

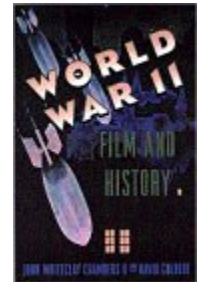
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Whiteclay Chambers, II, David Culbert, eds. *World War II: Film and History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xv + 162 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509966-9.

Reviewed by Ron Briley (Sandia Preparatory School, Albuquerque, New Mexico)
Published on H-High-S (December, 1996)



War and Cinema

In this volume, editors John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert present selected essays derived from the conference “War, Film, and History,” held at Rutgers University in 1993. The fiftieth anniversary commemorations of World War II proved quite controversial, ranging from the Smithsonian’s scrapping of the *Enola Gay* exhibit to who should receive invitations for ceremonies at Pearl Harbor and Normandy. The global conflict of the 1940s continues to cast a giant shadow, and, as Chambers and Culbert observe, public memory of World War II is increasingly a visual construct, “remembered from the visual images now endlessly recycled in newspapers, in magazines, on television, and in moving pictures” (p. 10). Accordingly, these film essays, which consider feature films as well as documentaries from the United States, Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union, provide a useful commentary on the complex relationships of memory, art, technology, and history as scholars turn to film as a primary source through which to examine the formation of popular values and ideology in the twentieth century.

The essays are organized in chronological fashion, beginning with Chambers’s discussion of director Lewis Milestone’s 1930 adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Chambers argues that Milestone, who did not witness combat during the First World War, established, through his mastery of cinematic techniques, the perception of trench warfare that became the public memory of that conflict. While Chambers makes a strong case for the historical significance of this film, he says little about how its antiwar message succumbed to the forces of nationalism, militarism, and to-

talitarianism. One of the answers may lie in a conundrum for the antiwar film: its message regarding the futility of war shares screen space with “the emotional appeal of an exciting, action-filled adventure” (p. 26). Thus, in teaching film history classes, I have often noticed that student reaction to Kurtz’s refrain of “the horror, the horror” in *Apocalypse Now* is “it’s cool, it’s cool.”

In an essay on Japanese cinema, Freda Freiberg maintains that scholarly focus on the director as author is responsible for the ignoring of the interracial wartime romance genre. In her analysis of *China Nights* (1940), Freiberg asserts that “feminine China needed the subjugation and protection of virile, masculine Japan” (p. 31). Female star Ri Ko Ron, who was actually Japanese and born Yoshiko Yamaguchi, portrays a Chinese woman who was befriended and “civilized” by a Japanese naval officer. Their marriage, concludes Freiberg, allowed Japanese viewing audiences to adopt a false visual image of Japanese imperialism as benevolent, encouraging the denial of racism and sexism exhibited in the rape of Nanking.

Two chapters and a photo essay concentrate on the little-seen German production *Kolberg* (1945). This film, whose production began in 1943 with the encouragement of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, was an effort to celebrate the 1807 Prussian resistance in Kolberg to the invading armies of Napoleon. The analogy to the invading Allied armies is obvious, but Peter Paret asserts that director Viet Harlan’s over-violent and destructive depiction of French bombardment in 1807 indicates that

the German public was more in tune with war “weariness and the recognition of defeat” (p. 64) than heroic resistance.

The last two selections on feature films include an analysis of Soviet cinema and Darryl Zanuck’s production of *The Longest Day* (1962). Focusing on *Ivan’s Childhood* (1962) and *Come and See* (1985), Denise Youngblood perceives disenchantment with the Stalinist interpretation of the Great Patriotic War. These films challenged the official line of a glorious heroic war, offering visual evidence of the Soviet regime’s growing instability. Stephen Ambrose’s piece on the film adaptation of Cornelius Ryan’s *The Longest Day* discusses many of the logistical difficulties Zanuck encountered in recreating the greatest amphibious invasion in world history.

The essays conclude with an examination of documentaries, but, as Chambers and Culbert observe in their final comments, one must not assume “a greater inherent truthfulness” in the documentary approach to filmmaking. For both feature films and documentaries offer “social constructs of reality” (p. 152). Alice Kessler-Harris examines Connie Field’s *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980). Kessler-Harris finds the film insightful for depicting the gap between official history and memory. The stories of Field’s five protagonists and their efforts to stay in the workplace following the war are inspiring for modern women; however, Kessler-Harris points out that the selection of five women with working-class backgrounds, two of whom are African-American, did not exactly constitute a cross-section of working women during the Second World War.

The documentaries *Men of Bronze* (1980) and *Liberators* (1992) are to be commended for their focus on the oft-neglected African-American military experience; however, both films raise questions about the standards of scholarship for the documentary film. The less controversial *Men of Bronze* accurately details the activities of the African-American 369th United States Infantry Regiment during World War I. Yet, as Clement Alexander Price observes, the focus of director William Miles on heroism successfully undermines negative stereotypes of black soldiers in combat, but are we to assume all African-Americans were this supportive of the war effort? *Liberators: Fighting on Two Fronts in World War II*, also directed by Miles in collaboration with Nina Rosenblum, attempts to renew alliances between Jews and African-Americans by examining the role of black troops in the liberation of the Nazi death camps. The film’s narrative indicates that black soldiers were involved in the

liberation of Buchenwald and Dachau, but critics of the film present evidence that the African-American experience was limited to the lesser-known camp at Mauthausen, Austria. The resulting controversy has led to lawsuits and the withdrawal of the film. Daniel J. Leab concludes that a failure to subscribe to the standards of scholarly accuracy runs the risk of undermining the historical record and legacy of the Holocaust.

This survey of papers from the conference on World War II and film barely begins to scratch the surface of possible topics. For example, there is no discussion of official government propaganda films such as Germany’s and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* or Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series for the United States. But what these insightful representative essays do demonstrate is the global nature of film as a language for the public memory of a pivotal period such as World War II.

Editors Chambers and Culbert conclude, “Filmic interpretations of the past have to be placed both in the circumstances in which they were produced and in the ongoing debate over the nature and meaning of the events they portray. In the case of historical films, there are, therefore, two contexts: that in which the motion picture was made and that which it portrays. And, of course, audiences and their own cultural context, which can vary significantly as to time and place” (p. 150). The authors of the essays in this volume are scholars who have carefully investigated the documentary evidence left by filmmakers. However, the murkier topic of audience reaction and interpretation is largely neglected (an exception is Freiberg’s analysis of *China Nights*). One interpretation of mass internalization of war films might be gleaned from Ambrose’s comment that in *The Longest Day* one sees little of the personal mayhem of war; the deaths are quick with little blood or gore. As Ron Kovic suggests in his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*, an entire generation brought up on the films of World War II went off seeking glory in the jungles of Vietnam, only to find psychological and physical dismemberment.

Chambers and Culbert, and the authors whose pieces they have selected, make a strong argument for the scholarly investigation of cinema. Yet the editors also fear the distortion of history in the hands of skillful directors such as Oliver Stone. On the other hand, while one may disagree with what Stone calls his “counter-myth” to the Warren Commission in *JFK*, the controversial director is successful in getting millions of Americans to think about historical issues. I find the film useful in introducing topics such as the Bay of Pigs, civil rights, Vietnam, and the

economic role of the defense industry. An examination of Stone's cinema leads students into an appreciation of history as an argument. For as historians increasingly engage in the scholarly analysis of film, as in this excellent book, let us make this scholarship accessible to the public and students. For what we need in our society is greater education regarding film and media literacy so

that the public may question Oliver Stone or the visual reconstructions of World War II discussed in *World War II: Film and History*.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-high-s>

Citation: Ron Briley. Review of Chambers, John Whiteclay, II; Culbert, David, eds., *World War II: Film and History*. H-High-S, H-Net Reviews. December, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=709>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.