

Five Came Back: Hollywood filmmakers and World War II

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Directed by Laurent Bouzereau; written by Mark Harris

Five Came Back is a three-part US documentary based on the book *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (2014) by journalist Mark Harris. Although the series, directed by Laurent Bouzereau, was released a few years ago, the subject matter remains highly relevant and worth examining. It is currently available on Netflix.

The documentary focuses on five major American directors of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s—John Ford, John Huston, William Wyler, George Stevens and Frank Capra—who enlisted with the US War Department to create films as part of the war effort between 1941 and 1945.

Narrated by Meryl Streep, the series creators worked through over 100 hours of archival footage and many feature films. Present-day filmmakers serve as commentators, each paired with an earlier figure: Steven Spielberg (Wyler), Francis Ford Coppola (Huston), Guillermo del Toro (Capra), Paul Greengrass (Ford) and Lawrence Kasdan (Stevens).

The primary value of *Five Came Back* lies in the light it sheds—through an abundance of fascinating material—on World War II, the response of the filmmakers to the conflict and their subsequent artistic and ideological development. Bound up with each of these processes are multifaceted and even perplexing problems.

The French-American Bouzereau has earned a reputation in particular through meticulously documenting the production of dozens of films, including works by Spielberg, Coppola, Kasdan, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Roman Polanski, François Truffaut, Sidney Lumet, David Lean, Brian de Palma, Martin Scorsese and others.

To its credit, Bouzereau's *Five Came Back* provides a sense of the shattering and tragic nature of the Second World War, which had far-reaching consequences for film and art, along with every other aspect of social life. In evaluating what the five filmmakers in question produced during and after the war, one is obliged to take into account their histories and outlooks, as well as the more general political and cultural challenges of the time. Moreover, there is the matter of the standpoints of the *current* filmmaker-commentators and that of Bouzereau and Harris themselves.

It is necessary to point out, at the outset, that the character of the war itself is a critical, inescapable issue here. Was it a monumental struggle for democracy, as the official version contends, or was it—in essence—an imperialist, great-power conflict, like World War I? The series tends to take the official version for granted.

The first two episodes of *Five Came Back* (“The Mission Begins” and “Combat Zones”) recount the individual experiences of the filmmakers during the war. At one point, Coppola (*The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*) makes the interesting observation that “I like to think that all war movies are anti-war movies.” However, he continues, the propaganda films produced by the five directors at the behest of the US government tend, “if not [to] glorify, to enhance the sensation [of war].”

John Ford (*The Informer*, *Grapes of Wrath*) was the first of the group to respond to the Second World War. In September 1941, he was already on active duty as a lieutenant commander in the Navy and established the

Field Photographic Unit. He filmed *The Battle of Midway* (1942), recording the June 1942 naval battle between US and Japanese forces that was one of the turning points of the war in the Pacific and was wounded during the shooting.

Frank Capra (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Meet John Doe*) oversaw the production of *Why We Fight* (1943-44), a six-part series plus *The Negro Soldier* (1944), seeking to convince American soldiers about the legitimacy of their country's involvement in the war. Later on, the documentaries were shown to the general public as part of the US government campaign to encourage support for the war effort.

Simultaneously inspired and horrified by the effectiveness of German director Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Capra wanted to emulate the latter's power on behalf of the American cause. (“I sat alone and pondered. How could I mount a counterattack against *Triumph of the Will*; keep alive our will to resist the master race? I was alone; no studio, no equipment, no personnel.”). A commentator describes one of the films in the series as virulently anti-Japanese.

The most substantive of the *Why We Fight* films, *The Battle of Russia*, was actually directed by Russian émigré Anatole Litvak (*Confessions of a Nazi Spy*), although Capra is listed as co-director.

The German-Jewish William Wyler (*The Little Foxes*, *Mrs. Miniver*) enlisted in the Army Signal Corps, flying on bombing missions over Germany, where he pointed his camera through the ball turret of a B-17. This resulted in his documentary *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress* (1944). At a White House preview, President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Wyler, “This has to be shown right away, everywhere.”

In 1942, Huston (*The Maltese Falcon*, *In This Our Life*), probably the most left-wing of the filmmakers, also began serving in the Army Signal Corps. With the rank of captain, he directed and produced three films: *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), about soldiers preparing for combat; *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), the story of a failure by America's intelligence agencies that resulted in many deaths; and *Let There Be Light* (1946), about the psychological trauma and damage suffered by veterans.

The Battle of San Pietro initially ran into difficulties with the US Army for its unstinting picture of war. On the Turner Classic Movies website, Rob Nixon cites the comment by critic-historian David Thomson—in a *New Republic* review of Mark Harris' book—that Huston's film “is that rare work, made by the military but regarding war with horror.” Indeed, Huston later recalled, Nixon explains, that when he showed the film to his military superiors, “irate viewers walked out according to rank. One story has it that a general told the director, ‘This picture is pacifistic. It's against war. Against the war.’ Huston is said to have replied, ‘Well, sir, whenever I make a film that's for war, you can take me out and shoot me.’”

As for his *Let There Be Light*, it was banned by the Army for 35 years, until 1981. About that film, Huston asserted: “So deep was their [the veterans'] despair and shock that the camera made no difference to them

... [The film showed] what the experience of war does to men's souls."

Originally a cinematographer, George Stevens (*Woman of the Year*, *The More the Merrier*), as the commander of the Special Coverage Unit of the Army Pictorial Service, filmed—along with Ford—the bloody D-Day Normandy landings in June 1944. Even more devastatingly, he recorded the liberation of the Nazis' Dachau concentration camp in Bavaria, southern Germany, in 1945. Shocked almost beyond belief, Stevens was witness to the piles of corpses, the half-dead, skeletal survivors and a generally unimaginable nightmare.

Stevens and his crew "would no longer be combat photographers," explains *Five Came Back*, "they would be gatherers of evidence." His footage and other concentration camp film were presented at the postwar Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals.

Although undoubtedly containing fascinating historical material, the first two segments of the series suffer the most from an uncritical attitude towards the war and America's participation in it. The final part, "The Price of Victory," the most intriguing, deals with the impact of the conflict on the five directors' postwar lives and filmmaking. It is the contention of the documentary, that after returning from the war, each of the filmmakers made his most important films. Both the experience of the slaughter and a generally critical attitude toward the American society that emerged from it dominated their work in that period.

The first postwar movie Ford directed, for example, has the suggestive title, *They Were Expendable* (1945). The film, noted for its military and emotional realism, follows a PT boat unit slowly killed off during the US military's disastrous defeat in the Philippines, hardly a subject for patriotic celebration. Apparently severely shaken after filming the D-Day carnage, Ford had gone on an alcohol binge. Very little of the D-Day footage was released. In a 1964 interview, Ford asserted that the US government was "afraid to show so many American casualties on the screen."

Wyler, who suffered a combat-related 80 percent loss in hearing, made *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), an extraordinary film about the dysfunction of post-war American society and how it treated its veterans. The film was an enormous success in the US and Britain. As we noted a few years ago on the WSWS: "Astonishingly, it sold 55 million tickets in the US, at a time when the American population numbered 141 million, and the adult population 106 million! Even today, remarkably, after all the blockbusters in recent decades, it remains the sixth-most-attended film in British history. It obviously struck a chord."

Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), with all its ultimate sentimentality, shows for the most part that life is anything but ... The film, on which various left-wing writers labored, caught the attention of the FBI. The latter issued a memo in 1947 reporting the opinion of anonymous sources who argued "that the film represented rather obvious attempts to discredit bankers by casting Lionel Barrymore as a 'scrooge-type' so that he would be the most hated man in the picture. This, according to these sources, is a common trick used by Communists. [In] addition, [redacted] stated that, in his opinion, this picture deliberately maligned the upper class, attempting to show the people who had money were mean and despicable characters."

Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) is based on an explicitly anti-capitalist novel by left-wing German émigré writer B. Traven. Huston transposes his critique of the American mania for money-making to the wilds of Mexico, but the message is clear.

In the movie, Howard (Walter Huston, the director's father) gives a speech loosely basing himself on Marx's theory of value: "A thousand men, say, go searchin' for gold. After six months, one of 'em's lucky—one out of the thousand. His find represents not only his own labor but that of 999 others to boot. That's, uh, 6,000 months, uh, 500 years scrambling over mountains, goin' hungry and thirsty. An ounce of gold, mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the

findin' and the gettin' of it."

And Stevens, a specialist in light comedy before the war, after the immigrant family drama, *I Remember Mama* (1948), ambitiously directed *A Place in the Sun* (1951), an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's great novel, *An American Tragedy* (1925). The film, although somewhat watered down from the book, is a critique of the ruthless, heartless pursuit of the American Dream at any cost. Its central figure, played by Montgomery Clift, George Eastman (Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser's novel), is willing to carry out an act of (self-serving) social euthanasia, the killing of the "weak" and useless, as it were, so that he can fully enjoy the "golden life."

Stevens went on to direct *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), based on the diary of the Dutch-Jewish girl who lived in hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam with her family during the war until they were apprehended and sent to concentration camps.

Five Came Back, because it largely accepts the status quo, does not genuinely appreciate or understand the disillusionment, even bitterness, and degree of political radicalism that the filmmakers exhibited in the postwar period, as part of the general mood in America. It should be noted that there were prolonged and violent strikes against the Hollywood studios in 1945 and 1946, part of a massive nationwide strike wave, which elicited a right-wing counter-attack from the industry.

Many of the ideological problems of the era in the working class and intelligentsia were bound up with the role of the Communist Party, a significant force and influence in Hollywood. Once Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the CP became the most rabid pro-war, anti-strike element in the American labor movement and played a deeply disorienting role. The American Stalinists' hailing of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 underscored their politically criminal role.

Just over the horizon of the series, of course, lie the anti-Communist purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s, another shock for the filmmakers. Capra secretly became an informer, while the careers of the others took various twists and turns in efforts to evade the repressive, increasingly stagnant climate.

The five filmmakers, like the rest of society, ran up against the predatory, criminal reality of American imperialism, now the dominant world power. As US capitalism launched the attempt to "contain" communism internationally, it needed as well to decapitate workers politically at home and make certain they would not threaten its global designs. The purge of left-wing forces in the unions and elsewhere and the Hollywood blacklisting were part of that general effort.

The weakest aspect of *Five Came Back* is its inclination, sincere or otherwise, to go along with the dominant myths that American filmmaking, including its "left," perpetrated about World War II—above all, that the conflict was a kind of "people's war" against Hitler. There was undoubtedly mass anti-fascist feeling in the American and international working class, with a profoundly democratic and potentially revolutionary content. The bourgeoisie was able to manipulate that sentiment and pursue its own rapacious aims due to the lack of a broad-based revolutionary party capable of mobilizing the working class along socialist, internationalist lines.

As the WSWS once noted, Hollywood's wartime national-populism "always rang false in the end because the reality was otherwise. The generally uncritical attitude toward the US and allied war effort; the veneration of Roosevelt ... the pretense that a united and democratic America was at war against some unfathomable foreign evil; frankly, all too often the beautification of American life—all this had harmful artistic and political consequences ...

"While millions went into combat motivated by the desire to defeat Hitler and fascism, World War II, in its social and economic essence, remained an imperialist war, a struggle between great power blocs for the

division and re-division of the world. The US, with its vast industrial strength and reserves, could afford Roosevelt's reformist experiments in the 1930s, but that did not make the war aims of the American ruling elite or its plans for the postwar world any less predatory or criminal."

Grasping these harsh truths would make for a stronger, more penetrating examination of the five directors treated here, and American political and cultural life generally.



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