



MARY MCCARTHY
GOES TO THE MOVIES

ALL PHOTOS: MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/FILM STILLS

The raid on Makin Island in GUNG HO!

Mary McCarthy on the movies—not exactly a book-length anthology. With her usual nonchalant bravado, she recently announced that she doesn't really think movies are an art form. She "doesn't much like them," and the past forty years of her writing seem to bear that bit of elegant lip-curling out. One wonders if she's seen more than a dozen films in her lifetime. Examine the written record. We know from *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* that she used to have a crush on Ronald Colman, and in an essay somewhere she mentions telling Simone de Beauvoir to see *CHILDREN OF PARADISE* when the visitor from France asked her what movies were playing in New York. Such decidedly minor references aside, the movies don't rate too much space in what is otherwise perhaps the most brilliant literary coverage we have of the last five decades of American life. Not unless you count the fact that one of the girls in *The Group* is said to look like Ann Harding, and the hero of *Birds of America* sneaks off to *LA VÉRITÉ* and a Monica Vitti film. (His author doesn't seem to realize that those aren't the kinds of films that lure modern kids away from the Sorbonne; it was probably a major concession on her part to allow him to go to the movies at all.)

The theater yes; the movies no. In this respect, Mary McCarthy has mimicked ancient received "wisdom." When it comes to established anti-movie prejudices, she is anything but an iconoclast. She even says as much in the introduction to one of the editions of her collected drama reviews. The plays she wrote about may have been terrible, but at least the theater was an interesting weather vane for American culture, and therefore worth noticing. Incurably fallacious, the movies were just the calculated lies of some thugs who were trying to gauge the fantasies of oafs even dumber than they were, and therefore beneath comment. It must be said that the theater chronicles contain a review of Olivier's *HAMLET*, but that's obviously a special case. The author writes about it as if it were a staged play.

All very sad. Consider the havoc Mary McCarthy could have wreaked with any

number of terrible films. By the same token, consider the offbeat compliments she might have had for a scattering of good, and not so good, ones. The one time the *HAMLET* review addresses itself to the movie as a movie, it's piercingly acute. Ignoring the *Zeitgeist*, Mary McCarthy claims that Olivier doesn't under-exploit the play's cinematic potential. On the contrary—naturally—she says that he over-exploits it. The evidence? Hamlet and Gertrude could only nestle in public with a close two-shot amputating the rest of the court.

In any event, for as yet unrecorded reasons, on one occasion Mary McCarthy actually did break down and give the treatment to some movies that didn't have Elizabethan origins. In the thick of World War Two, the cold eye that has usually been reserved for staring contests with such poor blind creatures as Tennessee Williams and J.D. Salinger was cast on Michael Curtiz and Alfred Hitchcock.

The results do not appear in any collection of essays. They did, however, appear in the pages of *Town & Country* in 1944. True, surrounded by cursive lingerie ads and photos of models wearing Gertrude Lawrence's new evening gowns, they may not have looked quite in place. But, to her analyses of *LIFEBOAT*, *THE PURPLE HEART*, *THE NORTH STAR*, and *PASSAGE TO MARSEILLE*, Mary McCarthy brought her standard dazzle. Written in that famous, intricately perfect prose, this piece fires off a compact battery of insights into the radical failures that create all the surface distortions and weaknesses that blind most of us to the true defects of schlocky stuff. "A Filmy Vision of the War" needs very little introduction. Like almost anything by its author, it's eerily self-illuminating—though one small matter might be remarked on. Note that Lillian Hellman's authorship of *THE NORTH STAR* is never mentioned. It doesn't have to be, because in the special sarcastic contempt Mary McCarthy reserves for the movie as a whole, her subscription to one of the pet bugaboos of the serious literary intellectual of the Thirties and Forties is apparent: No Broadway Stalinism tolerated here.

—Elliott Sirkin

It has long been the complaint of officials, liberals, intellectuals, editors, foreign correspondents, and refugees from Europe that the war is not "real" to the American people. The average American, it is constantly being said, does not understand the issues involved and in his heart has no patience with our commitments in Europe. It is certainly true that the Japanese aspect of the war engages the sympathies of the average man more fully than the European aspect.

The war in the Pacific, in spite of its geographical remoteness, in spite of the queerness of the place-names of battles and naval engagements, is the kind of war that he traditionally understands. It carries with it reminiscences of the Spanish-American War, perhaps even of our struggles against the Indians; it is a straight imperialist conflict without social overtones. The citizen is not asked to choose between two kinds of social order, he is asked only to drive the Jap from the territorial possessions of the United Nations. "What to Do with Japan" is not a subject of debate. In the Pacific there are no Darlans, Badoglio, Victor Emmanuel, to be welcomed or rejected; there is only the Jap, the archetypal enemy, the modern savage, ingenious, wily, and cruel, the sniper who ties himself to the top of an exotic palm tree so that even in death he remains deceitful—if he does not fall when hit you cannot tell whether you have got him or not. And the heroes of the Pacific are, so far, the Marines, the traditional trouble-shooters of American foreign policy, tough, rough fighters, the proletariat of our armed services, who sent a champ to the prize ring and were betrayed (spiritually) by him with Bernard Shaw.

It is significant of the role Hollywood is playing on the propaganda front that it simply mirrors this state of mind. Where the public imagination falters, Hollywood's does likewise, and it fills in the blanks with romantic material drawn from its own warehouses. Of all the war movies I have recently seen, only one, *GUNG HO!*, tackles the war in realistic terms, and it is no accident that the subject of this movie is a typical episode of the battle of the Pacific—Carlson's raid on Makin Island, one of the sensational exploits of the Marines. The picture is not important or even interesting cinematically; the photography and acting are humdrum; in fact, the best criticism that can be made of it is to say that it would have been better as a documentary.

There is no particular story. You see a picked battalion of Marines being trained for the Makin raid, you follow them to Pearl Harbor, then onto two submarines, then through the landing, the attack, the capture, and back to the submarines again. What is satisfactory about the picture, however, is the fact that you know, five minutes after you have been in your seat, that you are dealing with an approxima-

tion of life. There is no attempt here to idealize the Marines. They are a queer, mixed lot, none of them handsome, none romantically ugly. There are a gangster and a murderer and an ordained minister among them, but they are all Grade B characters out of Grade B sections of our American cities and countryside. There is no attempt either to idealize the war or our conduct of it; you see the Marines being taught all the tricks of dirty fighting, and when the commanding officer calls for volunteers, he asks, not for heroes, but for "killers." Lt. Colonel Carlson himself is not a glamorous figure; his intelligence seems higher than average, but he is otherwise G.I. When the picture is over, you have learned something, and the newsreel that follows it, showing the capture of Kwajalein or Tarawa, does not invalidate the pic-

ture; it merely corrects it in certain details and adds the dust and smoke of battle which the director did not trouble to put in. BATAAN, I am told, was such another picture, but on a higher level—it seems plain that the makers of movies, like the consumers, are more comfortable in the foxholes of the Pacific islands than on the European front.

This rule, however, is not an axiom. It is broken again and again, most recently by *DESTINATION TOKYO* and Darryl Zanuck's *THE PURPLE HEART*. Both pictures are full of ridiculous and improbable incidents, and this violation of our sense of truth in the interests of Hollywood romanticism seems particularly outrageous in that latter instance, where the picture deals with a case that we all know from the newspapers, that of Doolittle's fliers who were tried and

executed in Tokyo for the bombing of Japan. Here was a case that stood on its own feet, a violation of international law so flagrant that no script writer could possibly have improved on it; yet Mr. Zanuck was apparently not satisfied but filled his Japanese courtroom with murders, suicides, hand-to-hand fighting, and courtroom outbursts from the defendants in the manner of Clifford Odets.

What this invokes in the spectator is the total suspension of belief. The case of the fliers has been transported into the world of hokum, and the spectator, rejecting the hokum, is on the edge of rejecting the case itself. Hollywood, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, has enveloped it in its fatal embrace. *THE PURPLE HEART* is unquestionably the worst war movie I have ever seen, but it is only the apotheosis of a type, in which the world-conflict becomes a struggle between five or six Oriental character actors of terrifying physical aspect—who, by the way, are conducting a booming war business, a defense industry in miniature—and seven or eight recurrent American actors, representing the forces of democracy as exemplified by the Irishman, the Italian, the Jewish boy from Brooklyn, the farm boy from the South or the Middle West, and the upper class boy from the East, who is inevitably cast as the hero.

All the pictures mentioned so far are unpretentious. They make no claims on art, on symbolism, or even, except for the tagline, which is now affixed to every war movie as a matter of routine—"We die that there may be no more war"—on political ideology. When we move into the European theater, however, larger claims are instantly put forward, and at the same time, oddly enough, the grasp on reality grows feebler, for even *THE PURPLE HEART* started out with a real case in mind. Such pictures as *THE NORTH STAR*, *PASSAGE TO MARSEILLE*, and *LIFEBOAT* offer the spectator either political indoctrination or symbolism—in the third case both.

NORTH STAR is the least interesting of this group. The Soviet Union appears as an idyllic hamlet, with farmhouses and furniture that might be labeled Russian Provincial and put in a window by Sloane. It is inhabited by Walter Huston and Ann Harding, who, we conclude, liked the country so much in their roles as Ambassador and Mrs. Davies that they applied at once for citizenship and settled down near the Polish border. This innocent hamlet is raped—psychologically speaking—by the German invasion, and some rather lively melodrama follows which might be all very well if no one remembered the Pact and Stalin's long armament program and the terror which held the country in domestic siege long before the first German company moved across the frontier. The picture is a tissue of falsehoods woven of every variety of untruth. I will cite only three instances. First, the resistance of the village is seen as absolutely spontaneous.



Above: Democracy sneers at the Yellow Peril (Dana Andrews in *THE PURPLE HEART*). Below: Vagabond patriots George Tobias, Peter Lorre, and Humphrey Bogart in *PASSAGE TO MARSEILLE*. Right: Superman Walter Slezak in *LIFEBOAT*.



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There is no hint of a strong central government, of an Ogpu, of directives coming down from above. It is as though these characters were feudal Serbian mountaineers, or Norwegian fishermen, acting naively on their own initiative. Second, the country is seen as so unsuspecting that a pilot in the air force is on a hiking trip with some friends when the bombs from the air tell him that it is time to be off with his squadron. Third, the German planes, on their *first* day of the invasion, with no Russian planes in the air, are shown wasting their war materials by dive-bombing a couple of peasant carts on a country road—surely a tactical crime from the point of view of the German general staff, as well as a crime against civilian humanity.

PASSAGE TO MARSEILLE starts off with a really good symbolic idea: a French freighter carrying nickel ore and some high Vichy-style officers of the colonial military administration picks up a group of derelicts in a canoe in mid-ocean, who prove to be escaped convicts from the penal colony at Cayenne on their way—quixotically—to join up with the French army. It is spring, 1940, and when the word of the surrender comes, the Pétainist officers seize the ship with the object of turning it over to the Germans. But the escaped convicts mutiny, wrest the ship from her usurpers, and head for England and what will be the Free French. As an allegory of the French political dilemma this is courageous: it is the derelict, the down-and-out, those whom society has rejected who can believe most energetically in the cause of French freedom, though they are themselves France's prisoners. Unfortunately, the romanticists in Hollywood could not stomach this, and they threw in Humphrey Bogart and a ridiculous story about a crusading French editor who was framed for murder and sent to Guiana because of his opposition to Daladier and Munich. In the picture he appears as the leader of the convicts, and both allegory and credibility collapse. In Paris, in 1940, the streets were full of politicians and editors who had condemned Munich for one reason or another; and the allegory of the down-and-out loses its identity if the leader of the down-and-out is not a criminal but a political martyr.

In LIFEBOAT we have another allegory, still more seriously conceived and executed. The lifeboat, full of survivors of a torpedoing, exemplifies the forces of democracy, half-corrupt, half-strong, but divided among themselves, blind, trusting, and at heart for all their corruption, innocent. They pick up the commander of the German submarine who typifies the planned society, the head as opposed to the heart, political monism as opposed to pluralism. They are betrayed by this commander again and again, yet they continue to rely on him, for he is the man with the compass, the experienced navigator, the surgeon who can amputate a gangrenous

leg; because he is strong and they are weak, although his strength comes, not from his politics, but from a flask of water and some vitamin and energy tablets which he has concealed on his person. In the end, however, he goes too far; they turn on him and throw him upside, beating his clutching hands down from the side with the boot of the man he has murdered. But now they float without direction, nobody takes the oars. Without him, it would appear, they are doomed. Yet, before it is too late, they see the truth of their predicament, and the rich, in the person of Tallulah Bankhead, throw away their riches, which are symbolized by a diamond bracelet that she gives to be used as bait. They catch a fish with it. Instantly a ship appears; they are saved.

As allegory this has a certain force, and some truth, though it is doubtful whether the weakness of the United Nations came, predominantly, from their having too much heart. But once again the romanticizing tendency has weakened the picture, for whatever truth this story has as allegory, as fact it is highly improbable. If we can judge by what we have read of the behavior of German officers as prisoners of war, we must conclude that under such circumstances an ordinary German submarine commander would have behaved with perfect docility. But the figure Steinbeck has created is not an ordinary German submarine commander, he is superhuman, and we see that Steinbeck, even while polemicizing against it, accepts the theory of the master race. His is a paranoid view of the enemy: hatred and fear inflate the opponent to enormous size, and in all the hatred and fear there is an element of submissive love. This, surely, is the cause of the controversy about LIFEBOAT, just as, in a slightly different way, it was the cause of the controversy about THE MOON IS DOWN. It is not Steinbeck's ideology that is at fault. The ideology is morally and politically impeccable; the heart wins over the head, and the United Nations combine to defeat Hitler—it is his romantic tendencies that betray him both as artist and as political thinker. If you believe Hitler is the devil you can never vanquish him, for the devil is immortal.

And of LIFEBOAT, as well as of the other romantic war movies, you can say that they do not make the war "real" to us, but only familiar. These struggles we see are the struggles of our household deities, of Ann Harding, Walter Huston, Humphrey Bogart, Alan Curtis, and Randolph Scott against five or six character actors and Erich von Stroheim, who like the vaunted generals, is left over from the last war.

Beside this, a documentary like the ones the Marines have done of the capture of Tarawa seems exotic and almost untrustworthy. It is a shock for us to realize that the dead Marine will not come to life in the next war picture. :~: