

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

by Dana Polan

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 closer 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- or a-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-

◀ 30. Captain Cassidy (Cary Grant) writes a letter home in *Destination Tokyo* (1943).



ily perfected. Repeatedly, films had to work to secure their propaganda effects and, as we look closely at the strategies they employed, we find both a relative success and relative limits to what they could achieve.

In some cases, the attempt to merge propaganda and entertainment could seem downright artificial or forced. Take, for instance, the element of overt pedagogy about war-related facts that creeps into a number of films during the period, even when these don't deal directly with war subjects. There is an increasing insistence on instruction in wartime Hollywood cinema—an insistence that these films become more explicitly didactic. Hence, the increasing role of voice-over narration (especially in the first moments of the films), of looks-at-the-camera, of tracks-in to radios giving the news and so on. These moments of direct lecturing to the audience risk breaking the status of the story on screen as an imaginary fiction that the spectator can voyeuristically observe. The theatrical fourth-wall of fantasy breaks away and the spectator directly confronts lessons about current history. Films are called upon to become more responsible by being less escapist, but they thereby threaten to undermine the very basis of Hollywood entertainment.

To be sure, such direct didacticism is generally infrequent, and for the most part the wartime cinema does not seem to vary much in style from the classical Hollywood cinema that the film industry had so well perfected before the war. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the strategies of direct address I outlined in the previous paragraph were frequently made to seem less invasive by means of conventional Hollywood technique that assimilate them into the fictional world of the on-screen story. Take, for instance, the track-in to a radio from which we hear war news emerge: On the one hand, the aural component here is directly informational and even didactic; on the other hand, the track-in is generally accomplished by that gliding camera effect, common in classic Hollywood cinema, that makes the introduction of new material seem graceful. What might seem intrusive becomes naturalized.

Hollywood has indeed always been good at assimilating momentary disruptions of its style. More risky for the Hollywood film's overall raison d'être as a medium for escapism were the necessary revisions in the kinds of stories Hollywood would be called on to tell in the moment of war. Hollywood films during the period of the war don't look appreciably different than those from the pre-war moment, but

they start to narrate new tales, ones that in many ways threatened to change the very nature of Hollywood storytelling.

To put it bluntly, the Hollywood film's deepest purpose had been to recount narratives of heterosexual love, and this purpose could only become more difficult to uphold in the moment of war. Of course, even before the war, there had been exceptions to Hollywood's emphasis on heterosexual love. For example, the increasingly politicized climate of the 1930s had sometimes implied that personal commitment might have to be displaced from the romantic couple to social initiative, and there was consequently a didactic, social-reformist side to 1930s films that no doubt already prepared the way for the lecturing tone of 1940s wartime cinema. In this respect, a film like 1940's *The Grapes of Wrath* enacts a transition into the moment of wartime commitment with its narrative of a man discovering his engagement in a national cause and needing thereby to leave his family behind to go out into the social world.

Likewise, the centering of Hollywood narratives on stories of love didn't necessarily have to mean that these 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 tales of love thwarted, love denied, love deferred. But in expressing regret at a love lost, such narratives still held out romance as the ideal, even when an impossible one.

To be sure, the wartime film of 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 regretted. But 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 goal of Hollywood narrativity.

First, numerous films posit that romance simply is impossible in a world at war where couples, of necessity, must be split apart. Men and women have jobs to do and they must do these in separate realms. As the newlywed (of one day) emphatically declares to her husband (Humphrey Bogart) in *Action in the North Atlantic* when M.P.s come to interrupt their honeymoon and drag the husband back to his ship, “We can't go around holding hands when there's a war on.” To try to picture a man and a woman together in a time of war is to picture

something inappropriate and even unpatriotic: In a moment of higher mission, romance must be put on hold. (As the heroine of *Reveille with Beverly* sings at the end of that film as her *two* boyfriends leave for battle, “I'm taking a rain check on love.”) In a time of duty, lovers' emphasis on their own desires and needs is a scandal, an impropriety and Hollywood films go through contortions when they persist in picturing men and women together. Thus, there are narratives that work to bring the woman *to the war front*: for instance, *Fighting Seabees* where a woman war-correspondent (Susan Hayward) goes to the Pacific island where her love interest (John Wayne) is preparing for battle, and where the lovers die together.

Often, to get the man and woman together on the battle front, the films' narratives have to go through complicated ruses that seem to unveil the very awkwardness and artificiality of the attempt. Perhaps the extreme example is a 1942 B-movie, *Prisoner of Japan*. Here, a cynical, uncommitted American male has fled the war to what he thinks will be an island refuge. There he discovers a mass of Japanese soldiers and an American nurse they have taken prisoner. The two Americans 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 call in a U. S. Navy bombardment that will decimate the island, killing the Japanese and themselves in an act of supreme sacrifice. 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 rain down destruction. The cutting here seems veritably Freudian: In this time of necessary deferment of sexuality, the couple can affirm its love but then must let the real orgasm of voracious energy come from the war machine whose explosiveness is a direct displacement of unrealizable desire. The couple's life force has to give way to a larger force of military might.

If one strand of films brings the man and woman together by finding a way to send her “over there,” an obvious alternative is to narrate 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 romance in wartime can seem awkward. To enable men and women to reunite only if the man is harmed can seem defeatist (the historical moment needs to celebrate men going off, not depict the injuries that can happen to them when they do). It can create an image of a fun-

damentally damaged masculinity that has lost its ability to soldier on. For example, the 1945 *Pride of the Marines*—based on a true story of a Marine blinded in battle—is filled with virtually Freudian dialogue about men's emasculation, both by war and by a world dominated by an increasingly powerful femininity. Men, in the moment of war, are supposed to be doers—figures of action—but, then, to narrate their return home is dangerously to extract them from action and put them in a space of vulnerability.

If in the moment of war it becomes hard to find convincing contexts in which men and women can be depicted in blissful togetherness, one “solution” for films to narrate tales of happy coupledness is to retreat from an awkward *present* (where duty requires that men and women be separated) to a happy *past* in which romance once could bloom and not appear vulnerable to separation. There is thus in the war period a proliferation of narratives set in a past of small-town quaintness as if to offer escape from present-day worries and complexities. For example, the very popular *Meet Me in St. Louis* from 1944 is situated in Victorian America and concentrates on the vagaries of teenage love. Here, the girls of the Smith family wonder about the young men in their lives, encapsulated in the song one daughter (Judy Garland) sings about “the boy next door.” If the security, surety and permanence of love is in doubt in the wartime present, *Meet Me in St. Louis* finds a mythic past time in which the only doubts about love are when it will happen, but not if.

In other cases, films dramatize in even more pointed fashion the process of escape from the present into a timeless past where romance could develop unhampered. For example, a number of films involve flashbacks from the ambiguous open-ended present of a world in conflict to a past that is seen as assured and complete in itself. Probably the film that is most explicit in its ideological project in this regard is the 1942 MGM film *Joe Smith, American*, where the eponymous hero is captured by Nazis who torture him for an important military secret. Joe survives the dangerous present by disconnecting his mind from the violence being inflicted on him and by remembering warm, wonderful moments from his small-town American life. Most of these have to do with love and romance and the consecration of the heterosexual narrative of marriage and family. The surety of love and the insecurity of conflict here take place in two separate realms—the timeless time of the past and the ambiguous time of the present—separated by cuts that jarringly jump from one narrative world to another.

If the romantic kiss that seals the ending of so many 1930s screwball comedies is supposed to transpire in a wonderfully transcendent present—transcendent in that the kiss virtually is imagined as lasting for all time—the wartime film inserts discontinuity into present time and imagines narrative as out of sync. For example, the man’s narrative and the female’s narrative are out of sync spatially—insofar as each gender is relegated to the sphere of wartime operation deemed appropriate to it—and temporally—insofar as the woman increasingly comes to represent something absent to the man in the present, something he can only hope for in a yet undetermined future or something he can only remember as the trace of an inspirational past. Men and women are not present to each other. If the abrupt flashbacks in *Joe Smith, American* serve as one evident way to conjoin past and present, another visible means for connecting them is the use of a superimposition in which the woman’s image is placed over the man’s. Representative in this respect is the last scene of Fritz Lang’s *Man Hunt*. Made by an emigré director just before the war but serving as a warning to isolationists who would not act on the evil around them, *Man Hunt* tells the tale of a sportsman, Roger Thorndyke (Walter Pidgeon), who had a chance to assassinate Hitler but didn’t act on the opportunity since he didn’t regard the Nazi leader as a real threat. Thorndyke is the happy-go-lucky adventurer who doesn’t take anything seriously, even world politics. But after seeing the wickedness the Nazis are capable of, he comes to commit to the fight against fascism. His conversion to the cause coincides with his falling in love with a young woman, Jenny (Joan Bennett), who saves him from his Nazi pursuers. When she is killed, Thorndyke promises vengeance, and the last scene of the film shows him parachuting into Nazi Germany to go after Hitler again. Over a final shot of this man moving into an ambiguous future with a sense of newfound mission, there is suddenly superimposed the image of Jenny at her most lovely and lively. Two temporalities are conjoined here: an open-ended present or unwritten future, and an inspiring past but a past foreclosed by fatality, a mortality that is immortalized. The woman has died but the superimposition unites her once again in the present with the man who loved her.

Such films as *Man Hunt* or *Joe Smith, American* find directly imaginary ways to bring a man and woman separated by war together again. But, strikingly, in some other wartime films, separation of man and woman seems not so much lamented or sutured over by nostalgia as desired. That is, there is in the moment of war a counter-current that goes against regret at separation, that resists a propaganda of uplift and

unity and, most important, that declares the loosening of links in the romantic couple to be a desirable entity. The moment of the war is one in which the traditional norms of marriage are emphatically extolled, but it is also a moment in which those norms begin to get challenged as men and women both begin to discover new life patterns and possibilities. The men overseas, for example, encounter new cultures—including sexual cultures. If, as French philosopher Michel Foucault famously argued, modern society controls sexuality not so much by repressing it but by encouraging it (so that it can be named, scrutinized and studied in all its variations),² we might think of wartime as such an instance of sexual productiveness: For instance, the condoms distributed to soldiers and the anti-VD films the soldiers view might be intended to channel and control sexual expression but they also can serve as a coming-to-consciousness of sexual possibility for so many young American males who had been brought up in a climate of sexual conservativeness. Men are sexualized into new positions outside marital norms.

Likewise, the need to offer a cheerful popular culture to the women back home as they move into factory work leads to an emphasis on fun and gratification—and this while their men are away. To take the most famous example, for the women at home—who are supposed to be patiently awaiting the return of their men and are supposed to be denying themselves to anyone but those men—there is held out the image of one of the strongest symbols of extra-marital seduction, Frank Sinatra, who around 1943 becomes the target for intense emotional investment on the part of American women, young and old. Sinatra serves as a site for passion, a sexual excitement that often seems beyond traditional proprieties. The scandal of sexuality is so strong that, as the war ends, the anthropologist Margaret Mead has, in an anthology called *While You Were Gone*, to work to ensure the returning veterans that American women have remained faithful despite Sinatra.³

In one of the most compelling genres of 1940s cinema—film noir—we encounter a veritable anatomy and pathology of desires that refuse to settle into socially sanctioned straits of middle class propriety and marital normativity. The noir femme fatale is a figure of excess and voraciousness who resists the proper role of the time. She is neither the devoted and happily married housewife who waits patiently for her man to return from his necessary work obligations, nor is she herself the disciplined worker who accepts her nation’s call to adapt to a world

31. Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) serve a higher purpose by parting in *Casablanca* (1942).



of repetitive labor. The femme fatale is a restless figure who cannot be satisfied with the deck she has been dealt, and she goes beyond social boundaries in her quest for a deeper happiness. She is a figure who tempts men to go beyond their own social boundaries and break community proprieties. To be sure, the femme fatale is generally punished at the end of the films for her scandalous refusal to settle into place. But whatever their ultimate conservativeness—the wrath of morality that is brought down upon the femme fatale at film’s end—the noir films admire the femme fatale: Indeed, they photograph her with delight, using all the tricks of shimmering light and gauzy beguile to make her stand out from the conventional world around. Take, for instance, the first images of Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in the 1945 *Double Indemnity*. As she comes down the stairs to greet the insurance salesman (Fred MacMurray), who she will soon seduce into evil, we see a close-up of Phyllis’s leg sporting a gaudy but shimmering ankle bracelet. In a historical period governed by propriety and by a rationing of resources, Phyllis is immediately associated with an ostentatiousness, a flaunting of sexual appeal for its own sake, that refuses to be converted into any productive social use.

It is common in cinema scholarship to think of film noir as a postwar genre, one that deals with tensions between men and women as the soldiers return home from the front and discover a changed domesticity in which women have gained new forms of power. But noir was already a powerful form at the beginning of the decade and seemed early on to respond to war climate conditions that had insinuated suspicion into male–female relations. For example, released just a month before the start of the war, *The Maltese Falcon*, which many film historians suggest inaugurated the noir cycle, is centrally about desire and doubt: Here, the femme fatale, Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor), is a supreme figure of duplicity, endlessly playing roles and endlessly pitting the men around her against each other. If the official propaganda of the war held out the couple as an ideal—whether in a nostalgically remembered past or in proleptic glimpses of a utopian future—noir admits a danger in the heart of the couple. The couple here is triply the site of an anti-social narcissism: the narcissism of the femme fatale who immorally seduces the conventional man away from his bonds of community responsibility, the narcissism that the coupling of this man and this woman represent once they get together and begin to plot against the world and finally the self-defensive narcissism of the man who realizes the only way to survive is to turn against the woman to destroy her (although he is often himself destroyed in the process). In

each of these, the man and the woman separate themselves off from any notion of the common good.

In this respect, as I argue in a forthcoming essay on *Casablanca*, there is a clear connection to be made between this film, so seemingly a narrative of wartime affirmation and conversion (the cynical figure of isolation who commits to a cause), and the films noirs that Bogart had made earlier and would continue in after the war.⁴ What, after all, is one of the central narrative issues of *Casablanca* than the story of suspicions by one member of an amorous couple about what the other has been up to during a moment of separation? In the moment of war where one affirmative film tries nostalgically to put the best spin on what its title refers to as the complicated time “since you went away” (title of the 1944 film directed by John Cromwell), films noirs suggest that while one member of the couple was away, mysterious things may have transpired. Likewise, in *Casablanca*, major narrative twists revolve both around the sense of betrayal Rick has been feeling ever since Ilsa disappeared at the end of their Paris idyll and around Laszlo’s suspicions about what Ilsa did with Rick when she spent the night with him in order to get from him the invaluable letters of transit. In both cases, men wonder what women were doing during their time away. Conversely, when Ilsa meets up with Rick in Casablanca, he has become a veritable stranger to her, wallowing in self-pity and immersed in deep bitterness and cynicism. In all cases, separation of the man and woman occasions suspicion, worry and recrimination. To be sure, *Casablanca* is ultimately a supreme example of the conversion narrative in which cynicism gives way to a commitment to a higher good, but it is noteworthy that the suspicions of the film last so long, lead to so much bitterness and suspicion between lovers and don’t completely seem to be washed away by film’s end (it is not clear, for instance, that Laszlo believes it when Rick says nothing happened between Ilsa and him: One senses that Laszlo, like everyone else, is in a world where it is best not to probe too deeply, where it is best to “believe” in convenient fictions of devotion to the higher cause). *Casablanca* may strive for a clarity of ideology in its call for commitment to a cause, but there is so much that seems ambiguous, that seems to work against unequivocal endorsement of its narrative of engagement (including the fact that Laszlo’s sanctimoniousness about commitment to the war makes him a far less interesting character than Rick: As with the femme fatale of the films noirs, it is far easier to identify with someone who isn’t fully goody-goody two-shoes).

Narrative is potentially an act of affirmation—we can try to be confident about destinations—but it is also a source of doubt—who knows what will happen? Who knows, for instance, what men and women will learn about each other? Strikingly, then, in the moment of war—where it is not clear how things will turn out—a number of films pretend not to advance at all but to focus attention on a timeless present. For example, wartime musicals such as *This Is the Army* (1943) seem to tell no forward-moving story at all but simply present a series of non-stop spectacles that fill up screen time and offer an escape, an escapism, from time’s ravages. The musical offers a non-story, which instead of progressing, offers simply the endless replay of spectacle. This emphasis on a gripping show presented in present tense helps the *wartime* musical serve as propaganda in its own right. Here, the propaganda is not one that seduces by producing a stirring image of military engagement but, quite the contrary, one that seduces by offering pleasures of disengagement, the comforts of a spectacle that denies that things can ever change, that anything bad can ever happen. The musical is propaganda insofar as it whitewashes the dangers of temporality—of a future that could hold out bad things.

Even films about military engagement—about soldiers moving narratively forward into the risky time of battle—often defer such battles for long stretches to luxuriate instead in a thick presentness: For example, they concentrate on everyday rituals of soldiering (like the recurrent scenes of mail-call) as if to fascinate the spectator by such detail and forestall the dangerous moment when the men must go into battle and face mortality. In particular, the war films often offer virtually documentary-like sequences that concentrate on the details of preparation for war: They make the preparations themselves into a spectacle and defer attention from the more risky moment of battle itself. For instance, despite its goal-oriented title, much of *Destination Tokyo* is about build-up to the moment of confrontation rather than confrontation itself. Like the musical, the war film is often a series of vignettes that defer any definitive coming to an end since, in large part, the real endings of the historical moment are so in doubt.

Of course, the permanent show can’t go on forever. The song-and-dance number ends, the movie itself runs out. Narrative by its very nature is confronted with mortality—the film springs to life but then eventually fades away. The running out of the story in the wartime moment is doubly troubling. Not merely do the stories end but they do so in a context where upon leaving the theater at the end of the show

one will walk into a real life situation where ends can be fatal—where death may await, where ultimate and eternal victory may not be all that assured. For example, the soldier who watches a film in a makeshift setup provided for entertainment at the war front may find temporary suspension of real threats by immersion in the fictive worlds on the screen, but soon after he may be off to battle and face an all-too-real and dangerous future. Many of the narrative structures I’ve elucidated here are readable as attempts to prevent narrative from seeming mortal in this way; indeed, they work to take the fatal destiny of narrative and rewrite it as something affirmative. For example, as I’ve analyzed it, in *Man Hunt* the superimposition of the man’s narrative and the female’s 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 inspiration. Even more strikingly, the conversion narrative admits doubt, defeat, death and so on, but treats them as one moment in a narrative that optimistically and affirmatively will transcend them: For instance, a cynical or cowardly figure will offer a resistance to the story of war commitment but by film’s end, he will be swept up into engagement with the cause and will leave his problems behind.

But the very fact that the war film has to go through so many contortions to tell its tales of commitment suggests its potential fragility. There is always the possibility that the attempt to narrate engagement in the war or, conversely, to flee narrative ambiguity via retreat into mythic spaces such as that of small-town America will find itself exceeded by real history. A film, for instance, can recount a victory and thereby encourage affirmation, but if subsequent real events offer scenes of defeat, the film fiction reveals its limits. We can see these difficulties around the narrative representation of the attack on Pearl Harbor. On the one hand, the event was a catastrophe for America. On the other hand, so many films will try to turn that defeat into the source of subsequent victory: America learns from its mistakes to move triumphantly into the future. In the volatile moment of war, films are in a desperate race to outpace real events and endlessly try to find sources of affirmation in them. If the musical tries to defer the impact of the ending by pretending to offer the present-tense of an ongoing permanent show, other films do tell stories that move forward but nonetheless try to put the potentially dangerous consequences of The End at bay. *Casablanca*, for instance, literally clouds its ending by the fog into which its heroes walk: What will happen next is suspended in a nebulosity that itself is rendered as triumphant (for the film, it almost doesn’t matter what happens next since the important narrative



32. Detail from an ad for *Destination Tokyo* (1943).



33. The stars of *Destination Tokyo*, Cary Grant and John Garfield, were used to sell war bonds.

conclusion is that Rick has committed to the war). A similar suspension of possibly fatal outcomes occurs with the aforementioned ending of *Reveille with Beverly*: The “rain check on love” that Beverly promises to the two soldiers she is in love with and can’t decide between 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 men return and the light plot of undecided love continues on its way.

In these terms, the ending of *Destination Tokyo* is particularly revealing insofar as it unveils its own fictiveness 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 all heterosexual separation this warring male has had to go through in the homosocial space of his submarine.

Between these two endings, *Destination Tokyo* participates in that out-of-sync quality that I’ve argued is endemic to films of wartime, 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 couple comes at a cost: The couple is re-formed only insofar as the man exempts himself from the battle sphere and thereby ceases to be a 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 commit to.

In this respect, it is significant that *Destination Tokyo* actually hints at a third, darker ending. As the submarine is pulling into harbor, the

Captain in fact doesn’t know that his wife is coming to greet him and her eventual arrival is a joyous surprise for him. Just before he definitively realizes her presence, he thinks he spots her but dismisses the idea. Only when one of his subordinates tells him to look again does he accept that she’s there. It’s only a hint, but the idea that maybe the woman wouldn’t have been there, waiting for her man—that maybe it’s not to be expected that the woman naturally, logically would show up—is very much part of the period of war. The non-synchronicity of man and woman in the narratives of the period reflects suspicions as to the very stability of the marital couple and of its role in upholding American ideology. The dramatic rise in marriages during the war as lovers realize they might never see each other again is matched by the precipitous rise of divorces in the post-war period as many of the same 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 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.

NOTES

1. Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 45–99.
2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).
3. Margaret Mead, “The Women in the War,” in *While You Were Gone*, ed. Jack Goodman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 274–89.
4. Dana Polan, “*Casablanca*: The Limitless Potentials and the Potential Limits of Classical Hollywood Cinema,” in *The Film Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and Randy Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton, forthcoming).