Voices of Victory: Narrative Influence in "San Pietro"

Nestled in the southern gate to the Liri Valley, the village of San Pietro was a tactical cornerstone in a campaign that seemed months too late. The Italians had earned a separate peace by overthrowing Mussolini, but the Germans had swiftly pushed back into the boot to hold away the Allies (Simmon 1). "San Pietro" (1943) was filmed from December 8th-16th of 1943, and covered a full three-day siege. Directed by John Huston, a narrative filmmaker and screenwriter, deep-seeded issues with the validity or honesty of the images have since been revealed within *San Pietro.*

Four films were made by Huston for the US Army Signal Corps, specifically their Photographic Division or "Pictorial Service" (Simmons 1). This division was created to show wartime conduct honestly; Huston, famous director of "The Maltese Falcon" (1941), reported for duty in April 1942 (Mackenzie 3). First deployed to the danger-free Pacific Aleutian islands, Huston witnessed a rare aerial attack from the Japanese to bring forth his first honest depiction of death in "A Report From the Aleutians" (1943). He claimed the process was "no different than any other film", he would simply "let the material present itself" (Harris 113). He had a conflict with the military, in that they wanted the missions to appear successful where "nine out of nine" planes returned, even

though that almost never happened; "we were cheering our own boys on" claimed Huston (Mackenzie 1). He fought for the film to be screened in its full 34-minute runtime rather than as a 20-minute pre-show feature; unfortunately, it flopped as a main attraction. Shortly thereafter, he was brought onto Frank Capra's "Tunisian Victory" (1944); here Huston was ordered to stage some aerial dogfighting above the Mojave and parts of Florida. With capable and conscious filmmakers being asked to fabricate the combat they had become proud of portraying, *Tunisian Victory* was a flop, and the experience would affect Huston's future work.

Within *San Pietro*, many lives were lost. John Huston sought to make his film about the 143rd Infantry Regiment of Texas and to show their honored dead. This was the first film to be banned by the War Department. Mangled bodies and starving civilians scrape the shine off of a brass officer's concept of war. At one point, Huston asked about two-dozen soldiers why they felt they were fighting the war, and filmed their varied responses. Out of those men, several had died in the siege. Huston had cut a scene in which he filmed their corpses in their bedrolls and superimposed the text of their war sentiments. About this, Huston states:

> "I had gone overboard. I had made interviews with young soldiers.... They talked about the meaning the war had for them, what they felt, the role they had played, and quite a few of the answers were very

> touching, very profound... I put the text they had said when they were still alive over the images of the cadavers. It was too heartrending, too unbearable. And think of the families seeing that!" (Simmon 1).

He had cut this scene, as recreation can sometimes be too revealing, especially on Uncle Sam's dollar. But he kept the sequence that showcased the burial process. Bodies carried in flags, dog tags nailed to posts, and men still marching on to keep the pressure on. Huston's voiceover carries the ideology he forced himself to cut, in a 1945 review, James Agee claims that "Huston's narration is a slightly simplified technical prose, at once exact and beautifully toned and subtly parodistic; it is spoken with finely shaded irony, equally free of pompousness and optimism and mawkish generalizations and cheap bitterness... For once wordiness in a film more than earns its way" (Simmon 1). Sandwiched around the combat portion of the film, Huston begins by addressing the immutable importance of infantry and then claims that 100% of the 143rd Battalion is replacements. Every one of them, although living, already represents a man that had died in their place. The film closes with a slow pan of many of the soldiers relaxing after the siege of San Pietro. Here Huston claims that many of these living men have already joined their brothers under the ground, and many more will, in many other San Pietros. Huston signifies the insignificance.

Military Leadership did not take warmly to the raw representation of soldiering. In October 1944, Huston has told of a screening he had with a room full of Generals and officers (Simmon 1). Close to the halfway point in the film, each one of them walked out one by one until he was alone (Mackenzie 1). This was said in an interview Huston did with Ricky Leacock, also a combat videographer, and Midge Mackenzie for "John Huston: War Stories" (1999), a feature about Huston's wartime life. The Office of Government Reports was just changed to the Office of War Information and grew the BMP Branch, the Bureau of Motion Pictures. Lowell Mellett, FDR's 1939 agency appointee, promised the 1943 Academy Awards that the government was "not going into the motion picture business", for fear of propaganda (Harris 34). Even in the start of the film, the military's influence seems to cut the legs off of the film's honest intention. General Mark Clark, Italian campaign commander, gives a proud summary of an "key" battle that is worth "not excessive" death, yet he nervously glances off camera at cue cards to guide his recollection of the events. It took almost two years for this film to be released, because military brass seemed to all agree that the film should not be shown to new soldiers, on grounds that it would demoralize them. To Huston, it seemed that they wanted ''to maintain the warrior myth, which said that our American soldiers went to war and came back all the stronger for the experience" (Mackenzie 4). After notable

infamy, General George C. Marshall gave the film his attention and decided that it should be shown to new soldiers, on grounds that it would prepare them for the realities of war more than any Disney cartoon could. With great turnaround, John Huston was awarded and promoted to Major (Mackenzie 3). The film was shown to the public on May 3rd, 1945, shortly after V-Day in Europe.

Recall James Agee's praise of Huston's voiceover. All at once, it is "exact", "beautifully toned", and "subtly parodistic" (Simmon 1). The narration is distinctly John Huston, and it carries the film; as a film about the 143rd Battalion, Huston speaks from the perspective of the soldiers. There is only a major difference between the two because Huston never truly saw the siege of San Pietro. Professor Lance Bertelson of the University of Texas has studied and published about this film in "San Pietro and the 'Art' of War" (Kramer 1). Bertelson analyzed every foot of unedited footage and determined that most of the footage was reshot after the siege with 143rd soldiers and others from the 36th division. This is supported by the fact that Huston didn't reach San Pietro until December 16th, the final day of the siege. Facilitating *Pietro*'s filming, Captain Joel Westbrook discussed accurate map records with Huston. Over a short time, Jules Buck and the other four cameramen worked with the soldiers to reenact their brave siege with their 35-millimeter Eyemo newsreel cameras (Mackenzie 5). In

between the dishonest lack of loss in *Aleutians* and the complete recreation of the *Tunisian* dogfights, Huston lets a deeper truth come out of the soldiers experience by letting the camera witness their personal recounting in the space itself. Huston refers to his film as the first of its kind, in the vein of Memphis Belle and others that show a "personal" account. But here he does not only mean personal in that he and William Wyler were actually present during the fighting, but in that the camera is actually witnessing the battle. Since the soldiers are telling their own story, the film is still a primary document, if not more telling than others without any lapses in truth. *San Pietro* became a form of ethnographic co-authored film. Since the recreations never came to public light until after his death, Huston spoke of the siege in interviews with telling details. When asked about the approach to the city, he describes mortar fire and so forth with a nervous blinking (Mackenzie 1). In *War Stories,* It may look as if he is struggling to remember or to fabricate; even there he is speaking for the soldiers and their experiences, attempting to share them with the world.

After San Pietro, Huston made the second film to ever be banned by the War Department. "Let There Be Light" (1980) is a groundbreaking film on PTSD in WWII veterans; it was finally released almost thirty years after production. He continued to break down the Warrior Myth and show the lose-lose game of warfare. Huston called

his films “incendiary pacifist documents” (Mackenzie 5). It might be fitting that America’s first foray into on-screen death, real or recreated, should take place under the patron watch of Saint Peter himself.

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