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John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, a unit of the United States Army under the leadership of Hollywood director Frank Capra began making slick, interesting documentary films that stood in sharp contrast to the dry, dull training films that up to that point the military had been producing on its own. After Capra was drafted into the Signal Corps, he and General George C. Marshall had agreed to the need for a unit that would produce training, informational, *and* propaganda films both for military consumption and for general release.

In this country, government filmmaking was still something of a novel idea. The U.S. had been slow to realize the value of motion pictures in informing and persuading the populace. The Soviets had understood immediately the power of film, and the great Russian film directors of the 1920s were also successful Soviet propagandists. Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels followed their lead; after seeing Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925), he observed, "even the most obnoxious attitude can be communicated if it is exposed through the medium of an outstanding work of art" (Leiser 10). The greatest Nazi filmmaker, Leni Reifenstahl, was renowned for her ability to edit scenes of real life into a compelling document of Nazi power and purpose, and after Capra studied her film *Triumph des Willens*, he commented that although Reifenstahl's film "fired no gun, dropped no bombs," it was, "as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist . . . just as lethal" (363).¹ The Nazis successfully exploited cinematic propaganda long before the

Americans, who lagged behind. Even the British and the Canadians had government filmmaking units in the 1930s.

The U.S. did have, though, despite its tardiness, the advantage of the world's greatest movie-making resources. Just the list of directors who went on to make wartime documentaries would have been welcomed by any film studio head: in addition to Capra, the list would have included John Ford, Joseph von Sternberg, William Wyler, and the man generally acknowledged to have been behind the creation of the greatest wartime documentaries: John Huston.

During his long life, John Huston was many things: boxer, soldier, gambler, writer, big game hunter, film director, lover, artist, country squire. Above all, Huston was a myth maker, a teller of larger-than-life stories, and not just in his films; film historian Neal Gabler writes that Huston "made his life into one great work of performance art," and even after his death, some of the myths about the man endure because of the force of repetition and the force of Huston's personality (70). Among the most important of these are the myths relating to Huston's WWII experience and his heroic filming of the monumental combat documentary *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945).

That the film was shot under harrowing enemy fire, that Huston and his camera crew were in constant danger, that the Army brass cut his film to reduce its dramatic impact before releasing it are legends the records, when combed, don't support. In other words, although Huston's film has been praised by generations of historians and film critics, its overwhelming sense of authenticity may be attributed more to art than to fact. The confusion about *San Pietro* is understandable. Although records and unedited footage at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. indicate otherwise, Lawrence Grobel, author of the recent best-selling *The Hustons*, writes that Huston and his camera crew photographed the fight for the Italian village, a small but tenaciously defended target at the entrance to the Liri Valley, during the thick of the battle (250-52)—Scott Hammen has described Huston's courage in shooting the movie: Huston "reportedly moved continuously in the face of enemy small arms . . . fire from one cameraman to the next, explaining to each exactly what he wanted from their footage" (21); Basil Wright has praised the film as "possibly the

most authentic (and moving) picture of a real battle ever put on the screen" (380); Robert Sklar, in *Movie-Made America*, praises "remarkable films of war's actuality like John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*" (255); and Jeanine Basinger suggests that "Narrative movies were put to the test by the reality of *Battle of San Pietro*" (127).² Why should anyone question the authenticity of Huston's footage when these and other accounts of the film (and the gritty realism of the film itself) all reinforce the longstanding beliefs that *San Pietro* was shot under combat conditions and that John Huston was himself continuously in great danger?³

Furthermore, Huston repeated these stories in his autobiography *An Open Book* and in interviews, and most critics, scholars, and film historians have taken his words at face value, from James Agee, who championed Huston's documentaries in *The Nation*, to today. Admittedly, the story of Huston's wartime filmmaking career is an interesting one, and Huston must have been sometimes in danger while he was in Italy—he was a soldier in a combat theater—but although *San Pietro* is indeed a film of stunning power, the facts surrounding its filming do not match the myths that film historians have accepted now for over 40 years.

When war broke out, this event would not have seemed the beneficial artistic experience it became for Huston. In fact, since Huston had finally achieved some stature in his profession, the coming of the war must have been particularly discouraging. After several screenwriting successes, including *Jezebel* (1938), *Juarez* (1939), *High Sierra*, and *Sergeant York* (both 1941), he had been given a chance to direct, and his version of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) established him as a filmmaker to watch.

Then came Pearl Harbor. In the middle of making *Across the Pacific* (1942), Huston received his call-up to the Army Signal Corps. His assignment was to make films for the American war effort. After joining the illustrious group of Hollywood officers, however, Huston spent several frustrating weeks waiting in Washington before receiving his first posting: the storm-tossed Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska. Here he filmed *Report from the Aleutians* (1943).

Another director might have considered the Aleutian assignment a joke, perhaps even an insult. The windswept and remote Aleutians were as unknown then as now, and the film's narration describes the islands accurately as the "weather-pot of the world." But the Aleutians were important for other reasons, reasons Huston emphasized in the film he eventually made. First, Adak, Huston's home base, was closer to Japan than any other U.S. outpost. Perhaps more important, Kiska, an island invaded by the Japanese, was American territory. Although Alaska was not yet a state, the Aleutian theater was the only place where the enemy had landed on American soil—a fact which added drama to what otherwise might have seemed a worthless theater.

When we compare Huston's documentaries to those being produced by other Hollywood figures, even a minor and relatively conventional work such as *Report from the Aleutians* stands out for its acknowledgement of the complete spectrum of war—its routine boredom *and* its danger. Because of Huston's effort to reveal a multi-faceted—*total*—picture, his documentaries, when seen alongside those of other film masters—John Ford, say, or Frank Capra—have a freshness and apparent truthfulness unmatched in other U.S. wartime documentaries.

This is not to say that Huston in his first venture into wartime documentary did not indulge in propaganda. The images in *Report from the Aleutians* are artfully accompanied by patriotic music; American ingenuity is extolled, particularly in the scenes showing the island's airfield being created from a lagoon in 36 hours time; the photos of brave American fliers who have died in action are passed in front of the camera; and, most significantly, the bombing "mission" that culminates the action was actually patched together from several similar sorties, and the outcome dictated by propaganda. "Planes were lost on this mission, but the War Department wanted it to be a completely successful mission," Huston later explained in an interview to justify his film's departure from fact.

But although all of Huston's Army films contain elements of conventional propaganda, his pictures differ from most U.S. wartime documentaries in meaningful ways. First, Huston's documentaries do not employ a booming "voice of God" narrator

to enforce the “truth” of the proceedings; in *Report*, the subdued, human voices of John and Walter Huston tell the story. On the one hand, these voices celebrate the heroism of the pilots, while, on the other, they describe the boredom, the loneliness, the forbidding isolation of serving in the Aleutian theater. The images of desolation Huston shows leave no doubt that Adak was a place where bravery in combat was frequently less important than sheer survival. It may in fact be true that, as Richard Dyer MacCann has suggested, Huston used too much of the footage he shot; it is probably also true that without such incidentals—the mail calls, the worship services, the mess lines—the balance of the film would be disturbed (220). From this beginning, Huston learned that the “glamour” of combat was only a small part of war, and in *Report* he presented the realities of war—all of them—as he perceived them, with the exception only of the reedited final bombing sortie.

Huston’s next film assignment was to help the Capra unit replace North African footage that had been lost when the boat ferrying the film was sunk. Huston’s orders were to “manufacture” something similar to the missing film, and the results were incorporated into *Tunisian Victory*, a “mockumentary” co-produced with the British. According to production files in the National Archives, Huston photographed shots of a Teletype in the Pentagon spelling out “Acrobat”—the operation code name—and 26 shots of simulated air combat in Orlando, Florida, and he, Capra, and Captain David Miller directed over 120 shots of gun flares, tanks and half tracks, and simulated night combat.⁴ The combat reenactments are fairly easy to spot, and Scott Hammen has found it ironic that “this frustrating episode of faked battle” was Huston’s last project before filming *San Pietro*. There is irony here, but a very different irony from that suggested by Hammen, and one that has gone, for the most part, unreported.

That *San Pietro* is a masterpiece remains undisputed; its reputation is secure, its emotional power obvious.⁵ Writing in *The Nation* in 1945, James Agee named the movie the year’s best, and since that time, critics have continually lauded it as a superior documentary achievement and masterpiece of combat reportage. But this film, originally commissioned by the Army to chronicle the Army’s triumphant entry into Rome and then recommissioned

to explain the Army's slow progress through Italy, was not entirely filmed, if at all, during the actual battle for the village of San Pietro. *San Pietro's* opening disclaimer that the film was shot within range of enemy fire can, of course, be true, depending on how one defines "range" and "enemy fire," but records in the Motion Picture and Sound Recording Branch of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. indicate that Huston's creative combining of bombing missions in *Report from the Aleutians* and the combat reenactments he directed for the Capra unit may not have been temporary artistic departures from a factual bent; the artful combining of fact and fiction may have been, for Huston, a typical practice.

The actual battle for the village of San Pietro in the Liri Valley was fought December 8-15, 1943. More than 1,000 U.S. soldiers died in the capture of San Pietro, and Huston's film does not exaggerate or romanticize the battle's ferocity or the loss of life. But despite all the critical acclaim for its authenticity and accuracy, *San Pietro* is not the real-time recording of an actual battle. Just as he had done at Capra's request for *Tunisian Victory*, Huston reenacted many scenes of battle that have been long regarded as completely authentic.

File records at the National Archives describe 27 reels of film shot for *San Pietro*. Of those, file cards for 21 flatly state that the reels include reenacted combat footage; the descriptions on these cards range from "Partly reenacted" and "Reenacted in part" to reels whose records read "All footage is reenacted."⁶ Of the latter, one reel contains some of the best known scenes from the completed film, including a shot where soldiers advance through the devastated olive orchard outside the town and the camera shakes from the exploding shells—dramatic footage conveying a sense of imminent peril, when the fact is that if any danger exists, it is not from the Germans.⁷ Other footage on this reel (dated January or February 1944, months after the battle) includes scenes of San Pietro women calmly washing clothes in a stream just after their town had been retaken and a shot in which a bespectacled soldier (who seems to be Huston himself) playfully approaches the camera carrying a tommy gun.

While there are reels whose file cards do not directly indicate reenactment, most of the reels date from February of 1944, long after the battle of San Pietro. Only two reels are dated from December, 1943, which might lead one to think that these reels include combat footage shot during the actual battle. One of these reels however, again includes obvious reenactments: a number of shots of the same tank exploding, over and over, filmed from a variety of angles; a scene where a soldier supposedly on patrol playfully picks his nose on camera and Huston, wearing a floppy hat instead of a helmet, pokes his head into the frame and orders another take; a scene where soldiers nonchalantly smoke cigarettes, then salute somebody off screen (perhaps Huston), wave to the camera, and walk away.⁸ Such behavior is hardly behavior to expect from men under fire—in fact, front-line soldiers as a matter of routine did not salute officers during combat, since such show of respect made officers more obvious targets.

Many of the 27 reels feature footage used in the completed motion picture, where the effect, as edited, is to create a film of uncommon power. But in watching the individual reels, in seeing the shots, such as the tank detonated again and again for Huston's benefit, or the somehow perfectly captured explosions on reel after reel, we become aware of near-perfect composition, and the footage begins to lose its "authenticity." Soldiers drop to the ground to wait out an explosion that Huston's cameras miraculously center time and again; men at a machine gun fire out over a valley where no enemy can be seen; an explosive is detonated inside a deserted enemy pillbox, providing a dramatically smoking background for advancing G.I.s to walk past.

Huston claimed, and the historians have repeated, that the *San Pietro* he wanted to make was so controversial that it couldn't be released.⁹ His intention, he said, was to close the film by panning the bodies of Texas Rangers he had interviewed earlier. Huston intended to pan the bodies of the dead Rangers while their voices ran on the soundtrack. Such a composition may well have been disturbing to the brass, and they might indeed have reacted as Huston described it: after viewing the film, the highest-ranking officer left silently, followed in order by each lower-ranking officer

until the room was empty. Huston was then called on the carpet and accused of making an “anti-war” film. “Gentlemen,” he always claimed to have said, “if I ever make anything other than an anti-war film, I hope you’ll take me out and shoot me.”¹⁰

Perhaps the generals’ reported reactions may be explained by the scenes of death and burial—the depiction of dead U.S. soldiers was still a touchy subject—but although the burial scenes and the body bags seem authentic, many (if not all) of the dead in the reenacted combat footage are soldiers playing possum. In the completely reenacted reel 111 ADC 1030, for example, a “body” in a shell hole suddenly raises his head, while in 111 ADC 893, also dating from February, 1944, soldiers walk casually onto a battlefield from screen right—the direction in which their comrades in foxholes are initially pointing their weapons—and turn over a “corpse” they find there. Although Grobel in *The Hustons* discusses footage of dismembered corpses that found its way into the first version, examination of a number of representative reels does not reveal any such footage (250); in fact, none of the “dead” soldiers on the battlefield seem to have visible wounds. Furthermore, many of the shots of individual soldiers—the “personality” shots—that appear in the film are drawn from the 111 ADC 1030 reel shot in late February; these G.I.s could not possibly be the Rangers killed in San Pietro to whom Huston and others have referred, casting further doubt on the validity of this alleged earlier version of the film’s composition.¹¹

Still, we have to ask how a film made up largely of reenactments—scenes of battle staged for the camera—differs from a Hollywood version of battle, for in those answers lay the reasons *San Pietro* will remain a classic no matter how it was constructed. First, Huston did witness combat firsthand, and his experiences with the tedium of war in Alaska were expanded to include this experience of danger on the front lines. Huston admired the bravery of the American G.I.s, and his film reflects their courage, loyalty, and determination. Huston’s voice-over narration proudly notes the objectives Allied soldiers captured and memorializes those who died in taking them, whether or not those soldiers we see in the film are those who actually perished. “The lives lost were precious lives,” Huston tells us, and he seems to

have believed it. What is certainly true is his remark that before war's end, "Many of those you see here alive will die." With this remark, perhaps, Huston both acknowledged that those men were not in danger as he filmed, but when they moved on, they would be in enemy gun sights.

Huston's final film for the government, *Let There Be Light* (1946), was the first of his documentaries which did not involve either considerable restaging or editorial reshaping; the footage of the rehabilitation of battle fatigue and shell shock victims must have seemed to Huston sufficiently dramatic in itself. So in *Let There Be Light*, Huston turns his artistry, not to "created" scenes, but to camera angles and lighting. To suggest the terror and inner darkness these damaged men faced, Huston employed the visual stylings of *film noir*, and was so successful in demonstrating the psychic costs of war that the Army refused to release the film for over three decades.¹² *Let There Be Light* is consistent with Huston's other wartime work to the extent that it is neither jingoistic nor simplistic, and a comparison of *Let There Be Light* with *San Pietro*, reveals that both are works of striking power. Showing what often happens to soldiers in combat, *Let There Be Light* is a logical extension of *San Pietro*, and a strong and fitting culmination to Huston's wartime career.¹³

Knowing that *San Pietro* includes a great deal of reenacted non-combat footage has two effects. Such knowledge lessens the magnitude of John Huston's personal legend once we realize that in making *San Pietro*, Huston was not in the constant danger we have come to assume. But knowing that many of *San Pietro*'s battle scenes were consciously composed, our knowledge of and respect for John Huston the filmmaker increases, and, paradoxically, his artful, created scenes still give us the best idea of the terror and exhilaration of actual infantry combat. Despite our exposure to the on-the-spot realism of Vietnam and Gulf War reportage, *The Battle of San Pietro* retains the power to affect us—no matter the circumstances of its composition. □

Notes

1. Frank Capra, in *The Name Above the Title*, discusses his reaction to Reizenstahl's film. Production files at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. indicate that Capra consulted expatriate German film scholar Siefried Kracauer's study of the elements of Nazi film propaganda in order to put those same elements to work in the films he produced for the U.S.
2. One of the most recent film history texts, Louis Gianetti and Scott Eyman's *Flashback: A Brief History of Film*, continues this pervasive strain of criticism.
3. A recent award-winning documentary on Huston's career, *John Huston: The Man, The Movies, The Maverick* (1989) presents new factual errors concerning Huston's wartime filmmaking. The only scholar discussing the discrepancy between Huston's stories and the film's records at the National Archives is Lance Bertelsen in "San Pietro and the 'Art' of War," and Bertelsen's primary focus is on comparing the artistry of Huston and Ernie Pyle; his discussion of the material in the Archives seems almost an afterthought.
4. This information is drawn from the Source Key in the *Tunisian Victory* production file at the National Archives.
5. An idea of *San Pietro's* current reputation is provided by film critic Pauline Kael in a 1991 *New Yorker* article where her capsule review of the film describes it as "perhaps the greatest wartime documentary ever made."
6. It is possible that other footage exists. My purpose is to point to the considerable amount of reenactment, not to rule out the possibility that Huston might have shot additional footage during the actual battle. Of the 27 reels indexed in the file catalog, the 21 which explicitly state reenactments may be broken down as follows: 14 state that they are "partly" reenacted; 4 reels state that "many" of the scenes or "much" of the footage is reenacted; 2 state that "all" footage is reenacted; 1 reel simply reads "(Reenacted)." These file cards have been reproduced in *Film and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History, Vol 3*, Ed. David Culbert, New York: Greenwood, 1990.
7. Reel III, ADC, 584.
8. Reel III, ADC 587. The index card for this footage does not specifically mention reenactments.
9. The possibility exists that the controversial footage Huston mentions was destroyed or not archived with the other reels in the Motion Picture Division. The tale of a reedited *San Pietro* has been repeated so often that it might have been

contradicted by someone if the tale had no basis in truth. See also Bertelsen's discussion of the Ranger sequence.

10. The story has been recounted often. See Pratley for a typical telling (54-55).

11. The archival paper trail mentions little about such controversies, but does include interesting information on Frank Capra's role in editing *San Pietro* down to its current length. See Culbert's *Film and Propaganda in America*, Documents 89-111.

12. I've written on the visual stylings in "*Let There Be Light* and Huston's *film noir*," *Proteus* 7.2 (1990): 30-33, and on the film's long repression in "Muffling the Bell of Liberty: Censorship and the World War Two Documentary," *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 22 (1991): 63-73.

13. Perhaps Huston had reached a phase where he demanded complete authenticity, not just artistic truth, for after he returned to Hollywood, he became a pioneer in shooting on-location with films like *Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948) when most directors remained bound to sound stages.

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