

Delivered to the Society for Cinema studies annual conference at UCLA in July 1982, this paper consists of a progress report on my investigation into the reception of the 1945 film *Objective Burma!* Its thesis was that internal film history was impossible. My research was incomplete and the text contains early hypotheses and questions that were later discarded. The ultimate outcome was my 1992 book: *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950*. Various corrections and supplements have been added in blue. Its occasional stridency was an attempt to provoke. French theory was dominant in cinema studies at the time.

FILM HISTORY AND HISTORY: A WORKING PAPER

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Research into the history of a single film leads me to offer for discussion the following theses: films are the entry points to, not the units of, film history; even a narrow focus, when pursued in depth, broadens the enquiry far beyond films; in the course of resolving each problem one opens up hosts of new and deeper ones, including the metahistorical problem of whether segregating film history from history in general is intellectually defensible.

To argue for these theses I offer in this paper a potted intellectual history of my own researches into a single Warner Brothers feature film of 1945, *Objective Burma!* Perhaps it is important to stress that my interest in this film was almost totally devoid of aesthetic concerns.¹ When first viewed in 1952 the film struck me as an enthralling war movie, satisfying because it was never distracted from its action, which was pursued with a driving rhythm. Its makers were all Hollywood professionals whose individual careers explain far less about the film than does the social matrix in which the collective actions of its creation was facilitated.

My first concentrated thinking about the film began during a conversation with Garth Jowett about ten years ago, when we discussed Harley's neglected 1940 work on the cinema and international understanding and conceived the project of doing a new treatment of the subject, looking at a number of case studies of controversy surrounding the release of specific American films in different countries.² Our idea was to concentrate on countries formerly of the British Empire where sources would be in English.

During the latter days of the Second World War and the immediate post war period there was in Britain much discussion of Hollywood films' supposedly distorted view of things culminating in a furore around *Objective Burma!* that led to its being withdrawn from distribution.

¹ A good principle of historical and social scientific film scholarship is: eschew all evaluative terms.

² John Eugene Harley, *World-Wide Influences of the Cinema*, Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press 1940; facsimile reprint New York: Jerome S. Ozer, 1971.

This seemed a good topic for one chapter. Other commitments took precedence for both of us and the planned book was not pursued.

My interest was rekindled by an apparently unrelated event. In the late summer of 1979, some will recall, Warner Brothers released a religious satire by the Monty Python comedy team called *Life of Brian*. A hue and cry was begun by prominent spokesmen of mainstream religious groups in the United States in an attempt to get Jack Valenti to prevent the film's showing.³ Here was a British film deriving from a local tradition of irreverent satire on religion offending the sensibilities of established groups in the USA. A tenuous parallel could be drawn with the release of *Objective Burma!*, an American film deriving from a similarly indigenous tradition of action movies offending the sensibilities of established groups in the UK. Most striking was the clear attempt by self-appointed spokesmen of public opinion to prevent a controversial film being shown. In 1945 in the UK such pressure was successful, in 1979 in the USA such pressure failed (although some localities did not show *Life of Brian*). Whereas in 1945 the controversy cost Warner Brothers money,⁴ in 1979 it boosted attendance.⁵

To write up these ideas I began a preliminary dig into the events of 1945 via the available secondary sources.⁶ According to these, the film was a routine Hollywood war movie that somehow trod on British toes. When shown in London there was a public outcry and riots and the film was banned by the authorities. This account seemed *prima facie* unlikely, since such banning would require rather more extensive powers than the British government held.⁷

A second set of secondary sources, clippings files at the BFI, MOMA and AMPAS clarified the story a little, and made it less unlikely. The film was released in January 1945 in the USA. It was shown in May in Calcutta, the HQ city of South East Asia Command, and provoked an angry letter to the command newspaper, *Seac*, by a serving American officer who argued the film was a travesty of the war in Burma, implying an extensive American presence that simply was not there.⁸ This item was put on the wire by Reuters and written up in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, both serious (or 'quality') newspapers, the latter with ties to the British establishment.

³ See *Variety* (weekly), August 29, 1979, p. 7. News of these protests crossed the Atlantic and were reported in British newspapers, although the film was not released there for another three months. Similar futile attempts to get it banned were made by British religious organizations.

⁴ 'Burma War Film Ban at \$50,000 Cost' read a headline in the *Daily Mirror*, 26.09.45.

⁵ E.g., see *Variety* (weekly), November 7, 1979. It is listed in *Variety's* 1982 'All-Time Film Rental Champs' as taking \$10.1 m. See the May 12, 1982 issue, p. 59.

⁶ The principal ones are Alvah Bessie, *Inquisition in Eden*, New York: MacMillan 1965; Errol Flynn, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1959; Richard Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1970; Ted Sennett, *Warner Brothers Presents*, New Rochelle: Arlington House 1971; Raoul Walsh, *Each Man in his Own Time*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1974.

⁷ Cp. the failed attempt earlier in the war to ban *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* as described by Ian Christie, 'Blimps, Churchill and the State', in Ian Christie (ed.), *Powell Pressburger and Others*, London: British Film Institute 1978, pp. 105-20.

⁸ *Seac*, May 30, 1945; *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 May 1945; *The Manchester Guardian*, 31 May 1945. Hugh Thomas (ed.), *The Establishment*, London: Anthony Blond 1959.

Thus alerted, when the film opened in London in September (perhaps, one speculated, there was some hesitation on the part of Warner Brother's London office?), the whole British press and the BBC attacked the film as yet another example of Hollywood insensitivity and usurpation of credit. After briefly defending the movie as fiction, Warners withdrew it from distribution until 1952, when it was generally released to press comment wondering what all the fuss was about seven years before.

At no point were there riots, no government intervention, no genuine public outcry, letters to the press, but there were follow-up stories about alleged American mistreatment of the British contribution to the atom bomb in *House on 92nd Street*, and brief questions in both Houses of Parliament.⁹ The trade press in both the UK and the USA took different lines. The British trades stressing the cultural issue of Hollywood's insensitivity to foreign opinion;¹⁰ the American trade press seeing the dispute as cultural arguments disguising British attempts to tighten economic restrictions against US films in the British Empire market, while also trying to get a foothold for British films in the American market.¹¹ This latter point, to which, concerned as I was with cultural factors and collective sentiments, I paid little attention at first, has come after much further research to seem the most important of all.

Press reaction was one source, scarcely primary, but there was a deeper and more interesting one: archives. The Academy had very little, USC had extensive files from Warner Bros, the scripts were at Wisconsin, there should have been something but was in fact nothing in the Warner Bros financial files at Princeton. After going through these sources two things were immediately obvious: the many script drafts and the alterations during and after shooting showed this film had had its troubles coming to term. What exactly they were remained to be analysed. The other is that the script troubles had nothing to do with how to treat the fact that Burma was an Allied effort.

Thus primed, I wrote a lecture entitled 'Banning Controversial Films: From *Objective Burma* to *Life of Brian*' which treat the whole subject of unofficial censorship, and which still showed traces of the old Jowett project.¹² One day I may polish it for publication. [\[It appeared in 1985 and is listed as 1985a in my List of Publications.\]](#) An invitation to the ICA conference at Acapulco in May 1980 was the occasion for a second attempt on the subject, 'Controversy About Effects as Effects: A ShortCircuiting Model', utilising the fact that the film had caused

⁹ Hansard: *House of Commons*, 9 October 1945, cols. 81-2; *House of Lords*, vol. CXXXVII, 1945-46, columns 502-3.

¹⁰ See the long comments in *Daily Film Renter*, Thursday 27 September 1945 and *The Cinema (News and Property Gazette)*, September 26, 1945, pp. 7 & 26.

¹¹ (Weekly) *Variety* October 3, 1945, 'A British Film Party-Line?', by Abel; 'Britain's "Burma Campaign"', by Chester S. Bahn, (Daily) *Variety*; various items in the *Hollywood Reporter* by its publisher W. R. Wilkerson, especially at 30.11.45, 7.12.45 ('Rambling Reporter'), 18.12.45, 21.12.45, 4.1.46, 18.1.46, 6.2.46, and 15.2.46.

¹² In addition to the film *Life of Brian* I drew on the script paperback (New York: Ace Books 1979), the long-playing record of parts of the sound track and Robert Hewison, *Monty Python: The Case Against*, London: Eyre Methuen 1981.

controversy as a way of showing the film had an effect, thus short-circuiting the vexed problem of whether the effects of the mass media can be detected and measured.¹³

What had been learned so far? The fuss was because Hollywood released in Britain a film in which Errol Flynn, at the head of a group of American paratroops, operates behind Japanese lines in Burma to pave the way for invasion by the main force. Since the actual invasion was largely a British show, the film was read as Americans stealing credit (once more?).

It was easy to chronicle how such a film was made. It stemmed from an idea cooked up by Jerry Wald and Alvah Bessie around New Year 1944, worked up through the Spring by Randal MacDougall and Lester Cole, shot by Raoul Walsh and James Wong Howe between May and August, edited by George Amy in the Fall, and released in the USA in January 1945. An unremarkable history - revealing more intrinsic connections with Warner Brothers' methods of operation and the genre conventions of war movies, than any idiosyncratic cultural or political awareness trackable to creative individuals.

Since none of the participants or institutions seemed to want or even anticipate the scandal around the film, further research was called for. This proved exciting but tough. Only two clues presented themselves: the clippings files had gaps which could be filled by a thorough scouring of the press - easy in Britain, which has a central newspaper library, almost impossible in the USA; and the odd letter in the WB USC files to the War Department Bureau of Public Relations suggested that there might be more to be found at the National Archives. Various colleagues urged trying to contact survivors. The inaccuracy of the memoirs I had read made me doubt the trouble would be worth it. So the British Library Newspaper Library consumed every spare moment of a Christmas 1980 trip to London. There followed the discovery of a complete file on the film in the BOPR records at NA. It seemed time to attempt a preliminary historical synthesis of events surrounding its making. The result appeared that October as 'Fanning the Flames: Anti-Americanism and Objective Burma'.¹⁴ The framework of the article was Hollywood's unwitting contribution to the worsening of Anglo-American misunderstanding. Alerted to this theme by Jowett,¹⁵ I endeavoured to explain the British reception of the film by relating it to a general background of British anti-Americanism, and to how efforts by the American military to alert Warner Brothers to the travesty they were perpetuating were thwarted by their reluctance to enforce factual film standards on a fiction and by a preoccupation at the Warners end with quite different questions about how the story was to be developed.

Next I turned to the task of writing an Introduction to the screenplay for a projected volume in the Warners/Wisconsin series.¹⁶ This involved fleshing out the account of the making of the film, viewing the Wisconsin print, and selecting stills. Excellent referee's reports on the first

¹³ Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, Glencoe, Ill.: 1961; Paul Hirsch, 'The "Scary World" of the Nonviewer and Other Anomalies', *Communication Research*, vol. 7, 1980, 403-56, and 'On Not Learning from One's Mistakes', vol. 8, 1981, 3-37.

¹⁴ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 1, 1981, 117-37.

¹⁵ Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, Boston, Little Brown 1976, ch. XII.

¹⁶ Which Tino Balio had invited me to do; unfortunately, the future of that series in general, and certainly of my volume in particular, is in some doubt. [[This understates the fact that the series was cancelled. My Introduction is on this website as 1981.](#)]

draft made me carefully re-analyse the evolution of the screenplay through the nine drafts. The result was a shift of emphasis. While it was germane that the most liberal and socially conscious studio in Hollywood could make a film that gave such offense, the question remained of how that outcome was possible. My re-analysis led me to the mirror-image of British anti-Americanism, namely, American anti-British sentiment. Lack of historical background on this was a serious concern. Fired by an anti-British revolutionary ideology, against potentates, aristocracy and colonialism, submerged American attitudes to modern Britain are a complex matter exacerbated by the large numbers of Irish and German immigrants whose hostile feelings were more recent and less muted.¹⁷

For a screenplay series I felt the issues should be refracted through the screenplay materials rather than drawing on such an extensive background factor of American history. One rather glib approach to understanding the many cross-currents that run through the film might be as follows. Sketch the historical situation in Hollywood in 1944, in America in 1944, at Warner Brothers under Wallis and Wald, the state of the war, relations between the allies, and the general position of capitalism. Then, take a swing at the careers of Jerry Wald, Raoul Walsh, Alvah Bessie and the other writers Ranald MacDougall and Lester Cole, perhaps even at James Wong Howe and Errol Flynn and, thus prepared, head into an elaborate textual ‘reading’ to show how the contradictions of capitalism show themselves in the inconsistencies of the film, thus revealing, once again that film is ideology. If this sounds like a capsule pastiche of the *Cahiers du Cinema* piece on *Young Mr. Lincoln*, it is.¹⁸

Obvious flaws in this approach are as follows: there is no such thing as *the* situation in Hollywood, the USA, Warners, the war, or between the allies. A description is an answer to a question: ‘what was it like . . . ?’ A question presupposes a point of view (Collingwood). *Cahiers’* point of view is by no means the only one and not a very reasonable one. Their descriptions amount to a sketchy Vulgar Marxist¹⁹ economic history, using crude concepts like ‘Big Business’, ‘the Trust’, ‘crisis’, ‘ideology’, ‘the capitalist system’, ‘Hollywood’s masters’, and the usual jargon: deconstruction, signifiers, inscription, plus invocation of Sacred Names (Lacan, Derrida) known mainly for the obscurity-profundity of their sayings.²⁰ Hence not only are the questions

¹⁷ Just as I had found and reported in my article (note 14) a dearth of material on anti-Americanism, there is surprisingly little on American anti-British attitudes. See Bruce M. Russett, *Community and Contention, Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass.: 1963; H. G. Nicholas (ed.), *Washington Dispatches 1941-1945*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1982; John S. D. Eisenhower, *Allies: Pearl Harbor to D-Day*, New York: Doubleday 1982. [Doubtless there is much more material now.]

¹⁸ English translation available in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1976, pp. 493-529, and in *Screen Reader 1, Cinema, Ideology, Politics*, London: Society for Education in Film and Television 1977, pp. 113-52.

¹⁹ The principal errors of Vulgar Marxism are: 1. Ignorance of the fact that Marx was an opponent of *any* psychological theory of society (and rightly so); 2. attributing to Marx the idea that economic motives and especially class interest are the driving forces of history; and 3. foisting on him the childish idea that there is a sinister conspiracy of big business, greed, and war-mongering that creates all social misery. For the term and an explanation of it see K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1945 (62), vol. II, Hegel and Marx, ch. 15, p. 100ff. A good rule for Marxist writers would be: don’t consider yourself a serious Marxist if you haven’t read and learned from Popper’s monumental critique.

²⁰ ‘The standard of impressive incomprehensibility...clashes with the standards of truth and rational criticism. For these latter values depend on clarity. One cannot tell truth from falsity, one cannot tell an adequate answer to a

controlled by a point of view, the answers are predetermined by it. The entire upshot of this long piece is that Marxists can discern what they think of as the struggle between ideological determinants of capitalism, the need for myths, the welling up of repression going on in the construction and action of this film. Non-Marxists knew that would be ‘found’ before they started. Also that each schismatic subdivision of Marxism²¹ predetermines *its* answers by its questions. Evidence is merely used to verify what the author believes to begin with (see Methodological Notes). It is a measure of how low intellectual standards are in film studies that the tendentious and hollow agitprop of the Left Bank is taken seriously.²²

Second, there is no ‘text’: release times on the film conflict,²³ rolling titles and prefatory matter have been added to some prints, and the editing and re-editing files have not been found.

What then of the two blacklisted writers who worked on the film, Bessie and Cole? My problem was historical, not literary: to understand how a film glorifying the war could slight the major ally. How could two politically aware writers let this through? Here the currents of anti-British sentiment run deep. Neither the muck-raking populism of Warner Brothers, nor the dedicatedly progressive voices of Bessie and Cole were likely to be friendly towards Great Britain. Usually the left made a casuistical distinction between the British people or fighting men, whom no one would slight en masse, and the more sinister imperial designs of the British government. Roosevelt himself was clear that the USA would not help Britain regain her pre-war Empire.

At first look the screenplay drafts were unpromising, but closer scrutiny reveals clumsy and wordy ‘anti-fascist’ speeches and incidents devised by the militarily innocent comrades having to be cut out. Walsh remarked: “When I got the first script of ‘Burma’ it was riddled with dialogue. The actors were supposed to stop every few minutes and play ‘Hamlet’.”²⁴ Some examples are these²⁵

CURRY:

problem from an irrelevant one, one cannot tell good ideas from trite ones, one cannot evaluate ideas critically, unless they are presented with sufficient clarity. But to those brought up in the implicit admiration of brilliant and impressive opaqueness, all this... would be at best, impressive talk: they do not know any other values’, K. R. Popper, ‘Reason or Revolution’, in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann 1976, p. 294. A rule for film writers: *avoid all jargon and obfuscation.*

²¹ There are an almost infinite number of schismatic subdivisions possible. Marx can be split into the old and the young, can have the additive Engels or not, each can be blended in different proportion with the classic revisionists, with Trotsky or Mao, Guevara or Stalin, and the combinatorials become breath-taking when the *rive gauche* is added in: Foucault, Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Pechaux, Old Uncle Tom Cobby and All.

²² Not to mention the horrors perpetrated on the English language in the attempt to translate the stuff - errors, illiteracies and non-words which its devotees then reinforce by writing in Frenchspeak.

²³ Copyrighted in the USA at 149 minutes, the film exists in versions down to 122 and ‘cropped’ TV ones that are even shorter. Which of these texts can legitimately support its own ‘deconstruction’?

²⁴ Quoted in Otis L. Guernsey Jr., ‘The Playbill: Motion Pictures Are Rare, But Here is One’, *New York Herald-Tribune* [I have yet to locate a complete set of this newspaper in supply more precise coordinates for this clipping.]

²⁵ All from Bessie, Original Story, January 12, 1944, 51 pages, University of Wisconsin files.

(to the others--violent)

All I wanted to say was I seen this sort of thing before. With Vinegar Joe Stillwell. That's what the Japs are like. They ain't human; they're animals.

NELSON:

There's nothing especially Japanese about this Curry. You'll find it wherever you find fascists. There are even people who call themselves Americans who'd do it, too. But there are lots of people all over the world who haven't been turned into beasts--and you'll find them in Japan and Germany as well.

And:

GABBY:

I don't know what the hell we're fighting this war for anyhow! I know *I'm* not fighting it to leave our own men behind to be cut up for Sukiyaki! And it won't make any difference to me even if the major himself says to leave him.

(he faces Nelson defiantly)

You say democracy and majority rules and I agree with you. That's the way I understand this war. That's what I want. Me--I'm a Jew. A minority. People like me have been pushed around for years by people who'd like to get everybody fighting everybody else, so they can knock 'em off one by one. Tell the Christians the Jews are their enemies, tell the whites the blacks are out to knife them, tell the Americans the British or the Russians or the Eskimos hate their guts . . .

(a pause)

Well we're onto that trick by now. We fought through this together and we were lucky enough to find the lieutenant here, and he's one of our men and he's precious to me . . .

(to Shore)

Does that sound sentimental to you, you dope! Then you know what you can do--you can go roll a hoop!

(to Nelson)

Put it to a vote--do we take the lieutenant with us or do we stay and fight it out?

And again when asked whether he likes war:

NELSON:

No, Gabby, I hate it. But I can do it. I can do it well, I think. But I make a specialty of picking my wars. [I fought in Spain, for the Republic--that was the opening battle in this war--and] I fought in China, and I enlisted at Pearl Harbor. I'd never fight in an unjust war; and I'd never refuse to fight in a just one.

GABBY:

That's a pretty good answer, Major. But tell me--what makes a just war?

NELSON:

The people who're fighting it, Gabby. Figure it out. Ask yourself what they want. and what they stand to gain from it--the majority of the people, that is; then take your stand with the majority.

GABBY:

Check.

We see from these laboured lessons in history and politics that Bessie is concerned with illustrating democracy at work (in the army!) as a contrast to the fascist way of doing things. Nelson is described as a bearded intellectual, and note the line about fighting in Spain, scratched out in the cyclostyled script. Captain Li is a progressive-thinking Chinese poet. The political coloration outlives Bessie's participation because when a journalist-figure (Arthur Dennis) is later introduced by MacDougall as an audience-POV-surrogate, he starts out by being described as being 'the foremost labor-baiter' in America, who will clash with Nelson but be converted by his confrontation with the true face of fascism. By the time the film is shot this character has evolved into Mark Williams, a pipe smoking, avuncular, Ernie Pyle-like figure, addressed in Nelson's eulogy as 'Pop'.

Bessie was yanked from the film and replaced by Randal MacDougall, who was later assisted by Lester Cole. Perhaps Bessie's work was too wordy, perhaps Wald was putting him on too many projects; more likely, Wald was conscious of a conflict of aims. Bessie's basic idea was of a story about the weary tactical routine missions of war, carried out by ordinary but dedicated inductees doing their distasteful job of fighting for a just cause. His original ending called for the paratroopers to return to their base only to pass a fresh unit on its way to the same kind of search and-destroy mission. By contrast, Wald's original idea²⁶ was to show the paratroopers' mission as a crucial strategic move involving an heroic retreat. To analyse further: the producer wanted a film about heroes and heroics, the writer wanted a film about the quiet and routine heroism (and doubts) of the ordinary man conscripted into the great anti-fascist war.

Wald, according to Bessie, was under the genuine impression from talking to 'some guys' what 'a wonderful job the paratroops are doing in Burma'.²⁷ The context suggests the 'guys' and Wald took these to be American paratroops. Burma was something of a forgotten theatre in public opinion following the December 1941 Memorandum by the United States and British Chiefs of Staff that concentrated effort on defeating Germany and diverted only the necessary minimum of resources to other theatres.

At this stage of the analysis I could have contented myself with what I call a belletristic account of the making of the film as a problem in the construction of the script. Two different story conceptions are at work and the producer pushes the final product more and more towards his own conception by changing writers, demanding re-writes then even re-writing himself.²⁸ When it gets into the hands of a silent action director, however, Wald's own relish for words is revealed by his complaints at Walsh eliding scenes and eliminating speeches.²⁹ How could this relate to the furore around the film? Well, we can model the Warners creative system as one where the overriding preoccupation is with what one might call the internal industry problem of how to get a script-cum-blueprint for an Errol Flynn action vehicle that will work on the screen. What gets virtually forgotten under such a system is that the events depicted in the movie simulate those in a real and bloody theatre of war. Adding Gans' model of the creator-audience relationship to this belletristic argument about script conflicts, one can conclude that no one in the creative unit anticipated overseas concern for acknowledgement to other allies hence, in the councils of Hollywood script conferences, that POV was not heard.³⁰

Even with the addition of Gans' sociological model this kind of belletristic analysis is superficial. The questions are historical, not textual. The Bureau of Public Relations files show there *were* attempts to raise the question of fidelity to the theatre of war, but in a tentative manner: the War Department bureaucrats keep reminding themselves that they were operating

²⁶ Both Wald and Bessie filed signed story outlines in early January 1944 (Wisconsin collection).

²⁷ Bessie, *op. cit.*, note 6, pp. 79-80.

²⁸ Karel Reisz, 'The Showman Producer', in Roger Manvell and R. K. Nielson Baxter (eds.), *The Cinema 1951*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1951, pp. 160-7.

²⁹ Chronicled in the production manager's daily reports in the Warners collection at USC.

³⁰ Herbert J. Gans, 'The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media: An Analysis of Movie Making', in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (eds.) *Mass Culture*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press 1957, pp. 315-24.

within the context of a film intended to be fiction. This scarcely excuses the following: a middle-aged war correspondent is allowed to accompany a hazardous behind-the-lines expedition; the unit has both Ghurka and Chinese liaison personnel, although these groups operated on different fronts; and higher command instructs the remnants to march to a position near where the main force will invade, this is said to be diversionary, but a diversion to a hillside overlooking the jumpsite is not much of a diversion. These sorts of things, plus the lack of Americans in Burma, the fact that paratroops were not dropped there, and the possible slight the allies might feel, were raised but not pressed. Once the film was shot the War Department seemed to get quite upset, going so far as to send a representative out to Hollywood to confer with Wald, Walsh and Amy before final approval could be given. So far I have not located any papers preparatory to or reporting on those meetings and their outcome, but there is evidence in the film of hasty attempts to paper over possible interallied objections. That these efforts did not succeed is evidenced by the press furor that eventually erupted in London eight months later.

At this stage I again had an explanation of how this film had come to be in a form that could give offense. There was an element of inadvertence in that the Hollywood production system was geared to certain kinds of aims, not including sentiment abroad. At best, interested parties could resort to exhortation. There was also an element of ambivalence towards the British ally running deep in the American make-up and likely to be stronger in left-leaning writers. The evolution of the script gave good evidence of this.

Yet still the thought nagged that this was not sufficient. More was going on than yet had appeared. The press furore had produced only two hints: that a balanced film about Burma was badly needed and that commercial rivalries might be involved. These two hints have grown to dominate my thinking.

My approach owed more, however, to Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald than to Sir Lewis Namier. What I did was to follow up all clues, no matter how unpromising. Clearly a press furore in Britain would be the subject of reports to Washington from the US embassy in London. Thus: look at the State Department files. One newspaper mentioned that SEAC London office had been asked for a report on the film, thus: look at SEAC files.³¹ A friendly colleague, David Culbert, mentioned that in his researches in the ocsigo [{Office of the Chief Signal Officer}](#) and BPR [\[Bureau of Public Relations of the War Department\]](#) files he had come across material on Burma. Sure now that there was more to be learned from rather than about this film, I plunged into these sources.

These leads turned up further lines of exploration that could involve me in more weeks at NA and Suitland, and at least a week in London at the PRO. Hence this paper is something of an interim report on a project that may yet take years (since I advance it only in the interstices of others) and can, in a sense, obviously never be complete. What the research has yielded so far is 'deep background' on films about Burma and about US-British commercial rivalry.

³¹ *Daily Sketch*, 25.9.45.

It transpired that within the military film-making arms there had long been a plan for an Anglo-American film about Burma and *Objective Burma!* was issued in Britain after the acrimonious collapse of that project. The State Department files show evidence of a long-standing commercial pressure from the United States to gain favourable trading conditions for its films in Britain, and that British resistance often took the form of cultural as well as commercial arguments.

In footnote 9 of my 1981 article I suggested that a reference in the British press to an unshown Anglo-American history of the Burma campaign that was said to be being remade by David Macdonald remained to be explained. As we shall see, it now is explained. In the Spring of 1944 a proposal was generated within Mountbatten's SEAC HQ for authority to produce 'an official film of all the principal activities of South East Asia Command at sea, on land and in the air. It is explicitly directed that this should cover the Eastern Fleet, the 14th Army, General Stillwell's forces, the RAF and USAAF in India, Burma and Ceylon and the R.I.N. Hence it should be 'a joint production--British and American.' . . . 'I recommend, therefore, that the M of I and O.W.I. be approached to obtain the assistance of Colonel Capra and Colonel Stewart in making this film'.³²

Material had already been assembled by July 14th 1944, when an inquiry arrived from Warner Brothers to view the material for possible use (obviously on *Objective Burma!*, the only film in production on this theatre at the time). Wheeler telegrams Surles:

before agreeing to your loan to WARNER Brothers for technical advisory services please examine script of proposed film and report to me by signal whether it is a documentary film of the type we propose to produce or whether it is a normal fictional film with an operational background, which is not likely to prove embarrassing to us in any way.

It is unclear whether a rival documentary or a silly fiction is what Wheeler fears most. At all events, the footage of the Burma campaign used in *Objective Burma* came from a variety of sources. Work proceeded on the official film, and I have yet to follow that through the ocsigo files, but in David Culbert's forthcoming collection of documents we find George Archibald of the British Information Services writing to Surles on April 4 asking that the film be 'reshaped' to give 'a balanced view of the Burma Campaign'. He suggests issuing his own memo 'Campaign in Burma' to the 'Unit making the film . . . as a directive'.³³ In a transcribed telephone conversation 9 April 1945 between Surles and Archibald, the former says 'it's going to be a very difficult proposition' and take some time.³⁴ The film is taken over by the Information and Education Division of the Army Pictorial Service and documents 2285 and 2286, as Culbert points out (private communication) 'show internal I & E argument'. 2287 is a memo from Ralph Nelson on

³² Memo from HQ, SEAC, Secretary Plans, SAC(44)274, undated, WNRC, Record Group 331, SEAC, SAC, Records Section, War Diaries, Box 26.

³³ Tel from SACSEA to War Dept., 14 July 1944, RG 331, SEAC, SAC, Records Section, War Diaries, Box.26.

³⁴ Archibald to Surles, April 4, 1945, 062-2, Box 20, A 52-248, Suitland.

27 April 1945 trying to spell out the shape of the campaign. Within a fortnight it proves impossible to do the job and Munson cables to CO, SCPC on 9 May 1945:

ATTN COLONEL FRANK CAPRA PD CHIEF OF STAFF HAS DISPATCHED A MEMORANDUM TO FIELD MARSHALL WILSON REGARDING FILM OF BURMA CAMPAIGN WHICH READS QUOTE I AGREE WITH YOU THAT WE SHOULD ABANDON THE PROJECT AS A COMBINED EFFORT AND PROCEED UNI-LATERALLY ACCORDING TO OUR RESPECTIVE NEEDS POD IN KEEPING WITH YOUR SUGGESTION CNA I HAVE GIVEN INSTRUCTIONS THAT PRE-PRINT MATERIAL ON THE ROUGH CUT PLUS ANY OTHER PERTINENT FOOTAGE DESIRED BE MADE AVAILABLE TO COLONEL MACDONALD UNQUOTE END SPSAS DASH THREE.³⁵

So, while Warner Brothers were sitting on their film, dickering about when to release it in London, a major inter-allied film project on Burma was collapsing. Clearly the story in the *Daily Telegraph* was 'inspired' by this.

Not only had inter-allied cooperation broken down because of different emphases³⁶ but here was Warners issuing a film made with official cooperation, military advisers and final War Department approval that was a grotesque distortion of the campaign. Timing of the release could not have been worse. It appeared soon after VJ day, when the British were licking their wounds, counting the cost and assigning blame and credit. Lease-lend had just been cancelled and the British official campaign film had not yet been released, the one signalled in the Munson cable, and entitled *Burma Victory*.³⁷

³⁵ 062.2, Box 20, A52-248, WNRC Suitland.

³⁶ Letter from Mountbatten to Marshall, 14 July 1944, RG 331, SEAC, SAC, Records Section, War Diaries, Box 26, WNRC Suitland; reads in part:

I sent you a signal today about a film on Burma activities, and asked if you would approve Major Whitley's temporarily delaying proceeding on film as originally planned.

The reason for my new and enlarged proposal is that...I have made a tour of the forward areas... As a result, it became clear to me that it would be a mistake to make a film of such limited scope as to show only the Cochran-Wingate operations, to the complete exclusion of the heroic and often heartbreaking work that has been done by so many other units, American, British, Chinese and Indian, in this theatre.

I have discussed the matter with Wedemeyer and Wheeler who agree with me that it is important that the American and British public be given as clear a picture as possible of the activities of this entire theatre.

³⁷ My article 1988b is a comparison of the Hollywood, official American, and official British campaign films about Burma. See 'The Burma Campaign on Film: *Objective Burma!* (1945), *The Stilwell Road* (1945) and *Burma Victory* (1945)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 8, Number 1, pp. 56-73.

No records of Warners London office have been studied, if they exist. Likely, decisions about the strategy of release were not committed to paper. To speculate: Warners may have been wary of a British release and have been seeking a favourable moment. They may have thought that after VJ Day the subject would be less touchy. If so, they badly miscalculated. It was 1952 before the film could be issued in Britain without a ripple.

My other line of research, into State Department files, involves still ‘deeper’ background. Quite by accident, while reading the telegrams about the press furore surrounding *Objective Burma*, I came across memo after memo indicating how the commercial attachés were pushing hard against British restrictions on movies such as quotas on exhibition and restrictions on the transfer of earnings out of the UK. This was deep indeed. Other telegrams indicated the *Daily Mirror* believed *The House on 92nd Street* had been re-edited for Britain to avoid the suggestion that the atomic bomb had been an all-US ‘show’, and that the British were very pleased, when Macdonald’s *Burma Victory* was finally shown that it didn’t distort events. But why, I thought, would Commercial Attaché Don Bliss write that

The bare statement that large sums of money have been transferred to the United States will undoubtedly be the basis for considerable propaganda directed against American films and for continued agitation to limit their distribution on the British market in favor of the local product.³⁸

What could be clearer? United States and Britain are commercial rivals in the film industry.³⁹ The prospect of a proxy war carried out in the press in cultural terms to advance commercial interests looms up. We can put two and two together and get five! The British press are spokesmen for what they conceive to be British interests, but of course commerce is a bit vulgar, whereas culture and who fought the war is not. So, Fleet Street, no doubt closely in touch with military back-room sources and film industry sources, foams at the mouth about a film that not only fails to toe the British line on what happened in Burma, but which also is going to earn lucre for Hollywood. Hence the significance of the mention by Campbell Dixon of Britain spending ‘over \$20,000,000 for stuff like “Objective Burma”.’ ‘Stuff like *Objective Burma!*, indeed!

I hope I have shown then, that historical research into *Objective Burma* shows that ‘stuff like’ it, rather than the film itself becomes eventually the unit of historical explanation; that each solution opens up new problems; and that a single well-chosen film can force one to try to understand topics a long way from the belletristic interest in ‘good films’ or auteurs.

³⁸ NA, Diplomatic Branch, RG 59, 841.4061 MP 1945-49, Box 5816, 3-1445, letter from Don C. Bliss, Commercial Attache to Sec. of State, March 14, 1945.

³⁹ No scholarly study of this yet exists. Benjamin Williams, *Economic Foreign Policy of the United States*, New York: McGraw-Hill 1929 is an early stab at it on the pp. leading up to 264-5. But F. Klingender and S. Legg (*The money behind the screen*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1937), Peter Bachlin (*Histoire économique du cinéma*, Paris: La Nouvelle Édition 1947) and Thomas Guback (*The international film industry: Western Europe and America since 1945*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1969) all wrote before archival sources became available. There is material here for several PhD theses on both sides of the Atlantic.

I can imagine a line of criticism that would argue I have used film as a premiss for research into history in general rather than into the history of films as such. My response would be that the history of film is part of history in general and cannot be sealed off for explanatory purposes. One way to construe the rather convoluted argument of this paper is that it shows that films have many interconnections with the social matrix that prevents their being quarantined. If the argument goes through, the question arises as to whether histories of film as such can be written at all. The attempt presupposes that the intrinsic connections of films to each other are of explanatory value, whereas I have made the case for regarding the extrinsic connections of films to other social institutions as of greater explanatory power. *Objective Burma!*'s relation to any of the following intrinsic lines of development between films explains little: other war films, other forties films, other Warner's films, other Errol Flynn vehicles, other films by Wald, Walsh, Howe, Bessie, MacDougall, Cole. Perhaps some dim realisation of the need to situate films in much broader historical context explains that reaching out for Marxist or psychoanalytic ideas that I have castigated. After all, history is a huge and bewildering subject and one needs a systematic theoretical point of view. Yes and no. False theories are better than none, but theories dogmatically held may be worse. Theories that explain everything, and hence cannot but be held dogmatically, are worst of all. If you know the plot of history, why bother to do research? Many common sense, social, and economic theories about historical processes exist, and hence it would seem sensible for those working in history to develop a light touch when it comes to theory. Film history will not write itself, but no more will it be pushed and pulled into a predetermined shape derived from theoretical commitments. We study film history in order to learn: not just new facts and new connections, but also what explanatory theories will not survive in the face of the evidence.

APPENDICES

Unfortunately it is not the custom either in history or in film studies to be methodologically candid. The public is usually offered finished pieces. Here I begin by listing some of the open problems which I shall be taking up as time and resources permit.

OPEN PROBLEMS

1. Do the Stillwell archives contain his thoughts about being portrayed, given that WD letters to him have no answers in BPR files?
2. Do the Jerry Wald papers exist, and, if so, is there any material on this film?
3. Where are the Warner Brothers files on editing and music scoring? [\[They were loaned to USC for a number of years and then recalled by WB.\]](#)
4. Why do the Princeton holdings of Warners financial records contain nothing on this film?
5. Where in NA are the internal memos and minutes of Curtis Mitchell's office?
6. SEAC War Diary records the furore and minutes an officer to ask SAC if he wants to make a statement. Is his response known?
7. Are the Mountbatten papers open?
8. One newspaper, *The Daily Sketch* 25.9.45, reports that a Major A. E. Sykes of SEAC is preparing a report for the War Office. Can this report be located?
9. Taylor's *Seac* letter and quotes from Sykes indicate the film was screened for Eastern Air Command in Calcutta in May. Do any records of that showing and reactions to it exist?
10. London embassy files at NA show telegrams about the furore, passed on in letters to WB with no comment. Where are the files indicating if this was discussed in London or Washington as a problem in Anglo-US relations? Or was it too trivial a manifestation?

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

While the problem posed may be clear enough at the start of an historical investigation, the status of the explanations devised and the role of the evidence searched and marshalled is tricky. Inductivist historians bury themselves in the documents and let the explanations, if any, emerge from their descriptions of what happened. This overlooks the presuppositions built into the problem itself, which may be overthrown by the evidence, forcing reconceptualising of the problem; it also overlooks the presuppositional base of the process of searching. A conjecture of how the State Department worked and what sorts of things it would find important enough to report back to Washington were what led me to read in those files. That the files then triggered quite new explanatory thoughts is not a case of the explanation emerging from the evidence.

For a critical historian the question is what role does evidence play? I suggest that when one is puzzled and has only hunches, the evidence plays the role of reassurance. That is, to find documents which fit your hunches encourages you to think the hunches through, develop more consequences, and search more widely. That wider search, though, is less tentative. Then one is so to speak armed with conjectures and openly out to test and hence refute or modify them.

Readers may find it interesting to ask what status I presently accord to belletristic analyses of a film like *Objective Burma!*. It is already clear that there is no 'text' to be submitted to a 'reading', and that there is no auteur to take credit and blame. I have given short shrift to Marxist or psychoanalytic theories' since, notoriously (at least among the philosophically informed), their strong versions are empirically false, their weak versions pseudo-scientific. It is hardly necessary to go to the archives to further discredit them. My answer is in note 1.