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3rd Place Contest Entry: From Film Sets to Front Lines and Back Again: Reinventing Star Image in Post-World War II Hollywood

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Eric M. Scandrett Graduate Library Research Prize Essay

For my thesis, “From Film Sets to Front Lines and Back Again: Reinventing Star Image in Post-World War II Hollywood,” I consulted a variety of sources, including films, YouTube clips of interviews and speeches, primary sources consisting of fan magazines and archival materials, as well as secondary sources including journal articles, books, and biographies. The films I researched were James Stewart’s, Robert Montgomery’s, Marlene Dietrich’s, and Myrna Loy’s first postwar pictures, including *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), *They Were Expendable* (Ford & Montgomery, 1945), *A Foreign Affair* (Wilder, 1948), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946). I accessed these films through Internet Archive, TCM airings, and DVDs, where directors’ commentary was also consulted. The YouTube videos utilized in my research included interviews with these actors and talk show hosts like Dick Cavett and Michael Parkinson in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s.

The primary sources I consulted to ground my research largely included fan magazines from the 1940s like *Photoplay* and *Screenland*. These fan magazines were found through the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research’s Media History Digital Library. Other primary sources include archival materials such as Hollywood Victory Committee annual reports, letters from Billy Wilder, and a 1980 AFI Tribute to Jimmy Stewart program. Finally, the secondary sources I used to supplement my primary research included journal articles about each actor, such as Stewart’s traumatizing war service, Montgomery’s political work, Dietrich’s glamor, and Loy’s evolving star image. These articles were from newspapers, media journals like the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and history journals including *Military History*, *Aviation History*, and *World War II*. These articles were found on Leatherby Libraries’ online database and accessed through EBSCOhost. I also consulted biographies about each actor in addition to

books about cinema in the 1940s and '50s, trauma, and female ageism, which were found through Google searches, trips to independent bookstores, and PDFs offered by my thesis chair. All of these sources helped me provide a well-rounded exploration and analysis of each actor's pre-war star image and career, WWII service, and post-war adjustments.

To filter through the abundance of Hollywood and World War II-related scholarship, I narrowed my search field while still performing the same amount of research for four different actors. For my film research, I viewed at least one prewar film of each actor's filmography to grasp their star image before the 1940s, and then I incorporated my analysis of each actor's first postwar Hollywood picture to see the immediate effects of being away from the industry for four years. I explored these specific films in detail and then provided a brief mention of various films in their postwar filmographies. Regarding the YouTube clips, I specifically searched for interviews with each actor after the 1940s, and most of the search results consisted of interviews when the actors were much older.

My primary source research was much more laborious as I searched various archives related to four individuals. For the fan magazines, the Media History Digital Library website was extremely easy to navigate; I searched each actor's name and filtered the results to the years between 1940 and 1948. For the archival materials, I consulted with the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills and asked the librarian to summarize all the records the library had regarding each actor and I narrowed the results to the era and topic I was researching. I gave the librarian the exact files I wanted pulled, and I looked at the files in person and took notes that ended up in my final draft.

My secondary source research began on the Leatherby Libraries' website, where I started by searching for the actors' names along with "World War II." This yielded many useful results,

but I still needed to refine my search. From here, I searched the actors' names alongside "trauma," "politics," "gender," "ageism," "image," and some of their film titles. I wanted a variety of sources, so I simultaneously looked at newspaper articles, book chapters, biographies, and a few academic articles that I made sure were peer-reviewed by filtering my search. I had to be far more selective with choosing sources about Stewart and Dietrich because they garnered more results, but I had to do significantly more digging for Montgomery and Loy and utilize almost everything I could find because there was very little written about them.

My thesis is a bit different from other theses in that it is a simultaneous academic analysis as well as a historical observation piece. As such, it required a great amount of scholarly research in addition to archival discovery, which felt akin to treasure hunting. I initially evaluated the films, YouTube clips, and primary sources by determining if they were created during World War II and the immediate postwar period, and if the secondary sources were about this period. Once I determined that a source belonged to the correct era, I evaluated whether or not it dealt with trauma, politics, ageism, each actor's respective prewar image, how they each served the war effort, and how they navigated their postwar careers. This was not evident in every source; for example, I found many sources detailing Stewart's war service, but without applying it to his Hollywood career, and sources about Dietrich's glamorous image, but without any mention of how this contrasted to her service.

I wanted to utilize any source that explored the reality that these actors' star images evolved after the war and helped support my argument that their service did a disservice to their Hollywood careers. I recognize that my evaluation method is broad, but this reflects the general lack of scholarship written about my thesis topic and the lengths I had to go to secure relevant sources. I performed a great majority of my research on my own, but I briefly consulted with

Chapman's archivist, Annie Tang, who was able to find some sources about Robert Montgomery that greatly improved that section of my thesis. In addition, the help I received from the librarian at the Margaret Herrick Library was paramount for my thesis, as it provided concrete evidence and context for my research.

Conducting library research for this thesis has taught me that finding sources is not a unilateral experience; sources come in a multitude of forms, all of which require great determination in which to be sought. From films to YouTube clips, fan magazines to archival materials, and journal articles to biographies, research can be found in far more areas than I thought possible, and my thesis has been improved by each source. In my future endeavors, I will take what I learned from this thesis and continue to search in multiple places, look deeper than initially thought, and seek to create new areas of scholarship that are yet to be explored. The research I have done for my thesis is valuable to other scholars because it offers a new perspective in the overall conversation of Hollywood's role in World War II, and it also serves as a prime example of how analyzing and creating new ideas based on a variety of sources yields an in-depth, detailed, complete exploration of a particular topic.

Filmography

It's a Wonderful Life (Capra, 1946)

They Were Expendable (Ford & Montgomery, 1945)

A Foreign Affair (Wilder, 1948)

The Best Years of Our Lives (Wyler, 1946)

Mediagraphy

American Film Institute. "Jimmy Stewart on Frank Capra's War Service." YouTube Video, 1:36. February 4, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6Ku8MWrMow>.

Blank on Blank. "Marlene Dietrich on Sex Symbols." YouTube. July 26, 2016. 5:25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrNeTjVvRdA>.

FilmKunst. "James Stewart – Interview w/ Michael Parkinson." YouTube. May 13, 2015. 32:41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=970nWlbT1Bc>.

Flicks. "Myrna Loy on The Dick Cavett Show (1980) Pt. 1 & 2." YouTube. June 10, 2017. 45:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rc_NOD4RfN4.

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From Film Sets to Front Lines and Back Again:
Reinventing Star Image in Post-World War II Hollywood

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Dr. Emily Carman

FS 698: Film and Media Studies Thesis

March 20, 2024

As George Bailey sits at Nick's bar completely distraught and trembling with fear, he quietly prays, "Dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope, show me the way God."¹ In this memorable one-take scene from *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), which was also his first postwar picture, James Stewart's real tears exemplify all of the bottled-up feelings felt by soldiers who had recently returned home from war in 1945. Beyond his visibly aged face, compared with his appearance and demeanor in his prewar films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra, 1939), and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1940), Stewart's costar Donna Reed later said, "Jimmy Stewart was clearly affected by what he went through, and it's a change we didn't understand."² Stewart was by no means alone; this total war impacted individuals, both soldiers and civilians, worldwide. However, he is part of a very specific group of veterans: Hollywood actors who voluntarily chose to leave their lives of fame, wealth, and luxury to serve and support the war effort, only to survive and come back home permanently affected by their wartime experiences and forced to navigate a postwar Hollywood that necessitated a major shift in their star image.

An abundance of research and scholarship has been published regarding World War II and the film industry in general, mainly focusing on the films made during the war years, how Hollywood's economy was affected, and how filmmaking forged ahead in such uncertain times. In a similar vein, Hollywood directors who served have been highlighted in Mark Harris's book, *Five Came Back* (2014), which has also been made into a docuseries on Netflix. Even J.E.

¹ *It's a Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra (Liberty Films, 1946), 1:35:33. https://www.amazon.com/Wonderful-Life-Black-White-Version/dp/B001M432XA/ref=sr_1_1?crd=28EGEZMRH3TSM&keywords=it%27s+a+wonderful+life&qid=1671220478&s=instant-video&prefix=it%27s+%2Cinstant-video%2C149&sr=1-1.

² Dave Kindy, "The Dark Place: World War II left its mark on a renowned actor and transformed his postwar performances," *World War II* 35, no. 4 (December 2020), 48.

Smyth's book, *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women who Ran Hollywood*, includes a mention of Bette Davis's work with the Hollywood Canteen during World War II. Beyond these types of sources, however, very little scholarship has been written about A-list actors' service, postwar careers, and star image, specifically those who were already well-established in Hollywood. Four popular A-list Hollywood actors who had a solidified star image and left the industry to serve in World War II include James Stewart, Robert Montgomery, Marlene Dietrich, and Myrna Loy. Stewart flew bombing missions over Germany, Montgomery served aboard a destroyer during D-Day, Dietrich visited soldiers on the front lines, and Loy aided the U.S. war effort with the Red Cross; while their service looked different, each of these actors were forced to reshape their star images upon their return.

Before the war, Stewart's image was characterized by the awkward, unassuming, "aw shucks," yet lovable leading young man. This image remained relatively intact throughout the rest of Stewart's career as he was considered a "personality actor," meaning that he "imbues everything he does with a certain essence," rather than disappearing into a role.³ However, in his first postwar picture, *It's a Wonderful Life*, his image darkened with age and the effects of PTSD. Similarly, Montgomery's prewar image was centered around being the masculine love interest for the leading ladies of the 1930s, but as seen in his first postwar film, for which he also received his first directing credit, *They Were Expendable* (Ford & Montgomery, 1945), his image is hardened by real war experience and a reservedness that is clear evidence of withheld feelings. Dietrich gained fame by being a "glamour girl," a sexy, foreign seductress who is effortlessly beautiful; her return to Hollywood in *A Foreign Affair* (Wilder, 1947) provided a similar image, yet it was more raw and heavily layered with a clear undertone of sadness and numbness over the

³ Gary Fishgall, *Pieces of Time: The Life of James Stewart* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997), 133.

destruction of her native country. Loy was originally characterized as exotic, youthful, and fun, but in her first postwar film, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946), she is older, restrained, and enshrined in motherhood. These actors' first postwar pictures are just a glimpse into their altered postwar careers as a result of their evolving star image.

Each of these actors began with different star images and had to modify them in their postwar careers. The author of the same 1945 WAC annual report wrote, "Your heroes of the screen who dashed madly into make-believe battle, fought off rehearsed assailants, in film shows, look the same after battle service for their country. They are not the same."⁴ Due to their war service, absence from Hollywood, core issues that included trauma, silence, and ageism, and a world hardened by war, these actors' youthful and vibrant pre-war star images could no longer resonate in post-WWII Hollywood. As a result of these actors' absence from the screen, younger Hollywood stars filled their places onscreen, leaving these veterans without the level of economic and cultural prominence they had accrued before their years-long departure. The paradox of patriotism between being honored for their service and arguably being cast aside due to their outdated star images was clear, and this thesis seeks to use these actors' experiences as an original critique of the machinable nature of the Hollywood star system after the end of World War II, and as such, argue that these individuals' incredibly personal decisions to leave Hollywood and serve the war effort ultimately did their film careers a disservice.

⁴ *Movies at War*, 28.