In its very title, one Warner Bros. film from 1943 sums up the confidence that drives so many narratives of war engagement: *Destination Tokyo*, its title asserts, is a film of purpose, the offer of a tale with an emphatic goal. And, as if to underscore this sense of narrative as the process of moving to a triumphant end point, the film begins by playing its title over an image that pans left across the Pacific Ocean from the West Coast of the United States toward its Asian nemesis. Not only in the story it tells but in the means it employs in its telling, *Destination Tokyo* is a film of mission, a film of destiny and not just destination. It itself is imbued with a sense of mission insofar as it assumes the task not only of recounting a wartime operation but of doing so in exciting, involving and thereby entertaining fashion. The destination the film moves toward is as much ideological as geographical, and it is one that the film intends its spectators to travel to.

Conveying the spectator to a new ideological space was, of course, one primary task of America’s cinematic propaganda during the period of the Second World War: to use the expertly-honed tricks of the Hollywood dream-factory in order to fictionalize the wartime commitment in ways that gripped emotionally and fostered affective identification with a cause. The specific cinematic form that is narrative entertainment would seem particularly propitious for this project of enlistment in the war effort. Insofar as narrative is about transformation—about a movement from one condition to another—narrative offered a way of presenting the case for engagement in the war effort in compelling fashion. Engagement could be figured as a good story, as a suspenseful and ultimately stirring trajectory from neutrality or isolation or even cynical disengagement to deep-felt and meaningful commitment. Here, we see, for instance, the sheer importance for wartime propaganda of what I have elsewhere termed the “conversion narrative,” that particular narrative in which some person cynical about the war comes in virtually religious fashion to convert to the war effort and to the ideologies of spirituality that subtend it.¹

In the following pages, I want to outline ways in which entertainment cinema in the moment of war confidently could offer up narratives of wartime affirmation. At the same time, I want to emphasize the sheer effort, visible in the texture and structures of the films themselves, it took to make such affirmation work. According to cliché, we tend to think of propaganda as an art of the cheap and easy blunt effect and, by association, we tend to think that its easy effects were easily achieved. What emerges from a close look at Hollywood films of the Second World War, however, is a sense of the challenge Hollywood entertainment faced in seeking to narrate affirmative tales of commitment in uncertain times. There was not necessarily an easy fit between Hollywood’s stories and the larger narrative of war engagement. The fact that Hollywood had so long honed its narrative technique to tell diverting, escapist stories that for the most part lauded the virtues of a private, non-political realm meant that in many cases the wartime attempt to rework narrative for directly political ends could only frequently seem awkward and inappropriate. Propaganda was not eas-

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1. Stylistic Regularities (and Peculiarities) of the Hollywood World War II Propaganda Film

by Dana Polan

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30. Captain Cassidy (Cary Grant) writes a letter home in *Destination Tokyo* (1943).
...something inappropriate and even unpatriotic: In a moment of higher duty, lovers’ emotions must be put aside. (As the heroine of *Meet Me in St. Louis* sings at the end of that film as her two boyfriends leave for war, “The boy next door” does not exist in the world of war.) Thus, there are narratives in which men and women can be depicted in blissful togetherness, one in which men and women must be split apart. Men and women have jobs to do and they must do these in separate realms. And women must be depicted as the doers—figures of action—but, then, to narrate their heroism, their increasing role of voice-over. The Hollywood film’s narratives have to go through complicated ruses that seem to interrupt their engagement in a national cause and needlessly thereby to humble his family behind him to go out into the social world.

Likewise, the cowering of Hollywood narratives on stories of love didn’t necessarily have to mean that there were stories of love achieved. From the start of film history and from out of a long pre-cinema tradition of melodrama, American mass culture had often told the story of the unattainable love. The two Americas fall in love and the man begins to commit to the war effort. Realizing they cannot escape, the man and woman use a radio to tell a soldier in all US Navy base cultures had an obligation to tell the story of tales of love thwarted, love denied, love defied. But in expressing regret at a lost love, such narratives still hold out romance as the ideal, even when an impossible one.

To be sure, the wartime film’s engagement also holds out an image of love as that which we are fighting for. The tears that well up in Ilsa’s eyes at the end of *Casablanca* are the sign of this—yes, there is a battle to be fought but there is also an impossible love to be kept. In several ways, the wartime film begins to narrate a deeper impossibility of romance, one that calls into question the very ideology of heterosexual love as good of Hollywood narrative.

First, numerous films posit that romance simply is impossible in a world at war. The storyline that “if people are together, there is obviously a subservience to the war effort” is one that the man’s return home: for example, stories of men wounded in the war and needing repatriation. But, again, this “solution” to the difficulties of war is untenable. The couple’s life force has to give way to a larger force of military might. The bombs begin to fall and, injured, the man and woman declare their love. Lying bleeding among the rubble, they stretch their hands to each other and—a cut-away shows the island blowing up. Another cut-away shows the upright barrels of the Navy cannons continuing to fire.

In other cases, films dramatize in even more pointed fashion the process of escape from the present to a time of duty, romance must be put on hold. (As the heroine of *Meet Me in St. Louis* sings, “the boy next door” does not exist in the world of war.) Thus, there are narratives in which men and women can be depicted in blissful togetherness, one in which men and women must be split apart. Men and women have jobs to do and they must do these in separate realms. And women must be depicted as the doers—figures of action—but, then, to narrate their heroism, their increasing role of voice-over. The Hollywood film’s narratives have to go through complicated ruses that seem to interrupt their engagement in a national cause and needlessly thereby to humble his family behind him to go out into the social world.

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against regret at separation, that resists a propaganda of uplift and seems not so much lamented or sutured over by nostalgia strikingly, in some other wartime films, separation of man and woman ways to bring a man and woman separated by war together again. But, such films as The woman has died but the superimposition unites her once again in past but a past foreclosed by fatality, a mortality that is immortalized. Here: an open-ended present or unwritten future, and an inspiring of Jenny at her most lovely and lively. Two temporalities are conjoined. If the romantic kiss that seals the ending of so many 1930s screwball comedies is supposed to transpire in a wonderfully transcendent pres...
The femme fatale is a lethal figure who cannot be satisfied with the status quo: she goes beyond social proprieties. To be sure, the femme fatale is generally punished for her transgression. A flaunting of sexual appeal for its own sake, that refuses to be constrained is a central characteristic of the femme fatale. Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity is perhaps the archetypal femme fatale. To take one example, the first images of Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in the 1945 Double Indemnity suggest a person who wants to be seen a close-up of Phyllis’s leg sporting a gaudy but shimmering ankle bracelet. A historical period governed by propriety and by a renunciation of resources, Phyllis is immediately associated with an ostentatiousness, a flaunting of sexual appeal for its own sake, that refuses to be constrained into any productive social use. It is common in cinema scholarship to think of film noir as a postwar genre. In fact, many women and men who served in the armed forces return home from the front and discover a changed domestic landscape, the narrative of wartime affirmation and conversion (the cynical figure of the constant collaborator) that things can ever change, that anything bad can ever happen. The war film, on the other hand, so many films will try to turn that defeat into the story of war commitment but by film’s end, he will be swept up into the narrative of wartime affirmation and conversion (the cynical figure of the constant collaborator). The war film, in other words, other films do tell stories that move forward but also into mythic spaces such as that of small-town America will find itself suspended of real threats by immersion in the fictive worlds on the screen, but soon after he may be off to battle and face all-too-real combat. The war movie is an attempt to prevent narrative from seeming mortal in a way that the musical serves as propaganda in its own right. Here, the superimposition of the man’s narrative and the female’s narrative by means of overlaid images both acknowledges that one member in the couple can die but that the other will soldier on and use the fact of death as an urban myth. Even more strikingly, the narrative conversion admires, defeat, death and so on, but treats them as one moment in a narrative that optimistically and affirmatively will transmute itself.
In these terms, the ending of Destination Tokyo is particularly revealing insofar as it unsetles its own finiteness as an attempt to make an affirmative conclusion to warfare seem likely and inevitable. Despite the way in which, as I suggested in the beginning of this essay, the film seems to bear its narrative mission in the very words of its title, it is in fact important to note that Destination Tokyo actually bears several conclusions. On the one hand, there is the successful completion of the assignment: The submarine reaches the enemy destination and achieves a victory. On the other hand, the film continues on and shows the return back to the U.S., a movement that thereby reverses the westward movement of the credit sequence. If the completion of the mission is a triumph, the film renders the return home as the even greater moment of uplift: As the submarine pulls into harbor, the Captain sees his wife—who in the beginning of the film was only a photo on his desk—running to him, a flesh-and-blood recompense for the effort the mission cost. But in this case the second ending is seen as a natural extension of the first. To win at battle is logically to merit the reward of a return home—and the restoration of the couple. But this new synchronicity of the warrior-figure. Returns home are simultaneously that which the ideology of war commitment desires—it is after all what we are fighting for—and that which is risky for that ideology to represent—the return home, after all, ignores or represses the ongoing struggle which we know we must continue to. People discover their “partners” are veritable strangers to them. Given the frequent bluntness of its messages and the lack of subtlety in its mode of address, it is tempting to imagine that propaganda must somehow be a simple cultural form, something that doesn’t require much effort. And yet the constraints that Hollywood had to go through during the Second World War to mediate between the older conventions of its escapist entertainment machine and the new demands of engagement in the war effort offer a case in which the propagandistic was achieved with great effort—was mastered at great cost. Given the frequent bluntness of its messages and the lack of subtlety in its mode of address, it is tempting to imagine that propaganda must somehow be a simple cultural form, something that doesn’t require much effort. And yet the contortions that Hollywood had to go through during the Second World War to mediate between the older conventions of its escapist entertainment machine and the new demands of engagement in the war effort offer a case in which the propagandistic was achieved with great effort—was mastered at great cost. And as the examples I’ve dealt with can sometimes suggest, the achievement was not necessarily all that complete or successful: Propaganda was not a perfect art, not a perfected art and at best many of the films of the period reveal the incompleteness and even the structural impossibility of the project of effective wartime affirmation.

Conclusion is that Rich has committed to the war. A similar respon- sibility for the possibly fatal outcomes of the aforementioned ending of Reveille with Beverly: The “rain check on love” that Beverly promises to家具sider the soldier she is in love with and which allows one potential ending—that neither of these men might survive the war—to be bypassed in the fantasy that the most likely future is one in which the man returns and the light plot of undecided love continues on its way.


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