Falsification and unreality

Pearl Harbor, directed by Michael Bay, written by Randall Wallace

David Walsh
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"After my evacuation from Okinawa, I had the enormous pleasure of seeing [John] Wayne humiliated in person at Aiea Heights Naval Hospital in Hawaii. Only the most gravely wounded, the litter cases, were sent there.... Each evening Navy corpsmen would carry litters down to the hospital theater so the men could watch a movie. One night they had a surprise for us. Before the film the curtains parted and out stepped John Wayne, wearing a cowboy outfit—and 10-gallon hat, bandanna, checkered shirt, two pistols, chaps, boots and spurs. He grinned his aw-shucks grin, passed a hand over his face and said, 'Hi ya, guys!' He was greeted by a stony silence. Then somebody booed. Suddenly everyone was booing.

"This man was a symbol of the fake machismo we had come to hate, and we weren't going to listen to him. He tried and tried to make himself heard, but we drowned him out, and eventually he quit and left."

—Historian William Manchester in the *New York Times Magazine*, June 14, 1987

"Advertisements for a string of recent movies from Columbia Pictures have included gushingly positive comments from a critic who does not exist, *Newsweek* magazine reported in its edition that goes on sale on Monday.... Susan Tick, a spokeswoman for Columbia's parent Sony Pictures Entertainment, could not be reached for comment, but was quoted by *Newsweek* as confirming the reviews were concocted, which she called 'an incredibly foolish decision.'"

—Reuters, June 2, 2001

Pearl Harbor is a dreadful work from nearly every point of view. The film—which builds up to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 through a love story involving two American pilots and a nurse—is miserably written, acted and directed. Moreover, it distorts the history of the World War II era and glorifies the US military past and present in a manner that, inadvertently or not, serves reactionary political aims.

Rafe McCawley (Ben Affleck) and Danny Walker (Josh Hartnett) belong to the US Army Air Corps on the eve of American intervention in World War II in 1941. Rafe meets Evelyn Johnson (Kate Beckinsale), the navy nurse, and they fall in love. He soon leaves for England, having volunteered to join a squadron of foreign pilots fighting with the British Royal Air Force.

Danny and Evelyn subsequently find themselves at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, where for the moment life is idyllic. Rafe is shot down during the Battle of Britain and presumed dead. After a few months, Danny and Evelyn begin an affair. Rafe, however, turns up out of the blue. He and Danny clash, then reconcile.

Meanwhile the Japanese, driven to desperate measures by an American oil embargo, are preparing a massive strike on Pearl Harbor. US military intelligence attempts to figure out what the Japanese are planning. Franklin D. Roosevelt presides over the US like a proud, benevolent father.

A healthy portion of the film is taken up by a reenactment of the raid on Pearl Harbor. In the bombing, more than 2,000 are killed and a large number of US ships and planes destroyed. A black sailor, who has been consigned to kitchen duty, gets an opportunity to man an anti-aircraft gun and makes the most of it. Rafe and Danny do get into the sky and shoot down several Japanese planes.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the American military plans a retaliatory attack, in the form of a bombing raid on Tokyo. Rafe and Danny are to take part. Before they leave, Evelyn confronts Rafe, informing him that she is pregnant by Danny and plans to stick with him, although she loves Rafe. In the ensuing mission, only one of the two pilots will return to claim her affection.

Although *Pearl Harbor* as a rule navigates unpleasantly between vulgarity and sentimentality, sometimes it is both vulgar *and* sentimental. One watches incredulously the courtship scenes of Rafe and Evelyn, which include crude and unamusing physical antics involving hypodermic needles and a badly injured nose. And then Rafe on the night before he departs, after drooling over Evelyn and aggressively pursuing her, suggests—entirely out of character—that they not sleep together as to make it all the more special when they meet again! (This is simply, of course, an obvious plot requirement; Evelyn has to be certain later on that Danny is the father of her baby.) This early sequence, without a trace of dignity or sensitivity, sets the tone for the entire film. It also establishes that there will be no genuine chemistry between Affleck and Beckinsale; the performers are too self-involved and their efforts too strained for that.

Pearl Harbor is not so much a film as an advertising campaign. One is constantly being *sold* something—whether it is "love," the beauties of Hawaii, the genius of Roosevelt or the glory of the US armed forces. There is nothing measured or textured about the film, there is no dramatic argument being made. The filmmakers, on behalf of the Disney corporation, present the spectator with a series of finished products, whose positive qualities are absurdly exaggerated in order that these products may be purchased and consumed with the least amount of resistance. The actors are treated in the same manner, as items packaged as pleasingly as possible. (The director, Michael Bay [*The Rock*, *Armageddon*], used to film advertisements for Nike, Reebok, Coca Cola, Budweiser and Miller Lite. In 1995 the Directors Guild of America named him Commercial Director of the Year.)

In an attempt to liven up a hackneyed and sophomoric script, which has no authentic inner momentum, Bay has his cameras swoop in on objects and people from odd angles. For example, we seem constantly to come upon Beckinsale from the side or below, for no apparent reason. The pyrotechnics are meant at every point to conceal *Pearl Harbor*'s emotional and moral poverty.

The essential hollowness of the project and the lack of intelligence and artistic skill, however, strongly make themselves felt. Every side of the film—dialogue, performances, sets, lighting, music—is overdone to the point that it simply produces unease and even revulsion. A crude and obvious meal is being shoved in the viewer's face.

There is nothing honest about *Pearl Harbor*. The filmmakers are

pretending to care about the drama, pretending to care about history, pretending to care about the casualties of war—and, in fact, their thinking is focused almost exclusively on whether the film will be able to make back its $135 million budget and what success or failure might mean for their respective careers.

While the ostensible guiding principle of *Pearl Harbor* is the nobility and loftiness of America's war aims, the self-centeredness and smallness of the film's creators cannot help but manifest themselves. This is perhaps most perfectly (and ludicrously) illustrated in the scene in which Evelyn tracks Rafe down before his bombing raid on Tokyo. She attempts to justify her actions, explaining that she and Danny had thought he was dead, and so forth. Beckinsale reaches a certain point in her narrative and, wrinkling up her nose and spreading out her arms, exclaims with indignation, "Then all this happened"—i.e., the bombing of Pearl Harbor and US entry into World War II!—sounding every bit like a middle class young lady whose plans for a two-week skiing holiday have been disrupted by some irritating family drama.

Although it is less than a zero in artistic and intellectual terms, *Pearl Harbor* nonetheless points toward a number of significant issues.

One of the chief defects of contemporary American studio films is the almost complete absence of any historical sense. One feels sometimes that it has been surgically removed. Film writers and directors, lacking any serious knowledge about (and perhaps intuitively threatened by) history and the historical process, simply transport their own philistine selves back in time. Infinitely pleased with themselves and their lives, unable to imagine human beings acting from motives other than their own petty and self-absorbed ones, they create self-portraits (fantasized at that) and set them down at the appropriate times and places, whether it be, for example, ancient Rome, thirteenth century Scotland or colonial America. Characters—in fact, cliched types—resemble one another in films that appear to have been made with a cookie cutter.

Ignorance in this case is mixed in with the belief, derived ultimately from modern subjectivist ideology, that any truthful accounting of history is impossible in any event and the past is more or less "what you make of it." With the political establishment lurching to the right and the liberal-intellectual milieu incapable of mounting any opposition, empty-headed screenwriters and film director—whose employers, the large studios, hold a virtual monopoly of the world's movie screens—have grown to feel that anything goes. Who is going to call them to order? *Pearl Harbor* is an almost inevitable consequence of this sordid process. There is no point in waxing indignant about it. Critics who shake their heads at the film's stupidities or heap insults upon its creators without calling into question the process that produced such a work are merely deceiving themselves and the general public.

In terms of its falsifications, there is the issue, in the first place, of whether the raid on Pearl Harbor caught the US military so unprepared. A good deal of evidence suggests that the British and American intelligence services were aware that an attack of some sort was imminent. Certainly Washington was hoping that a provocation or confrontation with the Japanese could be organized in order to justify US entry into the war, a step made more difficult by the fact that Roosevelt had run as a peace candidate in 1940. As the film itself points out, the US had virtually issued an ultimatum to Japan with its oil embargo.

The Japanese were obliged to be the aggressors because they were late in the game, the US having already gobbled up some of the prize possessions in the region (the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam) around the time of its first imperialist adventure, the Spanish-American War.

A recent article on the *WSWS* noted: "Stripped of its ideological masks, the Pacific War between the US and Japan was a struggle between two predatory states seeking to replace the previously dominant European powers in the region and in China in particular. Being the weaker power, Japan was compelled to resort to adventurist methods—the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, then China as a whole in 1937. For its part, the US, while claiming to stand for democracy, had no qualms about firebombing Japanese cities and dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ensure the complete submission of its rival." (The film of course makes no mention either of the fact that in February 1942 120,000 Japanese-Americans were rounded up and placed in internment camps, an event that took place *before* the Doolittle raid.)

The calculated cynicism of the film's creators and producers, as well as their instinctive reverence for authority, knows almost no bounds. The film is designed to stoke up anti-Japanese sentiment with US audiences, while some of the most insulting epithets have been removed for the potentially lucrative Japanese market. Moreover, *Pearl Harbor* pays homage to that country's military and political leaders, making no mention of their barbarous policies in Asia.

The falsification of the geopolitical picture, part of the mythology that American capitalism only goes to war for freedom and democracy, is more than matched by the falsification of its portrait of the US in 1941 as an innocent and unified nation.

US intervention in the war came after and indeed put an end to 12 years of economic depression, which had deeply shaken American society. Enormous class battles, often with left-wing elements in the leadership, exploded in the middle of the 1930s. Roosevelt had come to power conscious of the need to steer a course, often against the wishes of elements from his own class, that would save the US from social revolution. Life-and-death issues were at stake in the events of the time.

Despite the increasingly subservient character of the newly-formed CIO's leadership and the betrayals of the Stalinist Communist Party, bitter strikes continued up to the eve of Pearl Harbor. Two protracted struggles took place in 1941—a 75-day strike at Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin early in the year and a strike at North American Aviation in June. In both cases the Roosevelt administration acted directly as a strike-breaker, in the latter conflict sending out 3,500 federal troops against the strikers in Inglewood, California. Workers shouted "Heil Roosevelt!" as they were driven back on the picket lines at bayonet point. In 1941 there were 4,288 strikes, involving 2.4 million workers, compared to 4,740 strikes and 1.9 million strikers in 1937, the year of the great sit-down strikes.

The war brought this strike wave to an end, as union leaders obediently fell into line with the Roosevelt administration, but the broader question that concerns us here is the character of the men and women who went off to war and the extraordinary events that had shaped them. None of the tension of the time, its explosiveness and complexity, is even hinted at in *Pearl Harbor*. Nor the degree of distrust and discontent which, even under wartime conditions (as the Manchester quote at the top of this article suggests), was never very far from the surface.

American war filmmakers of the past, in their own particular way, did have to respond to some of these social questions. They were obliged to make an appeal to the working class. So films, for example, portrayed a submarine crew or infantry unit with its requisite Italian or Jew from Brooklyn, a farm-boy from the Midwest or the South, occasionally a steelworker of eastern European extraction, and in later films, a black serviceman. Hollywood films depicted the war in Europe in particular as a struggle against fascist tyranny fought by soldiers and sailors imbued with democratic sensibilities. There is barely a tip of the hat to such sentiment in *Pearl Harbor*.

Had it been produced in virtually any other country, *Pearl Harbor* would be termed by US commentators a "propaganda film." The filmmakers received the full cooperation of the American military, whose efforts they uncritically celebrate. The sanitizing and falsifying of history (a process also going on in Japan at present) *objectively* serves contemporary political purposes, in this instance, preparing the population for new wars.

More than anything else, this wretched film has about it an intense air of

unreality. For all their patriotic zeal, directors like John Ford (*They Were Expendable*), William Wyler (*The Best Years of Our Lives*), Howard Hawks (*Air Force*), even Allan Dwan (*Sands of Iwo Jima*), and others, felt secure enough to treat certain troubling aspects of war and its consequences realistically. The decline in skills and intelligence in the film industry is bound up, in the final analysis and in a complex fashion, with the weakened position of American capitalism and its increasingly gloomy prospects. While *Pearl Harbor*'s creators may imagine they can manhandle history and human beings however they like without consequences, marketing the US role in World War II as one would a roll-on deodorant or a new brand of breakfast cereal is not, at a more profound level, an indication of extraordinary self-confidence.