

HOLLYWOOD AND THE SHAPING OF THE OFFICIAL STORY: THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE DOCUMENTARY SERIES *WHY WE FIGHT* (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

JAUME ANTUÑANO SAN LUIS

On December 7th 1941, the Japanese fighter planes attacked Pearl Harbor in two waves, unleashing a storm of projectiles over the Hawaiian base with devastating results. This incursion, the first one of the Axis powers on American soil, led the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration to rethink the isolationist posture adopted after the outbreak of World War II. The President mobilized the Armed Forces, and on December 8th, only one day after the Japanese attack, the US Congress declared war against the Empire of Japan, a resolution that was almost unanimous. Three days later the Congress also declared war against Germany and Italy. The involvement of the United States in the war was imminent.

The barrage also had consequences on Hollywood's representations of the conflict. Since the 1930s, different productions that had served as means of raising social consciousness had already been challenging the neutral position of the major film studios regarding the events linked to global

upheaval. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939) was the first film that openly defied the neutrality of the industry, and even though it was released four months before the beginning of the war, it already reflected one of the biggest fears of the interventionists: the Nazi presence in the United States. Other films, such as *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *The Mortal Storm* (Frank Borzage, 1940), *Escape* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1940), and *Man Hunt* (Fritz Lang, 1941), also warned the population of the dangers of Nazism through a combination of entertainment and ideology¹. However, after Pearl Harbor the role of Hollywood as a mass media device became much more active when some of the most important filmmakers of the time decided to put their successful careers on hold to enroll in the Army as volunteers. There, they would put their cinematographic experience and their notoriety at the service of the propagandistic demands of the Pentagon.

THE WAR AS A NARRATIVE

With the irruption of the war in the United States, the American government developed a propaganda program, a term generally camouflaged under other, less polemic words such as *information* or *orientation*. It relied on a number of great filmmakers capable of presenting war as a narrative in order to justify the intervention before to the population and the members of the Armed Forces (HARRIS, 2014: 9). Before entering the war, the Pentagon implemented a series of fifteen lectures delivered by Army officers to new recruits. These lectures focused on global history since World War I and were usually accompanied by instructive short films created by the US Signal Corps². But like David Culbert has noted (1983: 175), the lectures were ineffective and the short films failed to spark interest among the troops, demonstrating the futility of an obsolete morale project.

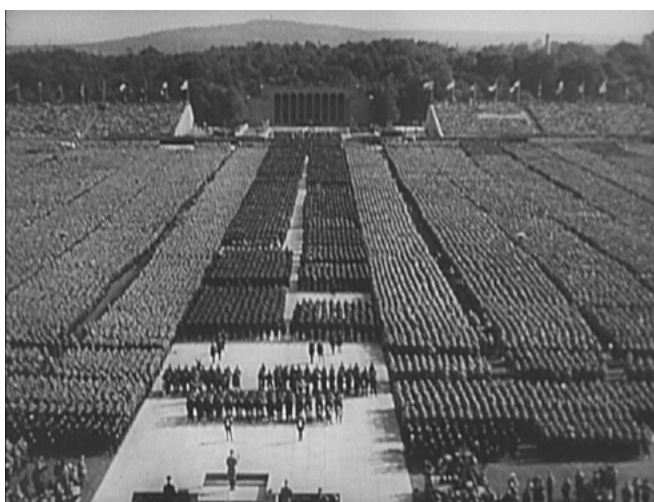
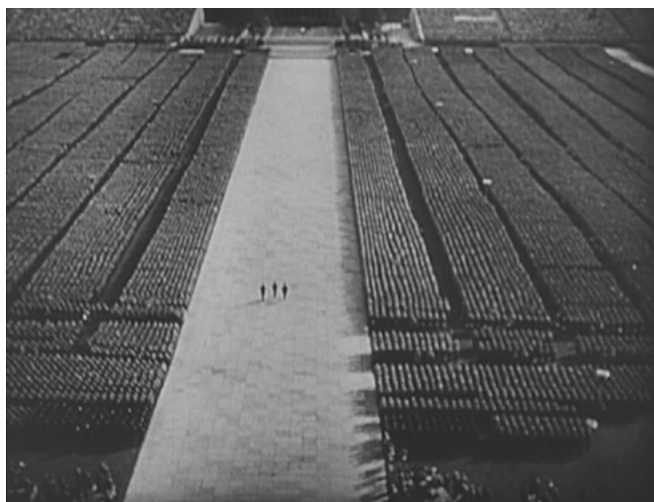
The new strategy, propelled by Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, aspired to substitute these inefficient indoctrination tools for documentaries that captured the attention of the recruits. In order to do so, the Pentagon commissioned some of the most important Hollywood filmmakers, such as John Ford, William Wyler, John Huston, George Stevens, or Frank Capra³. During the war, different productions, such as Academy Award winner *The Battle of Midway* (John Ford, 1942), or Wyler's *The Memphis Belle* (1944), allowed the American audience to see the Army in action, victorious before the Japanese and German attacks, through the use of footage recorded on the battlefield⁴. In Italy, John Huston filmed *San Pietro* (1945), a deliberate fictionalization of a campaign – already finished before the arrival of the cameras, as Bertelsen explains (1989: 254) – in which the filmmaker recreated the battle, the liberation of the small town of San Pietro Infine, and the exultant reception of their inhabitants to the American troops, played by extras (HARRIS, 2014: 280-281). For his part, after a long journey

through Northern Africa recreating the battle of Tunisia for Frank Capra – another conflict that was over before the arrival of the crew – George Stevens captured the liberation of Paris and the horror of the Nazi concentration camps on location, footage that would be later used as incriminatory evidence at the Nuremberg trials (Moss, 2004: 118)⁵.

The most prolific of all these filmmakers was the Italian-American Frank Capra who, leading the 834th Photo Signal Detachment, participated as a director, scriptwriter, producer, and supervisor in several projects, such as *Know Your Ally* (1944), *The Negro Soldier* (1944), *Tunisian Victory* (1944), *Know Your Enemy* (1945), or the documentary series that launched his foray with the Army: *Why We Fight* (1942 – 1945).

WHY WE FIGHT: THE WAR THROUGH CAPRA'S LENS

When Capra received Marshall's call, he was at the most successful point in his career. He had already received three Academy Awards for the blockbusters *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *You Can't Take It With You* (1938). When he was commissioned by the Chief of Staff, Capra was finalizing the shooting of *Arsenic and the Old Lace* (1944), one of his most known comedies starring Cary Grant and Priscilla Lane. Even though this notorious filmmaker did not have any experience filming documentaries, Marshall decided to keep him as lead of the project. According to what Capra wrote in his rather questionable biography, Marshall justified his decision with these words: "I have never been Chief of Staff before. Thousands of young Americans have never had their legs shot off. Boys are commanding ships today, who a year ago had never seen the ocean before" (CAPRA, 1971: 361-362). Capra had no other choice than to apologize and accept the challenge proposed by his superior.



Figures 1, 2 y 3. Shots from *Triumph of the Will* employed in *The Nazis Strike* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943)

To create the series, Capra set his gaze on Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a powerful demonstration of what the solid Nazi propaganda machinery was able to do. This German super-production was Hitler's personal request and captured the Sixth Nazi Party Congress, which took place in Nuremberg in 1934. Riefenstahl's documentary was an ode to the values and symbols of the Third Reich, a glorification of war, an exaltation of Hitler's control of the German mass as colossal as the sinister shadow of the dictator, soon to threaten the whole of Europe (figures 1, 2, and 3)⁶. After watching Riefenstahl's documentary, Capra found the key to the elaboration of his series: the systematic inclusion of excerpts of different propaganda films of the Axis and the transformation of their triumphalist images into representations of the totalitarian brutality and the delirium of their leaders through a new narration⁷. The rest of the images, with the exception of a few scenes filmed by Capra's crew and the different animations created by the Disney Factory, were also taken from other sources such as newsreels, fiction films, and footage appropriated from the enemy (BOHN, 1977: 106). Through the compilation of all these images, *Why We Fight* – designed specifically for military instruction, although some of the films were released theatrically – insisted on the importance of the American participation in the war, highlighting the threat of losing all freedom as the main reason to go to war and offering a revealing view of the enemy's power⁸.

Seven documentaries compose this series following a circular structure, an organization that sought to explain the need to disembark to European battlefields at a time when American soldiers were already fighting in the Pacific against the Japanese (GIRONA, 2007: 43). The first of these films, *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942), begins with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and establishes the causes that, according to the script of the documentary, led to the intervention of the Unit-



Figure 4. Disney animation that represents the world under the Axis' yoke. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

ed States in the war. *The Nazis Strike* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943) is the second documentary of the series and it focuses on explaining Hitler's expansionist politics, especially the annexation of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The main topic of the third film, *Divide and Conquer* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1943) is the fall of France under Nazi power. *The Battle of Britain* (Anthony Veller, 1943), *The Battle of Russia* (Anatole Litvak, 1943), and *The Battle of China* (Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, 1944) depict the glorification of the Allies's resistance during a time when the United States was not at war. Lastly, *War Comes to America* (Anatole Litvak, 1945) examines the history of the United States from the foundation of Jamestown in 1607 to the attack of Pearl Harbor and the resulting shift in public and political opinion about military intervention. This last film constantly reinforces the idea of American intervention as a defensive and inevitable action sparked by the sectarianism of three <<gangsters>> ready to subdue the United States under a rigid control once they conquered the rest of the world (figure 4).

Therefore, the United States occupies the center of history in *Why We Fight*, presenting it-



Figure 5. Disney animation that represents the division between the free world (bright) and the slave world (dark). *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

self as the guardian of a badly wounded system: democracy. In *Prelude to War*, Capra echoes a famous speech by Vice President Henry Wallace to present the war as a conflict between "the free world", represented by the countries of the United Nations (with the United States leading them), and the "slave world" of the Axis powers (figure 5). In reference to the "the free world", *Why We Fight* praises the cultural and political pillars of the United States: Lincoln, the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, patriotism, freedom, and national security, among others. The series addresses these pillars through a strong sense of sentimentality that is amplified by the affable tone that the narrators, Walter Huston and Anthony Veiller, employ to describe these images. On the other side of the spectrum, the Axis powers embody violence, repression, loss of individualism, and tyranny. In other words, they represent the Axis dogmas – imposed by the expansionist desires of their ruthless leaders – that, according to the series, clashed with the fundamental principles of the free world (figures 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). However, *Why We Fight* establishes the dichotomy democracy-dictatorship through a number of purposeful non-representations and historical

simplifications that blur the boundaries between the two concepts.

In the proposed dual division of the world, *Prelude to War* situates every single country of the United Nations in the democratic block, ignoring that among these countries were brutal regimes like Rafael Trujillo's (Dominican Republic), Anastasio Somoza's (Nicaragua), or one of the strongest allies of the United States at the time, Stalin's Soviet Union (Koppes y Black, 1987: 68). Regarding the Soviet Union, Litvak directed *The Battle of Russia*, a documentary in which the filmmaker praises its people and the Red Army, never mentioning the term communism – the fundamental cause of the later demonization of the country on the part of successive American governments. The documentary also obliterates the multiple political purges carried on since the 1930s in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the film erases the systematic executions and the confinement of thousands of political opponents in concentration camps from the official history as a mechanism to eulogize the (illusory) strength of the soviet national unity.

The Battle of China uses a similar strategy. The documentary exalts the pacific nature of the Chinese people, underlining that <<in four thousand years of continuous history, China has never fought a war of aggression>>. With this statement, the director establishes a comparison between

China and the United States, pointing out that both countries "hate war", but have been dragged into the conflict as a result of an external aggression. What the documentary does not include, as an effort to represent the Chinese national unity before the Japanese Empire, is the violent repression of dictator Chiang Kai-shek against Mao Tse-tung's communist side. Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Party whom *Why We Fight* describes as the unifier of the country, led an operation in which he purged hundreds of members of his party to consolidate his power. However, the series disguises once again the dictatorial

Figures 6,7 y 8. Childhood in the Axis powers. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)





Figures 9, 10 y 11. Childhood in the Axis powers. *Prelude to War* (Frank Capra, 1942)

practices of a country under the wide umbrella of the term “free world”, focusing in this case on the representation of Hirohito’s imperialist plans in China, represented as the first step towards the conquest of the rest of Asia. The documentary first narrates the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, an event presented in *The Nazis Strike* as one of the most significant examples of historical license in the series. According to the narrator, it was this Japanese attack that marked the beginning of World War II, and not Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939. This temporal alteration meets two functions: on one hand, it serves to contrast the apparent pacifism of China with the war tradition of Japan, now fueled by sadistic leaders that have the enslavement of American citizens as their ultimate goal. On the other, it is a critique of the isolationism of the League of the Nations before the first signs of Japanese violence, a fact that according to the documentary led to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi advancement through Europe, and eventually, to the bombing of Pearl Harbor (figure 12). By referencing all of these events through the concatenation of press headlines projected over columns of smoke and fire, the film sought to demonstrate that isolationism should not be considered an option. To reinforce this position, *The Battle of China* also represents the bombing of Shanghai in 1937, which the film de-

scribes as the attack in which the Japanese introduced a new kind of war to the world: the indiscriminate bombing of civilians⁹. The gory images of the massacre counteract non-interventionism: if the Japanese were unified under the veneration of the Emperor, the United States should be united in the name of freedom.

However, the reality in American soil was not as idyllic as projected in the series. The free land of opportunities was actually the land of racial segregation and the unequal distribution of civil rights, social conflicts that remain hidden in *Why We Fight* under constant allusions to the Constitution and the freedom it provided to all. Additionally, the representation of African-American citizens is practically non-existent during the series. Only some of the documentaries, like *War Comes to America*, allow brief shots that depict the lives of black citizens. One of these shots illustrates a young, black man enrolling in the Army. Another one depicts an African-American soldier defending Pearl Harbor. Another shot, during which the narrator names the nationalities of immigrants who helped build the country, depicts black men and women picking cotton under the “the burning sun of the South”. The use of the term “Negros” and the location of this shot allow for a brief and convenient simplification of slavery. *Why We Fight* eliminates the representation of all racial conflict in an attempt to offer a unified view of the

United States. In *The Negro Soldier*, a documentary that does not belong to this series but that also was supervised by Capra and served to persuade young, black men to enlist in the Army and to educate the white audience (DOHERTY, 1993: 213), a critique of inequality and racial oppression is also absent. Far from denouncing this situation, the narrator in *The Negro Soldier* states “this time it is a fight not between man and man, but between nation and nation”. Like *Why We Fight*, the film calls for national unity to fight against the totalitarian danger.

Capra’s series also severs another piece of American history, one that is less known in other countries: the existence of concentration camps during the Roosevelt Administration, located for the most part in the western states. As Bodnar argues (2010: 189-190), the President declared the reclusion of 120,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese-American citizens in concentration camps in the name of national security after the attack in Pearl Harbor. The erasing of this historical event echoes the same intention of *The Battle of Russia*, *The Battle of China*, and even *War Comes to America*. To show the deprivation of rights and the forced confinement of American citizens by the hand of their own government would obstruct the attainment of a national unity, one which was already compromised by the disagreements between the interventionist and isolationist wings. The strategy of the series sought to protect the image of the United States as the greatest exponent of freedom and democracy of the world. Therefore, the series blocks the depiction of the camps – a repression tool more suitable in the enemy regimes than in a



Figure 12. Disney animation that represents the attack in Pearl Harbor. *War Comes to America* (Anatole Litvak, 1945)

superpower of the “free world” – in order to avoid its infiltration in the collective memory of the American citizens. *Prelude to War*, and especially *War Comes to America*, focus on building a view of the United States as an advocate against the totalitarian oppression. These films depict all the goodness and kindness of the American way of life, in contrast with the enemy’s way of life [or “way of death”, as the narrator proclaims in a clumsy analogy], which consisted of the dissemination of terror inside and outside their borders. There are multiple references to the foreign policies of the Axis powers. The series alludes to and almost mystifies Mussolini’s plans to bring the Roman Empire back from its ashes, the Tanaka Report that would put Japan in the lead of the world, and Hitler’s crushing power that would burn it down, in order to prepare and motivate American soldiers to go to war. However, the representation of the repression of these leaders toward political opponents inside their own territories is minimal. In *Prelude to War*, the director employs a quote from Hitler’s

ANTISEMITISM, A KEY ASPECT OF HITLER'S CRUSADE, BECOMES DILUTED IN THE SERIES, MINIMIZED BY THE MAGNITUDE OF THE AXIS ATTACKS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD

Mein Kampf to refer to brute force as a mechanism to silence the voice of "the few that still believed in freedom and said so". In the same way, in *The Nazis Strike*, the second documentary of the series, there is another fleeting allusion. After a voice-over pronounces a speech with a dramatized German accent referring to the subjugation of all the German workers to the "Nazi secret mission" [the conquest of the world], Walter Huston retakes the narration of the documentary to describe the consequences that await those who oppose Hitler. The narrator says, "For those who don't like it, you don't eat. Or you disappear into a concentration camp. Or you get this [cuts to a dramatization of four civilians being shot]". One can see how these two documentaries allude to the internal repression through a generalization of the victims. The narration tells us that every opponent will be confined or executed, but it does not specifically refer to the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people across the whole of Europe. Antisemitism, a key aspect of Hitler's crusade, becomes diluted in the series, minimized by the magnitude of the Axis attacks in different parts of the world. *Why We Fight* shapes, through all of these strategies, the historical reality to embrace the propagandistic needs promoted from Washington, prioritizing depictions of the danger that the United States faced over an accurate representation of the violent reality that the world was suffering.

A FEW LAST CONSIDERATIONS

Although more than fifty million viewers had seen the film by the end of the war (Rollins, 1996:

84), the indoctrination documentary model that *Why We Fight* proposed became practically obsolete after the war. According to Harris (2014: 330), by the time of the release of *The Battle of China*, the sixth documentary of the series, this kind of project had already been exhausted, even among the soldiers. Thus, the use of this kind of film began to ebb before the new war documentaries, which were increasingly mobilizing a crew to war fronts and filming the conflicts on location. Claudia Springer (1986: 151) points out that during the Vietnam war (1955-1975), the US War Department sponsored the development of different propaganda documentaries. Only one, *Why Vietnam?* (1965), followed the guidelines established in Capra's series. The rest of the films relied on a subtler and more sophisticated style, describing from an alleged ethnographic point of view the daily life of the Vietnamese people and the supposed benevolence of the American military intervention in the country. At the same time, this new kind of documentary also tried to justify the simplified representation of the Vietnamese people and culture through the use of pseudoscientific standpoints. Unlike what happened with some of the *Why We Fight* films, none of the new indoctrination documentaries were released theatrically. What is more, the strong sense of repudiation that the Vietnam war provoked among the American population triggered the filming of documentaries that refuted the need to fight that the military propaganda hoped to instil in civilians and soldiers alike. Among these antagonistic yet pacifist works, in which the voice of the Vietnamese people could finally be heard, stand out a few that were filmed during the war, like *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968), a self-critical documentary produced by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War entitled *Winter Soldier* (1972), and Academy Award winner *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1975). Drifting away from the polarized idea of the world that Capra employed to warn America about the possibility of having

the enemy march down Pennsylvania Avenue, the new documentaries approached critically the military intervention. This shift not only reflected the pacifist standpoint of a great percentage of the population. It also established a new kind of documentary whose strategy, unlike Capra's, has prevailed.

NOTES

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- 1. The increasing insertion of political messages supporting the mobilization of the troops in Hollywood productions encountered a strong resistance in the isolationist sectors of the American Senate. The industry moguls, whom were mostly Jewish exiled from Europe, were closely investigated after being accused of corrupting industry and turning it into a propaganda tool (KOPPEL y Black, 1987: 40)
- 2. The Signal Corps started filming instructional short films in 1929. These productions described how to use weaponry or how to act before the different situations presented at the battlefield through tedious explanations. No argument, characters, humor, animations, or non-military music was employed in these films. (HARRIS, 2014: 113).
- 3. Ford was the first of these filmmakers in taking an active part in the Army. He enrolled a few months before the attack in Pearl Harbor, when he officially joined the Naval Reserve. Once enlisted, Ford created the Field Photographic Branch, a section of the Marine that filmed propaganda documentaries, among other projects (LEVY, 1998: 23).
- 4. Ford would also contribute with other documentaries, like *Sex Hygiene* (1942), an instructive short film that explained soldiers the consequences of contracting venereal diseases, or *December 7th* (1943), a film

about the bombing of Pearl Harbor that received another Academy Award.

- 5. George Stevens was eventually replaced by John Huston in this project, later entitled *Victory in Tunisia*. Huston filmed the footage thousands of miles away from the battlefield, concretely in Orlando, Florida, a fact that further demonstrates the fictional nature of this project (GUNTER, 2012: 132).
- 6. Riefenstahl's documentary had nothing to do with the productions of the Signal Corps. First, the German filmmaker managed a large crew and counted with extensive technical resources during the week of the Nazi convention. More than 170 people worked for Riefenstahl, who also counted with thirty cameras, four sound trucks, an airship and a plane that allowed her to capture aerial images of the rally, and an elevator-like system, attached to one of the massive swastika flag masts that allowed to capture in motion wide-shots of the perfectly aligned crowd (BARSAM, 1975: 23-25).
- 7. Like McBride noted (2011:467), this was not a new idea. In 1940, British documentaries such as Alberto Cavalcanti's satire of Mussolini *Yellow Caesar* or *The Curse of the Swastika*, which focuses on the increasing power of the Nazi Party, had already used similar techniques. In the same way, and in the same year, *The Ramparts We Watch* was released in the United States. Taking a verse of the American national anthem as its title, this film also turns a Nazi production against its initial purpose. In this case, the chosen film is *Feuertafe* [Baptism of Fire, 1940].
- 8. The documentaries released theatrically in the United States and abroad were *Prelude to War*, *The Battle of Russia* and *War Comes to America*. The first two won Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature.
- 9. Like Patterson noticed (2007: 2), this war strategy had been already used months before the attack over Shanghai. It happened during the Spanish Civil War, when the Condor Legion destroyed the city of Guernica.

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HOLLYWOOD AND THE SHAPING OF THE OFFICIAL STORY: THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE DOCUMENTARY SERIES WHY WE FIGHT (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

Abstract

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States government implemented a new system of propaganda that sought to convince American soldiers and average citizens alike of the necessity to enter World War II. This system counted on the participation of top Hollywood filmmakers, who filmed documentaries that shaped war as a narrative. Among these distinguished filmmakers, Frank Capra, author of the *Why We Fight* series, emerged as the most prolific propaganda cineaste of his time. This article analyzes how, through the use of documentary cinema, the US government and Frank Capra created a narration of World War II in the *Why We Fight* documentary series by careful manipulation, omission, and simplification of historical events in order to shape the official story of the conflict.

Key words

Frank Capra; Hollywood; Second World War; Documentary; Propaganda; Official Story.

Author

Jaume Antuñano San Luis (Valencia, 1986) has a Bachelor's degree in Media Studies from the Universidad Cardenal Herrera - CEU. He received his Master's degree from the University of Georgia (USA), where he is currently pursuing a PhD degree and is teaching Spanish. He specializes in contemporary literature and film with a focus on Memory Studies, particularly as it relates to discourses that challenge the official story. Contact: jaumeasl@uga.edu.

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HOLLYWOOD Y LA CONFIGURACIÓN DE LA HISTORIA OFICIAL: LA SEGUNDA GUERRA MUNDIAL SEGÚN LA SERIE DOCUMENTAL WHY WE FIGHT (FRANK CAPRA, 1942-1945)

Resumen

Tras el bombardeo de Pearl Harbor por parte de la Armada Imperial Japonesa, el gobierno de los Estados Unidos implementó un programa de propaganda que buscaba convencer a los soldados y a la población norteamericanos de la necesidad de entrar en la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Este programa contó con la participación de cineastas de Hollywood de primer nivel, los cuales realizaron producciones documentales en las que otorgaban un sentido narrativo al conflicto bélico. De entre estos directores destaca, por su gran producción, el italoamericano Frank Capra, autor de la serie *Why We Fight*. El presente artículo se centra en mostrar cómo, a través del uso del cine documental, el gobierno de Estados Unidos y Capra crearon en esta serie una narración de la Segunda Guerra Mundial que, mediante olvidos premeditados, manipulaciones y simplificaciones históricas, estableció la versión oficial del conflicto.

Palabras clave

Frank Capra; Hollywood; Segunda Guerra Mundial; cine documental; propaganda; historia oficial.

Autor

Jaume Antuñano San Luis (Valencia, 1986) es licenciado en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad Cardenal Herrera - CEU. Posee un Máster en Estudios Hispánicos por la University of Georgia (Estados Unidos), donde actualmente realiza sus estudios de doctorado e imparte clases de lengua española. Su investigación principal gira en torno a la memoria histórica, enfocándose concretamente en la representación literaria y cinematográfica de discursos que desafían la historia oficial. Contacto: jaumeasl@uga.edu.

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