

Haberski, Raymond J.

The Passion of Richard Schickel: what we expect from war films

Zumhof, Tim [Hrsg.]; Johnson, Nicholas K. [Hrsg.]: *Show, don't tell. Education and historical representations on stage and screen in Germany and the USA.* Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2020, S. 160-171. - (Studien zur Deutsch-Amerikanischen Bildungsgeschichte / Studies in German-American Educational History)



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Haberski, Raymond J.: The Passion of Richard Schickel: what we expect from war films - In: Zumhof, Tim [Hrsg.]; Johnson, Nicholas K. [Hrsg.]: *Show, don't tell. Education and historical representations on stage and screen in Germany and the USA.* Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2020, S. 160-171 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-205162 - DOI: 10.25656/01:20516

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-205162>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:20516>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.klinkhardt.de>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt unter folgenden Bedingungen vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen: Sie müssen den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen. Dieses Werk bzw. der Inhalt darf nicht für kommerzielle Zwecke verwendet werden. Die neu entstandenen Werke bzw. Inhalte dürfen nur unter Verwendung von Lizenzbedingungen weitergegeben werden, die mit denen dieses Lizenzvertrages identisch oder vergleichbar sind.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and transmit, adapt or exhibit the work in the public and alter, transform or change this work as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor. You are not allowed to make commercial use of the work. If you alter, transform, or change this work in any way, you may distribute the resulting work only under this or a comparable license.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Studien zur Deutsch-Amerikanischen Bildungsgeschichte / Studies in German-American Educational History



Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
(eds.)

Show, Don't Tell

Education and Historical Representations
on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA

Zumhof / Johnson
Show, Don't Tell

**Studien zur Deutsch-Amerikanischen
Bildungsgeschichte**

**Studies in German-American
Educational History**

General Editor Jürgen Overhoff

Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
(eds.)

Show, Don't Tell

Education and Historical Representations on
Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA

Verlag Julius Klinkhardt
Bad Heilbrunn • 2020

k

*This volume was published in cooperation
with the Center for German-American
Educational History at the University
of Münster.*

Arbeitsstelle für
Deutsch-Amerikanische
Bildungsgeschichte



*Titel entstand in Kooperation mit der
„Arbeitsstelle für Deutsch-Amerikanische
Bildungsgeschichte“.*

Dieser Titel wurde in das Programm des Verlages mittels eines Peer-Review-Verfahrens
aufgenommen. Für weitere Informationen siehe www.klinkhardt.de.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten
sind im Internet abrufbar über <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

2020.lg. © by Julius Klinkhardt.
Bildnachweis Umschlagseite 1: © Francis Miller (1961). *Peter Fonda in theater audience seats at
Omaha Nebraska Community Playhouse*. The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images. – The
cover photo is used for illustrative purposes only and does not represent an endorsement by the
Peter Fonda estate.

Druck und Bindung: AZ Druck und Datentechnik, Kempten.
Printed in Germany 2020.
Gedruckt auf chlorfrei gebleichtem alterungsbeständigem Papier.



*Die Publikation (mit Ausnahme aller Fotos, Grafiken und Abbildungen) ist veröffent-
licht unter der Creative Commons-Lizenz: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 International
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>*

ISBN 978-3-7815-5828-1 Digital doi.org/10.35468/5828

ISBN 978-3-7815-2397-5 Print

Table of Contents

Nicholas K. Johnson and Tim Zumhof

“Are you not entertained?” –

Education, Entertainment, and Historical Representations

on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA, an Introduction7

Tim Zumhof

Historical Culture, Public History, and Education

in Germany and the United States of America.

A Comparative Introduction to Basic Concepts and Fields of Research.15

Jürgen Overhoff

“Geschichte ist etwas Fließendes.”

Lion Feuchtwanger’s Changing Understanding of History

and the Role of the Stage: From his Earliest Theatrical Productions

to his Play *Waffen für Amerika* (1943/44)31

Simon Richter

Duell an der Havel:

Fritz von Unruh’s Depiction of Eighteenth-Century

Prussian-American Relations49

Alissa Rubinstein

The 614th Commandment:

A Documentary Play about how American Jews Feel

about Germany Today63

Wolfgang Hochbruck

Living History as an Educational Tool and Method

in North America and Germany81

Stephanie Johns

Theatre, Education, and Public History:

Teaching History at the Stratford Festival98

6 | Table of Contents

Felix Apel

Hollywood's Influence on the Transmission of Historical Images:

Lars Kraumes' *Der Staat gegen Fritz Bauer*115

Thorsten Carstensen

Learning from John Ford:

History, Geography, and Epic Storytelling

in the Works of Peter Handke131

Raymond Haberski, Jr.

The Passion of Richard Schickel: What We Expect from War Films160

Nicholas K. Johnson

"A classroom history lesson is not going to work":

HBO's *Conspiracy* and Depicting Holocaust Perpetrators on Film172

Table of Figures197

List of Contributors199

Index201

Acknowledgements207

Raymond Haberski, Jr.

The Passion of Richard Schickel: What We Expect from War Films

War Stories

"The men on board dubbed it the 'Home Again Special,'" reported *Time* magazine in August 1944. It was a train taking 370 members of the 1st Marine Division across the United States to their families for a 30-day furlough. The reporter mused, "In another war there might have been brass bands at every stop. But in this pageantry-less, slogan-less war, the train just rumbled on toward New York, through the big towns and the whistle-stops."¹

Samuel Goldwyn, one of Hollywood's movie moguls, imagined that the story of the Home Again Special might make a good script. Goldwyn was the producer of classics such as *Wuthering Heights*, *The Pride of the Yankees*, and, in 1946, *The Best Years of Our Lives*; this last film would be the cinematic adaptation of the *Time* magazine story. But why? Details about the soldiers suggested that they were slightly less than "Hollywood" – most were silent, pensive, and not at all like the action adventure heroes who typically populate war movies. When we think of such pictures, what comes to mind? Great battles fought with huge machines killing large swaths of soldiers, and a hero or heroes who emerge to elicit audience favor and provide the right kind of dramatic arc. But the *Time* magazine story did not, on the surface, have any of these dimensions.

In fact, it was clear that far from being heroic, the soldiers were scared, and not about the war – "I'm a little worried about how I'll look to them," one confessed, "about how much I've changed." Some didn't speak much at all, this to the chagrin of a reporter from the Pittsburgh *Sun-Telegraph*. He had boarded the train hoping to record war stories, but after two hours, he left mumbling, "I didn't get a thing." Another, when prodded about his heroism, retreated into modesty: "I had two machine guns, and I grabbed the guns a couple of times when my gunner got shot," Sgt. Al Goguen related. "But that was my job... God, I don't know how many Japs we got." To more than just a few soldiers, the real damage of the war was done on the Homefront. One recounted how while he was overseas, a buddy of his had received word that his girlfriend had gotten married. Because of this,

1 "The Way Home." *Time* 44 (August 7, 1944), 15.

she asked him to send home all the pictures of her he had. He did, along with “a foot high” stack of pictures of other women collected from other soldiers.² A month after this story appeared in *Time*, the magazine ran another, providing more evidence that the emerging story of the war was the integration of troops back into civilian life. On a 21-day furlough, Army Air Force pilots and crewmen attempted to enjoy themselves in Atlantic City. There they awaited reassignment, a prospect many found easier to handle than sitting on the boardwalk. “We don’t need to be reoriented to the Army,” one snapped. “A lot of us are damn glad to be going back overseas. What they should have prepared us for was the shock of coming home.” Like other accounts, this one also included stories of romantic betrayal and broken marriages. An Army chaplain explained that many of the marriages had been of a certain kind – say I do before I die acts – but other relationships had been long-term; yet many were broken by the long months of war. The soldiers even had problems talking to their friends who had remained stateside: “When I got home Manhattan didn’t seem real,” one said. And when he began telling people what he had experienced, he explained “they didn’t want to hear what men have to endure. They wanted dime-novel stories of adventure. They didn’t understand what I was trying to say.” “They hadn’t seen it. It hadn’t touched them.”³

Hollywood Remembers

But it had touched Hollywood director William Wyler. Wyler was Jewish with a Swiss father and German mother. His mother’s cousin was Carl Laemmle, the movie mogul who owned Universal Studios, and the person who brought Wyler to work for Universal in New York City. Wyler earned his stripes at Universal, slowly moving his way into directing throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. His most memorable films, though, emerged after he left Universal and began working with Samuel Goldwyn. It was Goldwyn who tapped Wyler to direct the *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the picture he wanted made about problems soldiers faced when they returned home.

Wyler had directed for Goldwyn before, (*Wuthering Heights*) but just as importantly, he had also served in the US Army, shooting war documentaries, including the harrowing 1944 Army Air Force film, *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress*. His experience in the war represented one of the main reasons Hollywood evolved into something else after 1945. “The war was an escape to reality,” Wyler explained. *The Best Years of Our Lives* “was the result of social forces at work when

2 “The Way Home.” *Time* 44 (August 7, 1944), 15-16.

3 “Morale.” *Time* 44 (September 11, 1944), 65-66.

the war ended. In a sense, it was written by events and imposed a responsibility on us to be true to these events and refrain from distorting them to our own ends.”⁴ Consider how Wyler described the relationship between his movie and history – he believed that the war compelled Hollywood to get real about its social obligation to its audiences. Of course, such intentions still had to operate within the “Dream Factory” that just as often made reality into a fairytale.

And yet, Goldwyn, Wyler, and Robert Sherwood, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author who wrote the screenplay, depicted perhaps the toughest and yet most universal of all war stories – the transition from combat to civilian life. *The Best Years of Our Lives* traces the return of three soldiers to their respective families. Each man deals with his own specific problem that, in light of the articles that inspired the film, were fairly common in postwar America. As with many Hollywood movies, the characters represent far more in a single person than would be realistically possible, but they also provide somebody for everybody in the audience to relate to. For example, a young bombardier captain returns to his wife and his somewhat pathetic life as a soda jerk, only to slowly realize that she has left him for another man. He is emotionally crushed by the thought of washing glasses all day long. The character that attracted the most attention, though, was the one played by the only non-professional in the cast. Harold Russell, a real-life soldier who had lost his hands in a real-life battle, played a disabled vet who returns to his cute blonde girlfriend filled with the type of dread that many soldiers felt – will she understand me? He wonders. Will she accept me? Russell was honored by the Academy for his performance, both, it seems likely, for his authenticity and for giving a voice to a dilemma understood by millions of Americans.

Critics Weigh in

The film premiered the week before Thanksgiving in 1946. An auspicious time, present-day critic Francis Davis notes, for it was “a year when many families were mourning their losses as they sat down to count their blessings.” The film was an immediate success with both audiences and critics. It grossed more in its first run than any other movie except *Gone With the Wind*, at that point the reigning all-time box-office champion. It garnered an astonishing array of awards, including seven Oscars, two Golden Globes, and was named best picture of the year by the Academy, the New York Film Critics Circle, and the Golden Globe journalists. *Time* announced it was a “big, shiny, star-studded show that should appeal to practically anyone who can be lured inside a movie theater.” It cost a relatively

4 As quoted in Philip D. Beidler. “Remembering the Best Years of Our Lives.” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 72.4 (1996), 4.

high \$3 million to make, but clearly earned its weight back in gold statuettes alone. The review in *Time* summed up the general reaction to the film: "Like most good mass entertainments, this picture has occasional moments of knowing hokum; but unlike most sure-fire movies, it was put together with good taste, honesty, wit – even a strong suggestion of guts."⁵

Shortly after the war ended, a new film journal entitled *Hollywood Quarterly* editorialized, "One of the first casualties of the conflict was the 'pure entertainment' myth, which had served to camouflage the social irresponsibility and creative impotence of much of the material presented on the screen and over the air."⁶ For Wyler and the generation who served in and survived the war, Hollywood could not remain merely a dream factory. That notion might sound anachronistic, considering that we assume war movies made before the 1960s (and certainly before Vietnam), are one-dimensional. But did Hollywood trade one kind of approach to war films for another? In other words, the skepticism and cynicism that pervades later films such as *The Deer Hunter* or *Coming Home* might be seen as a reaction to the intentions driving *The Best Years of Our Lives*. And yet, both eras responded to the cultural conditions of their audiences and filmmakers. While Wyler's film was not meant as a correction, nor was it the typical John Wayne vehicle or a pat, buddy movie with equal parts comedy, tragedy, and hollow heroics. Still, it was a quintessentially Hollywood war movie: it was made by one of industry's moguls, it starred a few big-name male and female actors, was filmed at the end of the Second World War (and was therefore was very timely), and was directed by someone who had seen combat. Perhaps from our perspective today, the simple structure and nature of the film strikes us as naïve, the film does not reflect the jaded, cynical successors that we have come to accept as the standard. But should we find grave faults with it?

In 1946, Robert Warshow, a critic of a caliber almost unmatched in his day, leveled a devastating critique of *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Warshow was an erudite and happily elitist. His criticism clearly influenced later critics who were primed to see war movies as one of Hollywood's social sins. In his review of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Warshow snipped, "the falsehood [of the film] has many aspects, but its chief and most general aspect is a denial of the reality of politics, if politics means the existence of real incompatibilities of interest and real *social* problems not susceptible of individual solutions." The movie, in other words, was a moral failure.⁷

5 Francis Davis. "Storming the Home Front." *Atlantic Monthly* 291.2 (2003), 125; "New Picture." *Time* 48 (November 25, 1946), 103.

6 "Editorial Statement." *Hollywood Quarterly* 1.1 (1945), vii.

7 Robert Warshow. "The Anatomy of Falsehood," in *The Immediate Experience: Movie, Comics, Theatre and other Aspects of Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Warshow (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 158.

It strikes me as more than a bit disingenuous to expect war movies to lay bare the emotional and even political tumult that the soldiers themselves found difficult to comprehend. Acknowledging the line that Hollywood films straddled between entertainment and art, critic James Agee wrote a two-part essay on *The Best Years of Our Lives* for the political magazine *The Nation* in 1946. In a review that in its totality was a mixture of abject disappointment and genuine pleasure, Agee, more than any other critic, captured what was so troubling about the film. Agee was no lightweight; his intelligent writing elevated movie criticism to a level of respectability. Agee wrote, “At its worst this story is very annoying in its patness, its timidity, its slithering attempts to pretend to face and by that pretense to dodge in the most shameful way possible its own fullest meanings and possibilities.” However, he relished the notion that “this is one of very few American studio-made movies in years that seem to me profoundly pleasing, moving, and encouraging.”⁸ Unlike Warshow, Agee wrote for popular outlets as well as specialized journals – he was one of the main film critics for *Time Magazine* as well as for the *Nation*. And unlike later critics, Agee could not assume that his film criticism mattered. In fact, he and Warshow were part of a generation of truly outstanding writers who devoted considerable and sustained attention to the roles movies played in defining American cultural history.

Schickel Remembers

Richard Schickel was a beneficiary of those earlier critics. As a critic for *Time* from 1965–2010, Schickel held a position of authority in the world of film criticism that was nearly unmatched in terms of influence (opinion-shaping) and access. He came of age as a critic when his profession had gained full legitimacy because there was a huge audience ready to listen to what critics like him had to say. Therefore, it is with great interest that we should consider Schickel’s dismantling of Hollywood war films, especially *The Best Years of Our Lives*. In his book, *Good Morning Mr. Zip Zip Zip*, Richard Schickel refers to that film as the “last great wartime lie, a fantasia of good feelings...eerily out of touch with human reality.” For most of his book, which is a strange hybrid of memoir and film history, Schickel tackles what he believes is that great lie: that Hollywood helped perpetuate an alternate reality “covered in silence, duplicity, [and] misdirection.” He relates with obvious exasperation, “During World War II, in the midst of my burgeoning life [Schickel was eight years old in 1941], I was surrounded – as we all were – by death on a scale unprecedented in human history. Yet it was constantly lied about.

8 James Agee. “What Hollywood Can Do,” *Nation*, 7 and 14 December 1946, in *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (New York: Beacon Press, 1966), 229–231. 229, 230.

In the movies particularly, tragedy was almost always subsumed in triumphalism, mortality in broadly hinted at suggestion of heroic immortality.” And while his memory of being duped clearly infuriates Schickel, the reason his ire has yet to recede is because, he explains, “This is a lie that has returned, revitalized, in the ‘greatest generation’ fantasy.”⁹

Schickel wanted his book to expose and undermine the lies and myths cooked up by Hollywood; lies that were part of official American propaganda during the war and grew into prevailing opinion following it. Thus, it follows that *The Best Years of Our Lives* was a feel-good movie that, Schickel argues, was probably needed by adults in 1946. “But,” he declares, “I didn’t. In fact,” he snaps, “the comfortable – not to say semi-comatose – world of *The Best Years of Our Lives* was exactly the world I wanted to escape.” For Schickel, and one assumes he thinks for millions of people like him, the fiction of Hollywood’s America had consumed all understanding of the real America. In a remarkable statement about historical memory, Schickel announces, “If we cannot remember truthfully, we cannot think clearly or behave decently. That is one important thing a critic...tries to do: recall honestly, so as to measure new experience in such light as memory can shed on the case...It is,” he closes, “all I have to offer.” While many people who live through great historical events invest faith in their own memory, what makes Schickel’s remembering actually a bit dangerous is that he expects too much from movies and memory.¹⁰

After reading *Good Morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip* I felt it imperative to address the passion of Richard Schickel – or his quest to redeem us all by condemning Hollywood’s version of America at war. The tragedy, he exclaims, is that the government and Hollywood “deliberately distorted much of what they put forth in those days in order to keep us bent pliantly to their will.” Schickel goes on to confess that he “became...a critic...out of some dimly felt desire to help set this errant record straight.” To advance his mission, he rented a few dozen World War II vintage movies and wrote his reactions to them into what becomes a reviled past. Yet, what is most puzzling about Schickel’s approach is not his desire to seek the truth but his absolute certainty that memory and criticism can uncover it. In a rather ahistorical comment, Schickel contends that because his generation is dying off, the war period will “belong exclusively to the historians, trying to recreate the living texture of the time out of dry documents, [and] fading photographs.” Gone will be the people such as Schickel who “can remember the war,” and while there

9 Richard Schickel, *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip: Movies, Memory, and World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 270, xiv, xv.

10 Schickel, *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip*, 272, 303-304.

is still time, who will be able “to debate its conduct and its meaning.” It is up to his generation, he closes, “to get straight about it.”¹¹

The War on Film

How do we know when we have “gotten it straight”? If Hollywood poses problems for those who, like Schickel, lived through the war, one would imagine that documentaries are the obvious answer. Indeed, I had the chance to watch the making of *The Perilous Fight: America's World War II in Color*, a documentary that is stunning because it *looks* like film footage from America's other filmed war, Vietnam.¹² The documentary was made by a team of accomplished filmmakers who used the expertise of historians and journalists to verify the authenticity of the story and footage. The filmmakers had an audacious goal to use color footage to create a narrative rather than look for film to tell a story already written. In other words, the six hours of documentary film drive the story. It is as close to memory as history as we are likely to get because the film is basically shards of memory stitched together to make an historical argument. And yet, as much as I think Schickel would have liked this approach because it relies on firsthand accounts, the filmmakers still had to make significant choices.

For example, by relying only on color footage, the filmmakers placed limits on what they could use and what audiences would see. Some events, including Pearl Harbor and the Battle of the Bulge, do not actually appear in the film – there were no cameras capturing the Japanese raid on the American base in Hawaii in color. And some film footage was just as sentimental as anything captured by Hollywood. Consider a five-minute sequence about the 1945 battle for Okinawa as just one instance. In what, to me, is among the most heart-wrenching chapters of the film, the filmmakers used the terribly intimate bloody battle for this island base to recount the story of William Belcher, an American soldier from Indiana who died clearing out one of the many caves on Okinawa. These caves, the sequence begins, harbored both civilians as well as soldiers, and the Americans sent to root out the enemy also encountered a terrified, wounded, and sorely maltreated population.

Unlike the characters in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, William Belcher did not return home. But the film's portrayal of Belcher, and the music and narration that surrounds it, seems very similar – sentimental and sympathetic – to Hollywood's composite. The film jumps from scenes on Okinawa to home films of Belcher and

11 Schickel, *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip*, xvii, 302.

12 *The Perilous Fight: America's World War II in Color*, Martin Smith, producer (USA, 2003).

his wife getting married and raising their two sons, while a voiceover reads a letter Belcher wrote home. It begins:

This is a letter that I want your mother to save for you until you are older if perchance I never return. Death is not an easy thing for anyone to understand but every life shall one day end and should that day come for me before I can return to live with you remember that only the body can be taken and I will still be. You both shall know your father better as you grow and know yourself better. I can never be dead, because you are alive.¹³

Belcher's letter, and the construction of the scene around it, quite deliberately evokes emotion and sentimentalism as sure as any Hollywood movie. But because Belcher was not yet jaded and cynical, did the filmmakers fail their audience? Can we get a simple message from his death? While Schickel indicts Hollywood for not merely creating a false past but knowingly perpetuating myths that served to cover-up the truth, with a capital "T," I wonder whether Schickel's indictment of Hollywood films doesn't rest on an impossible charge: to capture the meaning of the war. Like the ambiguity that complicates recounting the history of the war, the history of moviemaking during the war is a good deal muddier than Schickel would have us believe.

Cinematic History of the War

Thomas Doherty, a film historian with a distinguished publishing record, deals with the matter of World War II movies and American culture in his 1993 book *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. Doherty suggests that "from the vantage of half a century, the film record of 1941-45 is condescended to as quaint or condemned as duplicitous. The technique seems hopelessly antiquated, the sensibility laughably naïve."¹⁴ Indeed, Doherty supports Schickel's gut reaction. I agree that when compared to films such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* or Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (much less all the Vietnam movies), Hollywood films made during the Second World War seem outmatched technologically and, therefore, we think they are outmatched dramatically as well. However, quite apart from the undisciplined memories like Schickel's, Doherty explains that wartime Hollywood did not belittle the experience of war or willfully create the kind of meta-myth that Schickel condemns.

13 Letter from William Forbes Belcher to His Sons, February 14, 1945, William Forbes Belcher Papers, 1945, SC2353, Indiana Historical Society.

14 Thomas Doherty. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2, 11.

Of the many movies that might illustrate this point, Doherty points to one that quite directly addresses the context of Schickel's argument. In 1944, Hollywood scored with a movie called *I'll Be Seeing You* – a title that touchingly echoed one of the period's most melancholy tunes. In a pivotal scene of the film, a burned-out combat veteran (again on leave), played by Joseph Cotten, goes to a picture show with his girlfriend, played by Ginger Rogers. In the movie, the two sit through a typical flag-waving screen spectacle, one that was made to boost morale and instill patriotism – the kind of movie that Schickel deplores but also holds up as monolithic. After leaving the theater, Rogers turns to Cotten and asks if the “war was really like that?” The couple stops and Cotten begins a monologue that is neither inspirational nor cynical, it is simply delivered without emotion:

It's just a difference in size. To a guy that's in it, the war's about ten feet wide and...kind of empty. It's you and...a couple of fellows in your company maybe, maybe a couple of Japs. It's all kind of mixed up, uh, sometimes it's...all full of noise and sometimes it's quiet. It all depends on what you're thinking about I guess. It depends on how scared you are, how cold you are, and how wet you are. I guess if you asked a hundred guys what the war is like, they'd all give you a different answer.

Sound like fiction? A meta-myth? A lie? This movie rebutted Schickel's argument sixty years before he made it. One thing that Hollywood could not fake, furthermore, was immediacy of war for the movie industry. “Unlike Vietnam,” Doherty explains, “this war reached into boardrooms and penetrated the highest executive levels...Joseph I. Breen, the power behind the Production Code Administration [the organization that had infamously browbeaten the industry into sanitizing its product] had three sons serving overseas. During the same week in 1944, Breen received two telegrams, one son had been wounded in Normandy, another had lost a leg on Guam.”¹⁵

Schickel can be disappointed with mainstream Hollywood if he finds it nefarious that that Hollywood colluded with Washington to prevent reminders of war's brutality from reaching the nation's movie theaters. Yet any historian who plumbed the archives and read magazines – trade and popular – would also have to concede that, as Doherty suggests, “whether overseas or on the homefront, American audiences knew what Hollywood was about and Hollywood knew that they knew.” Perhaps the clearest illustration of this implicit understanding was audience reaction to non-fiction films during the war. Doherty recounts the reactions audiences had to two different cinematic depictions of war's brutality. In the Hollywood movie *Air Force*, which came out in 1943, audiences laughed and applauded when Japanese Zeros were shot out of the sky. However, when people witnessed real war footage of flamethrowers eviscerating Japanese soldiers in pillboxes and caves the

15 Doherty, *Projections of War*, 12, 14.

audience sat “silent and grim.” The public was sophisticated enough to grapple with the disconnect between Hollywood fiction and the war’s reality, even if a young Richard Schickel was not.¹⁶

Newsreels and combat reports played in two-thirds of the 16,800 theaters in the United States. Throughout the war, they brought as many people into theaters as A-list features; and by 1944, over eighty percent of newsreel footage was about the war. Hungry for information – especially pictures – about the fighting, audiences forced the movie industry and the government to change their policies regarding war footage. In September 1943, the US government officially permitted “newsreels to record the realistic ‘albeit harrowing’ side of war, including images of American dead in battle.” Schickel reserves special condemnation for the film industry’s failure – and therefore a generation’s failure – to face the enormity of the Holocaust. Here too, Schickel’s memory fails him. While it is clear that FDR’s administration willfully disregarded the magnitude of the Holocaust, even with this dreadful cover-up – among the worst of the war – images from liberated death camps did reach audiences. In April 1945, the newsreel *Nazi Atrocities* appeared in movie theaters. This initial view of the Holocaust was quickly followed a month later by Army Signal Corps footage of the liberation of four Nazi concentration camps. Ed Herily, the voice of Universal Newsreel, admonished the audience, “Don’t turn away! Look!” One wonders if Richard Schickel did.¹⁷

Problems with Memory

Schickel wants his book to be seen as an impassioned rejection of the myth that World War II was fought by good simple men for the betterment of a troubled but redeemable world. “Most of us no longer believe in that myth,” he says. “When we encounter it, usually in a late-night television rerun of some old war movie, we laugh and shake our heads at the naivete.” Schickel is saving us by disavowing saving himself of the deception now mass marketed as the Greatest Generation. In returning to his youth, and the origins of this lie, he hopes to understand and then erase the fact that, he “surrendered a great deal of [his] imaginative self, more than a half-century ago, to the movies, the most immediate and potent – though certainly not the most subtle – narrative instrument our society has yet created.” Yet has Schickel not perpetrated the same crime of memory he accuses Hollywood of committing? He condemns Hollywood for deceiving boys like him into believing, as he says of Robert Sherwood’s script, “that American life was now mainly a question of minor behavioral adjustments within the framework provided by [overly

16 Doherty, *Projections of War*, 228.

17 Doherty, *Projections of War*, 228, 239, 247.

optimistic] values.” But in place of falsehood, Schickel substitutes a cynicism that buckles under scrutiny. In the end, it is not the movies that failed Schickel or Americans in general, but his own memory, conflated into truth and history.¹⁸ Far from the last great lie of Hollywood’s war, *The Best Years of Our Lives* might be reasonably seen as the last great war film before nostalgia and then cynicism made irony and suspicion the only authentic response to the war. It is undoubtedly the case that as we moved further away from the Second World War, we as a society have allowed nostalgia to inform our celebration of the generation that fought that war as much as cold reason. Yet, are movies to blame for such a development? What can we reasonably expect from movies? I don’t ask that question flippantly so we – the filmgoing audience – avoid parsing out why some war movies are good and some are not. Those that are vacuous are fairly easy to identify and dismiss. Yet, movies such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* remain significant because they persist as war movies of particular kind. They teeter on the edge of profundity and profanity – trapped between being smart observations on the tragedy of war and commercial products that sell movie tickets and popcorn. But these complicated movies are not, collectively, a lie. They can’t be, because we, the audience, accept them for what they are, movies – not the Truth.

So, in the end who is to blame for the lies that Schickel identifies and denounces? Was it the so-called Greatest Generation or the children of that generation who preferred to accept the fantasy world of late-night TV rather than understand what their parents had lived through? Remember the lack of hubris among the returning soldiers; compare it to the sarcasm of Schickel – it seems he is unable to mention the title *The Best Years of Our Lives* without an ironic sneer that says to anyone listening that Hollywood can’t fool Richard Schickel any longer. Such a reaction does a disservice not merely to the history of the war years, but to the filmmakers who approached this film with sincerity, not piety, in an effort to capture the myriad of emotions felt by the generation that crowded into theaters in the winter of 1946. That generation frankly didn’t need to add irony to their war experience, they were happy just to survive it.

Cited Works

- Agee, James. “What Hollywood Can Do,” *Nation*, 7 and 14 December 1946, in *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (New York: Beacon Press, 1966), 229-231.
- Beidler, Philip D. “Remembering the Best Years of Our Lives.” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 72.4 (1996): 589-604.
- Belcher, William Forbes. Letter to His Sons, February 14, 1945, *William Forbes Belcher Papers*, 1945, SC2353, Indiana Historical Society.
- The Best Years of Our Lives*. William Wyler, dir. (USA, 1946).
- Davis, Francis. “Storming the Home Front,” *Atlantic Monthly* 291.2 (2003): 125-132.

18 Schickel, *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip*, xii, 271, 303.

- Doherty, Thomas. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- "Editorial Statement." *Hollywood Quarterly* 1.1 (1945).
- I'll Be Seeing You*. William Dieterle, dir. (USA, 1944).
- "Morale." *Time* 44 (September 11, 1944).
- "New Picture." *Time* 48 (November 25, 1946).
- Saving Private Ryan*. Steven Spielberg, dir. (USA, 1998).
- Schickel, Richard. *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip: Movies, Memory, and World War II*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.
- The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress*. William Wyler, dir. (USA, 1944).
- The Perilous Fight: America's World War II in Color*, Martin Smith, producer (USA, 2003).
- The Thin Red Line*. Terence Malick, dir. (USA, 1998).
- "The Way Home." *Time* 44 (August 7, 1944).
- Warshow, Robert. "The Anatomy of Falsehood," in *The Immediate Experience: Movie, Comics, Theatre and other Aspects of Popular Culture*. (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 156-160.