

NOT TOO RICH, NOT TOO POOR  
*Britain's Mrs. Miniver as the Epitome of the American Middle Class*

NOT TOO RICH, NOT TOO POOR  
*Britain's Mrs. Miniver as the Epitome of the American Middle Class*

Films are the reflection of a specific time and place. When they are examined in the context of the culture in which they were created, they become an indirect window into that world. Although Neil Rattigan was speaking of British films when he states, "films, especially commercial entertainment films but also documentaries, are excellent sources of information about their contemporary cultures,"<sup>1</sup> the same observation applies to American pop culture films as well. Thus, by examining a 1942 Hollywood movie about the "British middle-class" during World War II, one can see how the content and character of that film strongly reflected the American cultural and national identity of the time.

*Mrs. Miniver*, an MGM movie starring Greer Garson in the title role, was developed from a book of loosely linked short stories about an English family written by the British author Jan Struther. Struther's book ended just before Great Britain entered World War II, but MGM Studio producer Stanley Frank, along with several writers and director William Wyler, expanded Struther's story into an Academy Award-winning movie of middle-class British courage and resolve as the family and their small English village endured the German bombing blitz in the first years of the war. Although *Mrs. Miniver* wasn't released until the year after Pearl Harbor, the film was written and filmed prior to that time, while Americans were still uncertain about what their role was or should be in the conflict being waged in Europe.

At the time, there was a growing belief in Hollywood that America would be drawn into the war in Europe and that there was a need to inform and prepare Americans for just such an eventuality. In response, although somewhat ahead of American public opinion, Hollywood began to produce films that were "sympathetic to the British, opposed to the Germans, and supportive of readiness."<sup>2</sup> Isolationists became alarmed that Hollywood was pushing America toward war. In the fall and early winter of 1941, Congress held hearings to investigate the charges, and while the debates were heated, there was some truth to the charges.

---

<sup>1</sup> Neil Rattigan, *This is England: British Film and the People's War, 1939-1945* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), introduction 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960*

According to Wyler, *Mrs. Miniver* was created with the express purpose of breaking down America's isolationist tendencies and hesitation about going to war in support of the entrenched British class system. As he admitted, "*Mrs. Miniver* was obviously a propaganda film."<sup>3</sup> In order to elicit sympathy for the class-conscious British, Wyler and his scriptwriters created an idealistic "we're in this together" experience for American audiences, attributing American democratic and cultural values to the film's British characters. Even without Wyler's own admission, *Mrs. Miniver* can be viewed as a form of propaganda that used the growing power of pop cultural entertainment to deliver a message to American audiences.

American propaganda, especially as practiced by Hollywood, makes great use of the populist way Americans view themselves as independent, peaceful, and democratic. In his discussion of how a wide variety of films in the 1930s and 1940s were "carefully constructed to stay within the bounds of essential American cultural and political myths," Robert Sklar notes in his book, *Movie-Made America*, that "Hollywood's contribution to American culture was essentially one of affirmation."<sup>4</sup> *Mrs. Miniver*, which became the most popular movie of 1942 and won six Academy Awards, was no exception.

From the opening scenes of the film, *Mrs. Miniver* endeavors to make the Americans in the audience see the British characters in the film living lives just like their own – holding dear the same values of democracy and freedom as they do, and facing the same fears and dangers. The prologue introduces "an average English middle-class family," followed by the ominous words that these "happy, careless people, who worked and played, reared their children and tended their gardens" would "soon be fighting desperately for their way of life and for life itself."

As Britain is thrust into the war, the Miniver family – Mrs. Miniver, her husband Clem (Walter Pidgeon), their college-age son Vin (Richard Ney), and two younger children – are transformed from a state of mind where their biggest worries are how Mrs. Miniver can tell her husband she's purchased a new hat and how Clem can tell her he's purchased a new automobile to courageous, sacrificing involvement in the war.

---

(Berkeley: University of California Press, Anchor Press, 1979, 1980, 1983), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Herman, *William Wyler: A Talent for Trouble* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, A division of Random House, 1975, 1994), 196-197.

Weaving their wartime experiences into the lives of other characters in the small English village of Belden, the film depicts a community “that overcomes superficial class distinctions to unify in the face of a common threat.”<sup>5</sup>

Everyone in the film is affected and as their lives change in extraordinary ways, American audiences can envision their own lives changing, too. Vin leaves Oxford and enlists in the R.A.F.; Clem, an architect, assists in evacuating the British at Dunkirk; while he is away at Dunkirk, Mrs. Miniver confronts a downed German airman and captures him in her kitchen. Other villagers’ lives are also transformed.

Villagers who were formerly separated by class distinctions now come together: Carol Belden (Teresa Wright), the granddaughter of the village matriarch, Lady Belden (Dame May Whitty), quickly marries Vin – with her grandmother’s blessing – in order to take advantage of a brief leave during the war; the grocer becomes an air warden with the power to give orders to anyone in the village; Lady Belden chooses to award the annual Belden Challenge Cup for the finest rose to Mr. Ballard, the stationmaster, for his “Mrs. Miniver” rose instead of keeping the coveted award for herself; Lady Belden later opens her house to the villagers fleeing a German air attack during which both her granddaughter and Mr. Ballard are killed.

Throughout the movie, there is strong sense of the middle-class Miniver family as the center that links the village together. Through their innate charm, decency, and courage they manage to bring together classes that haven’t been close for generations. Vin marries Lady Belden’s granddaughter. Mrs. Miniver convinces Lady Belden to give her cherished award to the stationmaster. This breakdown of class distinctions was important in making the British more sympathetic to American audiences, although audiences may not have been aware of this because of the effective way the story was written, with its message concealed as entertainment. As Brock Garland notes in his book, *War Movies*, “American viewers aren’t likely to perceive this subtext of snobbery, however, and probably will be swept along by its well-oiled drama of an ‘ordinary’ family nobly attempting to hold back Nazi barbarians.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Jerome Christensen, “Studio Identity and Studio Art”: MGM, *Mrs. Miniver*, and Planning the Postwar Era,” in Project Muse [on-line database] (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Copyright © 2000 ELH 67.1 (2000) 257-292, accessed 12 October 2002, p. 263), <http://80-muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.mnl.umkc.edu/journals/elh/v067/67.1christensen.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Brock Garland, *War Movies* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987), 144.

This idealized, Americanized portrayal of the middle-class Minivers – who manage to unify the members of different British classes in their small village while fighting the Nazis in the air, at sea, and in their kitchen – was well received in the United States and succeeded in popularizing the British cause.<sup>7</sup> The film was also released in Britain, where it also boosted morale but was criticized for its Hollywood falseness – from celebrating the comfort-loving middle class, which had tried to appease Hitler to portraying the Miniver’s servants and other members of the working class as comic oafs.<sup>8</sup> As Ivan Butler notes in *The War Film*, in the near-perfection of the Minivers, some British felt that *Mrs. Miniver* “presents a picture of their country life that must have astounded village folk up and down the land.”<sup>9</sup> However, despite their criticisms, the British still turned out in masses to see the film.<sup>10</sup>

Back in America, the wartime Office of War Information (OWI), which was responsible for overseeing all information presented about the war – including Hollywood films – “praised *Mrs. Miniver* profusely and asked Hollywood to produce similar films set in the United States or in Allied countries such as China and the Soviet Union.”<sup>11</sup> In doing so, scripts had to meet the OWI’s guidelines; in most cases, this meant presenting the Allies in a way that showed them as Americanized and democratic as possible. Stories about the social and political conditions of allies, especially the Soviet Union, were carefully monitored, and accuracy was often sacrificed in the name of putting a good face on America’s wartime partners.<sup>12</sup>

In 1942, Hollywood answered Washington’s call and produced three films about Russia – *Mission to Moscow* (Warner Brothers), *Song of Russia* (MGM), and *North Star* (Samuel Goldwyn) which, according to Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund in *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960*, were “Sovietized

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Butler, *The War Film* (Cranbury, N.J.: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1974), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society 1939-1952* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 49.

<sup>11</sup> “Film During World War II - *Mrs. Miniver*” in DISCovering History [database on-line] , (Farmington Hills, MA: The Gale Group, Copyright © 2000, accessed 12 October, 2002), <http://80-galenet.gale.com.ezproxy.mnl.umkc.edu/a/acp/netacgi/nph-brs?d=DTCU&s1=mrs.+miniver&s2=discovering+history&s3=fullsearch&pg1=FT&pg2=PD&pg3=ST&l=50&p=1&u=/a/acp/db/dtcu/index.html&r=1&f=G>

<sup>12</sup> Ceplair, 311.

versions of *Mrs. Miniver*.”<sup>13</sup> They point out that all of these films deliberately chose not to present an intelligent or in-depth treatment of any of the problems associated with a socialist society or in the alliance between a capitalist and communist country.<sup>14</sup> Like *Mrs. Miniver*, these films were determined to present a view of the Allies that was most compatible with and didn’t contradict American’s view of their own national identity. As a result, Colin Shindler points out in *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society 1939-1952*, “the essence of *Mission to Moscow* is the conviction that Russians are just like Americans with fur hats and the ideological division are more imagined than real,”<sup>15</sup> and further, the movie inevitably ends with a “utopian picture of Americans and Russians yet unborn who will march together down the road to freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

Garland argues that, like *Mrs. Miniver*, “the bulk of war films made just after a war breaks out and for the duration are generally propaganda.”<sup>17</sup> He proceeds to discuss research, which shows that on its own, propaganda won’t change someone’s mind on an issue, but that it can reinforce existing opinions.<sup>18</sup> *Mrs. Miniver* didn’t open until after the United States had been drawn into the war by the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and its popularity and effectiveness might not have been quite as great if the U.S. were still neutral. Nevertheless, the power of *Mrs. Miniver* derived from the way it created British characters who embodied traits that Americans valued in themselves – democratic ideals, courage, humor, a belief in “the people” to make a difference. This allowed Americans to view the Minivers and their British neighbors in a positive “that’s how we’d handle ourselves” manner.

*Mrs. Miniver* concludes with a service held in the ruins of the village church. Carol Beldon and Mr. Ballard, along with others from the congregation, are mourned in an inspiring eulogy delivered by the vicar. Actor Henry Wilcoxon, who plays the vicar, along with director William Wyler, apparently rewrote the speech to emphasize the new democratic nature of the war.<sup>19</sup> During the service, Vin enters the pew traditionally occupied only by the Beldon family and puts his arm around Lady Beldon to comfort

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Shindler, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Garland, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Shindler, 49.

her in their shared loss, a scene that visually underscores how the people of the village have become united.

As a formation of R.A.F. planes is seen through the bombed roof of the church and the choir sings "Onward Christian Soldiers" the vicar says, "This is the people's war! It is our war! We are the fighters! Fight it, then! Fight it with all that is in us. And may God defend the right." Despite being spoken by a British vicar in a church in a small English village, it is an American speech, reflecting American beliefs and intended to inspire American audiences. It succeeds by attributing the most American of qualities to the film's British characters - American's pride in their democratic "middle-class" identity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butler, Ivan. *The War Film*. Cranbury, N.J.: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1974.
- Ceplair, Larry and Steven Englund. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960*. Berkley: University of California Press, Anchor Press, 1979, 1980, 1983.
- Christensen, Jerome. "Studio Identity and Studio Art": MGM, *Mrs. Miniver*, and Planning the Postwar Era," in Project Muse [database on-line]. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Copyright © 2000 All rights reserved. *ELH* 67.1 (2000) 257-292, accessed 12 October 2002, p. 263.  
<http://80-muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.mnl.umkc.edu/journals/elh/v067/67.1christensen.html>.
- "Film During World War II - *Mrs. Miniver*" in DISCovering History [database on-line]. Farmington Hills, MA: The Gale Group, Copyright © 2000, accessed 12 October, 2002.  
<http://80-galenet.gale.com.ezproxy.mnl.umkc.edu/a/acp/netacgi/nph-brs?d=DTCU&s1=mrs.+miniver&s2=discovering+history&s3=fullsearch&pg1=FT&pg2=PD&pg3=ST&l=50&p=1&u=/a/acp/db/dtcu/index.html&r=1&f=G>
- Garland, Brock. *War Movies*. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987.
- Jan Herman. *William Wyler: A Talent for Trouble*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.
- Rattigan, Neil. *This is England: British Film and the People's War, 1939-1945*. London: Associated University Presses, 2001.
- Shindler, Colin. *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society 1939-1952*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1975, 1994.

CINDY TSUTSUMI  
University of Missouri – Kansas City  
18 October 2002

A&S 509: Methods of Inquiry:  
Research Issues and Methods in the Liberal Arts  
Dr. Burton Dunbar  
Dr. Tom Poe