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Emma: Did she wrongfully spend years on death row?

Rape Culture in Music: Lyrics that Provide a Step-by-Step Guide to Sexual Assault

Plus

Hollywood legend Olivia de Havilland as the bad girl

The popularity of the Serial podcast
CONTENTS

4. From the Editor
An introduction to the latest edition of Eye Magazine

6. Being Charlie
Power, Text & Context
by Joseph Haldane

12. Emma
Did a woman spend years on death row for a murder she did not commit?
by Ruth Johnson Carter

20. Serial
How did a story about a possible wrongful conviction make for the most popular podcast of all time?
by Lindsay Lafreniere

23. In the Pursuit of Justice
Alec Klein and the Medill Justice Project
by Richard Roth and Lindsay Lafreniere

24. “What a cool liar you are, Melly”
Hollywood legend Olivia de Havilland as the bad girl
by Victoria Amador

32. Victory at Sea
A Paradox of Objectivity Immersed in Hard-Hitting Action
by Wajiha Raza Rizvi
Victory at Sea, a cold war epic by Director M. Clay Adams, proved to be one of the most popular documentary series in the history of American television. Nevertheless, the series left its viewers immersed in a paradox of objective realism; as the television news coverage in the era of the Vietnam War reflects bias due to network television’s monopoly of the sourcing of national and world news. According to Frank Russo (1971), Elmo Roper & Associates polls in 1959, 1961, 1963, 1964, and 1967 confirm television’s status as the primary, most believable source of news; Nielsen ratings indicate that 35 million television sets were “tuned to evening news shows each night” (540).

NBC took the unique opportunity to beam major events of WWII directly into the comfort of living rooms via the new technology of television while the memories of war were still fresh in public minds. The living experiences of the true to life hard-hitting-action, desolation, destruction, and death were launched into people’s houses like breaking news.

Victory at Sea used real WWII footage to fictionalize and fabricate war realities that muddle the confines of objective rendering. New technologies of the 1930s had made it possible for Navy camera crews in protagonist (Allies: United States, Union Soviet Socialist Republic, and Great Britain) and antagonist (Axis powers: Japan, Italy, and Germany) teams to use portable cameras and quality film stock to film accounts of their operations across the globe. Peter C. Rollins (1972) argues that the Allied victory resulted in protagonist control over antagonist footage. Recounting a mixture of the actualities of naval operations of WWII from protagonist and antagonist points of view, Victory at Sea episodes offer idealistic interpretations of war realities.

These interpretations reduce objectivity to subjectivity by influencing social and psychological perceptions of war in human objects, a phenomenon which had special significance and role in the cold war era. The mediation of the real images...
transforms the image into the real, causing a loss of ability to differentiate reality from fiction. *Victory at Sea* is an erroneous production, which reenacts the events of WWII outside their original temporal and spatial realities. Rollins says it compromises authenticity at the cost of human “drama that’s packed into history”: Japanese ships and bombers advancing on American ships and bombers or Kamikaze suicide attacks against Allied targets in the closing phase of the Pacific campaign. This powerful, ‘entertaining’ spectacle spliced with narrations of then popular celebrity Leonard Graves and the symphonies of Richard Rodgers obscures these perceptions through impact montages at a breathless pace. This technique, loaded with the official ideological spirit of of war, is preserved from the first episode, *Victory at Sea: Design for War*, to the last episode, *Victory at Sea: Design for Peace*.

Montages follow repetitive patterns: Allied forces move from left to right and Axis powers from right to left. An impact is created through reinforcing images of ship, ship, ship, and gun, gun, gun in juxtaposition to enemy leitmotiv war, war, war like a constant threat. This action style editing creates high drama by knocking viewers with booming, repetitive, in and out imagery. An impact montage of big guns, parallel fifty caliber bullets, and bombers follows an impact montage of big ships creating a thriving impact of the war threat on minds and personalizing hatred of American enemies. The power of the impact is enhanced through the orchestration of the protagonist and antagonist leitmotivs and their variants that effectively perform at the level of the subconscious.

Episode 19, *Victory at Sea: The Battle for Leyte Gulf*, fictionalizes a close encounter between the Allied forces and the Japanese. In one of the extended scenes, the shadow of the protagonist naval plane touches the sea surface, symbolizing the position of the navy as savior of maritime peace and freedom. Earlier, at the beginning of the documentary, after the V for victory sign emerges above the tides, we see several shots of ships in a row that follow several mid-shots of naked naval officers and then close ups of several GIs. The impact of the American’s militarily invincible muscle is created. Later, a personalized order, “Strike! Repeat! Strike! Good Luck!,” from the higher naval command is delivered in a close up, which follows a tight shot of a speaker, symbolizing communication of the command down the hierarchical chain. This scene follows a sequence of fast cutting long and close shots of loyal officers, flags, ships, and planes as the command and ideology rule. The light bombers of the protagonists fly from right to left, and of antagonists from left to right. The mid-shot (with a back focus) of an officer celebrating victory with a flying kiss at the blast of the enemy’s mariner, holds many planes of the protagonists in the background. The sequence repetitively orchestrates hype building imagery of sailors, flags, machines, ships, planes, guns, and torpedoes to create a powerful impact montage in juxtaposition to rising tones of the leitmotivs of enemy-attack in the earlier part and victory in the later. The paradoxical montages of the victorious Allied advance build war icons, dictate war ideology to make viewers sympathize with larger than life political causes and bury human cost of victory under the generalizations of freedom.

Episode 20, *Victory at Sea: Return of the Allies, Liberation of the Philippines* builds on the binaries of friends/enemies, good/evil, Allied forces/Axis powers, Americans/Japanese, democracy/despotism to complicate comprehension of war realities. This film puts together spectacular montages of Kamikaze flaming planes crashing into the sea, devastating damage on Allied ships, fleeing citizens, a ruined flaming city, a church temporarily turned into a hospital, a soldier helping a little boy to quench his thirst with water, and again at the close of the war, Kamikaze planes crashing into buildings, and ships in the harbor, victorious Americans
turning the tide of war, and the flags in Manila, Bataan, and Corregador following Philippines liberation. The sequence juxtaposes high and low pitch symphonic motifs as needed to end on rising victorious notes as Graves repeats Roosevelt’s words, “American soldiers fight not for the lust of conquest; they fight to win; they fight to liberate.” The paradoxical montages repetitively emphasize, what Rollins (1972) calls, the American ideology of patriotism, cause, freedom and victory over human loss under the generalizations of democracy. Enemy motives for historical Kamikaze attacks are reduced under a larger cause of liberation of the Philippines. The building up of the enemy threat and misery is dramatically reversed into his own camp. Rollins says the protagonist dies for a noble cause and the antagonist for no cause. One reality is compromised over another.

The portrayal of un-distressed Allied soldiers indoctrinates viewers into mere observers who do not sympathize with dramatized public deaths of the antagonists. The film follows a philosophy of dangerous moralism; Fred Friendly, a former president of CBS News said, “A country cannot commit to fight the war unless the country hated the enemy.” This powerful series aims at building hatred of the enemy and raising talons to involve the American public in the drama of war. This pseudo-realistic series does not offer to viewers a “truly realistic mental picture” of war’s past, present, and future (Rollins, 1992). The viewers learn about the righteous American character, and an American desire to help the weak; the Philippines is liberated from the threat of Japanese despotism. The series orchestrates sublime themes of American innocence, rhetoric of liberation, machines in action, innocent protagonists and mean antagonists. The viewers are emotionally absorbed in predestined judgment made by the producers of the oligopolistic broadcast industry, far from an insight into the complexities of war.

The Victory at Sea series is a typical incidence of the mainstream media and government alliance in pursuit of their own focused interests during the cold war era. This alliance was also operating in Vietnam; where government and military officials were media informants and facilitators in the drama of Vietnam. In fact during the period of full-blown American commitment in Vietnam, the series itself was frequently broadcasted in several states to build the ‘morale’ of the viewing public. The series Victory at Sea originated the beginning of modern war genre within American documentary. Indeed the media clearly showed its passion for exploiting the opportunity to build a factory for the production of current affairs and documentaries for consumption in the market place following its debut.

Wajiha Raza Rizvi is the founding director of the Film Museum Society Lahore. She collects the archives of Pakistani cinema, conducts research, produces films, and provides consultancy to established media institutions.
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Assistant Editor: Lindsay Lafreniere

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