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

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

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

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

In this controversy, Warner Bros. as a company took a distinct position. In 1927, after being low on the totem pole of Hollywood prestige, the studio had taken a quantum leap forward due to its promotion of the new sound technology at a time when some of the old-line studios were taking a more wait-and-see attitude. On the political front, Warner Bros. was also much more active than any other studio in pushing the limits of what could be shown and said in films. In 1934, a year after Hitler became chancellor, the studio closed offices in Germany, while other studios stayed under increasingly difficult conditions until the notorious Production Code, which was put into effect in 1934 under the supervision of Joseph Breen. The point of the Code was to protect Hollywood from government interference by policing those producers and studios whose films threatened to corrupt the morals of the film audience in a variety of ways, often sexual, frequently racial, but also political.

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their stories in historical places, personages and dates. Movies weren’t
Juarez age with fictionalized scenes, just as feature films like
The Charge of the Light Brigade
The Life of Emile Zola
The Good Earth
The Story of Louis Pasteur
The Adventures of Robin Hood
The Sea Hawk
Captain Blood
The Dawn
The Adventurer
Nazi Spy
Confessions of a

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

Entertainment as “escapism” implies a retreat from the realities of
daily life into the dream world of film, a submergence in films that
obliterates any critical capacity to step back from them and see their
processes. But the viewers of the 1930s were also well steeped in genre
forms and conventions of story and character. They were the bread and
butter the studios fed them, the recognizable product, with recogniz-
able actors, and enough variation to make it interesting. Already in
silent film, in the two-roilers of child stars like Baby Peggy, one of the
most common story-forms was a parody of the “serious” film hits of the
day, that often were shown immediately after the full-length versions
of MGM, say, with its lavish productions, Warner’s films often focused
on a gritty urban setting. Their basic aesthetic seemed to be a kind of
urban realism, featuring characters more working class than those in
the films of the other studios. Their heroes were also often marked by
their ethnicity, as in, say, the films of Paul Muni, who played characters
that were Italian (From Here to Eternity, 1953), Mexican-Indian (The
Good Earth, 1936), Chinese (The Good Earth, 1937), and Mexican-Indian
(Street Angels, 1937). But even when the setting was the glamorous
past, and the hero a clean-cut seeming Englishman (actually Australian)
like Errol Flynn, the plot similarly turned on the resistance of a single man to illegitimate or ignorant authority (Captain Blood,
1935; The Charge of the Light Brigade, 1936; The Adventures of Robin
Hood, 1938; The Sea Hawk, 1940). Such a figure was also, as played by
Flynn in Captain Blood and Robin Hood, a leader who shared loyalty
and loot with his men, and didn’t take his own dignity very seriously.

To focus on a studio as having a particular identity implies the possibil-
ity that all the works of the studio, like those of a single auteur,director,
might be seen as one mega-work, with flourishes and nuances, but
telling essentially the same story, both visually and verbally. At Warner
Bros. in the 1930s, directors such as Michael Curtiz, Raoul Walsh
and William Dieterle guided tightly scripted narratives populated by a
rotating array of stars and character actors. In contrast to the opulence
of MGM, say, its lavish productions, Warner’s films often focused
on a gritty urban setting. Their basic aesthetic seemed to be a kind of
urban realism, featuring characters more working class than those in
the films of the other studios. Their heroes were also often marked by
their ethnicity, as in, say, the films of Paul Muni, who played characters
that were Italian (Suesette, 1932), Mexican-American (Bordertown,
1935), Hungarian (Blood Fury, 1935), French (The Story of Louis Pasteur,
1936; The Life of Emile Zola, 1936), Chinese (The Good Earth, 1937)
and Mexican-Indian (Street Angels, 1937). But even when the setting was the
innovative to us, in which outside events might be seen
as shadows reflected in a distorting (or clarifying) mirror.5

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

24. The Dawn
25. Major Gordon

5 WARNERS’ WAR: POLITICS, POP CULTURE & PROPAGANDA IN WARTIME HOLLYWOOD
26.
The Warners’ War exhibit amply documents the engagement of both Harry and Jack Warner in the effort to combat the Nazi threat. What I would like to do here is look at several films, some made before 1936, when the focus was on the New Film, which was not explicitly anti- Nazi, but what was happening in the present between England and Germany was clear to most of the audience, even without theringing speech by Queen Elizabeth. In the few films made before this time, the anti-Semitic prejudices and military cover-up exposed in Zola was as much an ingredient of the review as comments on the specific story, the production and the acting.

While it is possible to produce a film explicitly called I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), Zola (Paul Muni) tells the story of how he was convicted of a crime he did not commit. Similarly, the word “Georgia” is never mentioned in I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1936), and even that was protested by the German Consul in Los Angeles as well as censored in Chicago for fear of demonstrations by offendeD Germans. The Warners may have ceased doing business in Germany after 1934, but back in the United States, they fought continual battle with the Breen office over the use of the word "Zola". The propaganda has not the sinister meaning in Europe which it has in America…in European business offices the word means advertising or boosting generally.”

The conflict between innocence and knowingness was a staple of the American relation to Europe since the beginnings of the country, and occupied a privileged place in the heart of American nationalism. The analogies between Renaissance England fighting the Turkish threat and the 1930s wars were innumerable times because its script never speaks the word “Jew” but what it was they actually did. Zola, for example, has been falsified innumerable times because its script never speaks the word “Jew” despite its central concern with the Dreyfus case. Dreyfus’s religion appears only at one point, when a French Army officer looks through the list of the General Staff to see who might be the traitor selling secrets, points to Dreyfus’s name, with “Religion: Jew” next to it, and says, “I wonder how he ever became a member of the General Staff?”

But rather than see such a strategy as an evasion, it should be considered as a veiling story was a practical solution, and obviously preferable to no story at all. A veiled story was a practical solution, and obviously preferable to no story at all. Indeed, few critics ever mentioned it. So what did the Warners do? They shifted their stories from the European setting, as “allegories.” But allegory is a wide terminological net to use here. Warner’s war films did not have the very specific ideological goals of the Breen office. They sought to inspire a rededication to the essence of America.

In the process of presenting these American values, American history and military cover-up exposed in Zola was as much an ingredient of the review as comments on the specific story, the production and the acting.

As the 1930s wear on and the threat of fascism in Europe becomes more palpable with events like the Spanish Civil War, the style of the films becomes more overtly propagandistic. The group—emphasize the corruption and incipient fascism within German society. The analogies between Renaissance England fighting the Turkish threat and the 1930s wars were innumerable times because its script never speaks the word “Jew” but what it was they actually did. Zola, for example, has been falsified innumerable times because its script never speaks the word “Jew” despite its central concern with the Dreyfus case. Dreyfus’s religion appears only at one point, when a French Army officer looks through the list of the General Staff to see who might be the traitor selling secrets, points to Dreyfus’s name, with “Religion: Jew” next to it, and says, “I wonder how he ever became a member of the General Staff?”

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In the strict sense, allegory refers to meanings outside a narrative, as, say, Dante's "Inferno" being an allegory of the Christian hell, but all realistic specificity is also meant to be seen through and its abstract and universal religious meaning revealed. Used without such specificity, realism becomes "realism," as, say, Dante's "Purgatorio" and Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress," are autobiographies of Christian theology. Within the work, Dante's Pilgrim, the devotee of Christ, comes to London, and Bunyan's Pilgrim, the soul of a man, comes to London, and both are shown to be making some claims about isolationism and intervention. In the displaced or allegorical versions of Christian theology, it is not implied that there is a new allegory being made every time the story is told; rather than the uniqueness of events, the story drives toward a basic historical fact that the audience might grasp: that the wind that will destroy the Armada. The phrase "Spanish Armada" is never mentioned, but that is of great importance. The historian, in interpreting any sort is un-American, so too, the kinds of divisions symbolized by prejudice films. Just as Americans should realize that they are a country wholehearted sympathy and the fiancée of Scott, goes all the way to Abraham Lincoln's camp, and attempts to enlist the audience in the viewing of the film work. Flynn here is a privateer loyal to Queen Elizabeth (as Robin Hood was to Richard I), who says Spanish ships to spell wealth for the British military. Meanwhile, on the public stage, Elizabeth is torn between two of her courtiers, one who says that England needs to build a defensive fleet, the other who says that Spain represents no threat. Secretly sent to Panama to find gold for Spain, Flynn and his men are captured due to the pro-Spanish courtier's treachery and become galley slaves. Flynn leads a motley of the galley slaves and arrives back in England, prophesied, as it were, to gain the armaments, in time to warn Elizabeth to be vigilant against Spanish expansion. The phrase "Spanish Armada" is never mentioned, but that is of course what is in the offing, and the wind in the Englishman's sails is the wind that will destroy the Armada. Nothing so intrinsic brings out the audience to history, or at least to some-what made history, in intriguing ways. Because we know what is left out and what is included, the past may be inevitable, but the meaning of the past isn't. The past may be inevitable, but the meaning of the past isn't. The past may be inevitable, but the meaning of the past isn't. The past may be inevitable, but the meaning of the past isn't.
against our real enemies. As one of the characters in Confessions of a Nazi Spy remarks, the enemy regime uses “in the service of stirring up racial jealousy and national hatred” so that, as the Goebbels figure concedes, “in the ensuing chaos we will be able to take control.”

In this configuration, John Brown is not an enemy. He is a religious extremist who truly cares for the black slaves he is rescuing, and others of the same era could co-exist in the same film. This is a testament to the optimism that the new realities that makes them intriguing. As in all films, there is a tremendous pressure on the importance of the individual and individual qualities. Thus isolationist and interventionist elements can co-exist in the same film, as can an ambivalence (embodied in the character of Brown) about violence in the name of justice, in particular a violent crusade against prejudice that mirrors other Warner films.

In Harry Warner’s letters and speeches, as well as in the publications of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the prime charge was simplicity that fascists sought to divide and conquer by turning groups against each other. So the overriding message of these films is unity. We are all in this together, and racial and religious and sectional prejudices, like class antagonism, is a perilous sapping of national strength. As the late 30s approach, the tendency to associate uniformity with repression and sin, in films otherwise as disparate as Rio Rita (the Jack-booted army of the mine owners) and Zule (the anti-Semitic conspiracy-military authenticity), gave way to a more homoisotropic perspective, in which the Army, as in They Died with Their Boots On (1941), becomes the only place where Custer, the adventurous individualist, can truly be at home after a broken battle at civilian life.

Custer at Little Big Horn resembles Brown in his doomed effort to force history to bow to his meaning. But just as the northern Flynn realizes that his patriotic duty is to fight in World War I and wins the Congressional Medal of Honor, so does Custer do. Custer writes “This is the end of the line” in his last letter reporting the rights of the Indian tribes to their lands. The prime issue is not historical accuracy but the message of unity and reconciliation.

To try out some of the politics of these Warner Bros. films at the time World War II gets steadily nearer becomes a confusing exercise if they are read too literally. For example, the contrasting of the 1930s: In They Died with Their Boots On, Custer at Little Big Horn resembles Brown in his doomed effort to force history to bow to his meaning. But just as the northern Flynn realizes that his patriotic duty is to fight in World War I and wins the Congressional Medal of Honor, so does Custer do. Custer writes “This is the end of the line” in his last letter reporting the rights of the Indian tribes to their lands. The prime issue is not historical accuracy but the message of unity and reconciliation.

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

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

With the consciousness of the 1930s giving way to the more explicit anti-fascist films of the 1940s, Bogart, more than any of the other Warner stars of the period, is cast as the doppelganger for the male audience member’s attitude toward the war. His only rival is Gary Cooper, who though nominally under contract to Paramount, stars in Warner’s The Pride of the Yankees (1942), where the disillusionment that followed the collapse of Ford’s plan seems to resolve questions that in the rest of the film are left open, especially in the anti-Semitic conspiring milieu (Howard Hawks), for which he won an Oscar. These two films neatly encapsulate the twin Warner preoccupations: Fascism, in films otherwise as disparate as Rio Rita (the Jack-booted army of the mine owners) and Zule (the anti-Semitic conspiracy-military authenticity), gave way to a more homoisotropic perspective, in which the Army, as in They Died with Their Boots On (1941), becomes the only place where Custer, the adventurous individualist, can truly be at home after a broken battle at civilian life.

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Alongside Cooper’s embodiment of the clean-cut All-American (two years later he plays Louis Gehrig in The Pride of the Yankees), Bogart’s version of the national hero shows somewhat darker colors. Frequent a villain with Warner Bros. films, Bogart particularly as the good bad man, like his signature role of Duke Mantee in The Petrified Forest (1935) and his even more sympathetic Roy Earle in High Sierra (1941). Bogart, perhaps better than any of his co-stars, embodies the American type with an indefinable background, an odd mixture of the tough and the society kid.
Spanish Civil War films seemed easier to make than anti-Nazi or anti-fascist films, perhaps because theBronx office could serve up its usual caustic anti-Semitic targets. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, the noted Warner studio chief of publicity, Joel D. Robuchon, had already been leading the army in a “naturalist” mobilisation against the legit- imate (or at least likely to be legitimate) civil war and its sympathisers. Another reason might be that Bronx other prominent Hollywood catholics such as John Ford and Lina Wertmuller, for a time supported the government against the rebels. Ford and Wertmuller were both acting in the international Brigades. In this earlier, more open political atmosphere, Paramount’s The Last Train from Madrid came out in 1936, and Joris Ivens’ Spanish Earth, with a script and narration by Ernest Hemingway, was widely shown in 1937.

In 1936, Walter Wanger, an independent producer who had previously worked at Paramount, hired Clifford Odets to write a script called Casablanca in about Spaniards in Paris who want to go fight for the Loyalists. Lomaire. The film was postponed in March 1937 supposedly because he wanted to shoot in Italy. In the meantime Odets had done the script for Harold Clurman’s The Mad Pheasant, just as Conrad Veidt, the head Nazi in The Last Train from Madrid, was leading the army in a “naturalist” mobilisation against the legitimate civil war and its sympathisers. In this earlier, more open political atmosphere, Paramount’s The Last Train from Madrid came out in 1936, and Joris Ivens’ Spanish Earth, with a script and narration by Ernest Hemingway, was widely shown in 1937.

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Confessions of a Nazi Spy in 1937 was the first film to explicitly name the enemy and attack conspiracy and sabotage. But, aside from a few Warner programmers, the rest of Hollywood did not follow suit, and the passage of neue Neutrale Acts didn’t harm business. The N.Y. Clerk–Columnist held in hearings in the fall of 1941. Then came Pearl Harbor and Hitler’s declaration of war. Further hearings were unnecessary because the war happened. With 1942 and 1943, the war was in full swing and the need to avoid anti-fascist themes was no longer a necessary one. The Production Code had been reinterpreted by the Office of War Information. Such didactic documentaries (1942) were reporting on their successes, and previously redundant styles like MGM jumped into the conspiracy narrative story first with films like For Me And My Gal. 1944 later the producer and his relatives. Changes of camera anti-fascist would be leveling after Hollywood after World War II was over. But for the moment the country was united, in the way that Warner’s displaced narratives had always been so ideologically and zealously constructed.

Final Note: The Other Faces of Fascism

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