Some Notes on *"San Pietro"*

John Huston's *San Pietro* is one of the best known nonfiction films from World War II. Often called *The Battle of San Pietro*, the film is an account of an action that took place in December 1943 at the entrance to the Liri Valley of Italy, where the small town of San Pietro is situated, during the allied drive northward to Rome. It was produced by the Army Pictorial Service for the War Department of the American Army. It is not clear whether the film was originally requisitioned for training purposes or for showing to the American public; nor is it clear what its subject matter was at first to be. According to Huston an early order was to make a film about American forces entering Rome. This order was then modified to one showing why the allied advance toward Rome was taking so long, which meant focusing on the hardships of the American sector of the Italian campaign. The War Department, it seems, was responding to President Roosevelt's demand for more realistic front-line coverage of American soldiers in action.[i]

Huston later gave the impression that his own vision for the film was compromised by objections from senior army officers who found it too "pacifistic" and "against the war," too "anti-war." After cuts were made, the film was approved for release in February 1945. Its first screening to the American public was apparently in May 1945. Though well received by film critics, it does not seem to have been widely distributed. By then, the war in Europe was over.[ii]

Today at least two versions of *San Pietro* are circulating in commercial form. There may be other versions, but at Boston University, where I have been screening documentaries for more than twenty years, I have become familiar with these two.

The first version is the one that was approved for release in February 1945. It circulated for a time as a 16 mm film before the advent of VHS technology. It may exist also in VHS form. But it is now available in DVD format. Boston University's DVD copy is included in program two of the four part *Treasures from American Film Archives*, released by the National Film Preservation Foundation in 2000. It runs for just over 32 minutes and is identified in the titles as CR-2 (Combat Report – 2).[iii]

The second version circulates in VHS form. It apparently entered the market during the 1980s and may also once have circulated in 16 mm film form. The copy in Boston University's library is packaged together with a wartime training film, *The Marines Have Landed*, a videotape that can be obtained through several distributors. It runs for about 38 minutes and is identified in its titles as HR-2 (possibly, Historical Report or Record – 2).

The co-existence of these two versions of *San Pietro* has long been something of a puzzle. Since the original release version seems now to be the only one on DVD I was prompted to look more closely at them both, fearing that the VHS version might soon disappear from circulation. In what follows two works have particularly helped me. The first is the collection of documents that passed between film industry executives and army liaison officers working on the production of *San Pietro* that was edited by David Culbert and published in 1990 in volume III of *Film and Propaganda in America*: *A Documentary History*. The second is Peter Maslowski's *Armed With Cameras: The American Photographers of World War II*, published 1993.[iv]

Among the documents relating to *San Pietro* published by Culbert are two scripts for the film. These scripts match exactly the two versions of the film that are now in circulation. I believe it is therefore safe to say that these two versions are without doubt the same two versions of his film that Huston often referred to both in interviews and in his autobiography, namely a

longer version with which he was satisfied, but which supposedly never saw the light of day, and a shorter version in which cuts were made to satisfy the Army. By comparing the two with their respective scripts in hand we can correct some long-standing confusions about the production of *San Pietro*, confusions for which Huston himself was largely responsible.[v]

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THE FILM'S TITLE

In an often quoted interview that Huston gave in 1960, he said that the film "was finally called" *The Battle of San Pietro*. It "was the first battle of the Liri valley, and the reason we settled on that was simply because we were held there for so long."[vi] Clearly, the point of his words here was to explain why the name of the town, San Pietro, came to be in the title of his film. The documents show that the working title of the film was indeed *The Battle of San Pietro* and this is the title that appears on the script for the longer version, dated October 12 1944. But in the months following this date, the use of *San Pietro* as the title appears in many other documents, including the final script of the release version. No explanation is offered in the documents for this change. Presumably it was Huston's choice; *San Pietro* is the title that appears on both versions in distribution. There does not seem to be any justification for anyone to use the longer title.[vii]

REENACTMENTS

Huston's film has been widely praised for its unflinching portrait of American infantrymen in combat. They suffer through intense mortar and machine gun fire. Their numbers dwindle, paying "for ground gained at the rate of a man a yard." The wounded pass in shock on litters before us. Men are killed before our eyes; enemy dead lie exposed to view; American dead are scattered on rocky hillsides, in sparse undergrowth and foxholes. Graves are dug, cemeteries fill up, identity tags are nailed to wooden markers. Many writers have commented on Huston's sympathy for the foot soldiers who advance into smoke and heavy gunfire, battling their way through olive orchards and rocky hillsides to the strongpoints where the Germans have had ample time to defend themselves. This sympathy is underscored by the tone of Huston's narration, which he speaks himself. At times ironic, at times sorrowful and reflective, Huston's voice is itself an important element in the film, providing a kind of counterpoint against the way this war is conducted and perhaps against all wars.

San Pietro's strength lies in its combat footage, which forms the heart of the film. The combat footage is flanked by newsreel style scenes of the Italian campaign – flooded rivers, mountainous terrain, trucks and men on the move - and shots of Italian people, mostly women, the young and the elderly, returning to their shattered homes in the rubble of the town of San Pietro. These opening and closing sequences are authentic documentary scenes, though not all shot in San Pietro itself.[viii] Some were shot by Huston's crew, some by other Signal Corps cameramen who may have been assigned to him when he began shooting his own film. Huston's narration is a tribute to the foot soldier "the man with the bayonet," whose courage and sacrifice gave this particular episode in the war its meaning, whatever generals and strategists might say.

But almost all of the combat footage - that is, shots of American infantrymen in deadly action - is reenacted, a fact that takes many viewers by surprise. The opening battle for the Liri

Valley that was centered on the town of San Pietro took place in two phases over a ten day period, from December 8 – 17. Huston arrived at the front on the last day of the fighting, as the Germans were preparing to retreat from their remaining strongpoints in the mountains overlooking San Pietro and from the town itself. Some weeks later, in late December 1943, and in January and February 1944, guided by an officer present at the actual fighting, he reconstructed scenes from the preceding battle, using units assigned for this purpose from the division that had recently fought over the same ground.[ix]

One of the mysteries about *San Pietro* is the silence that long reigned on this subject. Reenactment is not mentioned in the published documents of the time, nor did Huston ever admit to it in interviews or his autobiography. On the contrary, in these public outlets Huston gave the impression that he was filming live combat action. "[T]hat was the first time real Infantry combat conditions, involving Americans, had ever been seen on the screen," he said in the 1960 interview.[x] There is not a word on the subject of reenactment in the two best known histories of the non-fiction film, by Richard Barsam (1973) and Erik Barnouw (1974). Barsam, indeed, singled out the authenticity of the combat footage – "Made in the heat of fire, the cinematography includes (with the films that were to come from the Pacific front) some of the best footage from the war. There is direct footage of soldiers being shot and killed …" In 1984 the circulating film library catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art in New York followed the same line, "Huston … provides an unsurpassed account of the ground fighting, photographed alongside the foot soldiers throughout the battle." For many years most film historians took the same position.[xi]

Yet there can be no doubt about the extent of the reenactment. The original cards itemizing their shots made up by the Signal Corps cameramen assigned to Huston are preserved in the U.S. National Archives. Following regulations the cameramen added notes to many of these: "Portions of the above are re-enacted," "Reenacted in part," "All scenes are re-enacted," "Some Scenes Re-enacted." Several of these cameramen survived the war and were able to provide first hand accounts of how Huston staged action scenes. One of them described how Huston dressed up an American GI in a German uniform to play a dead German in a captured foxhole.[xii]

One of the first writers to draw attention to Huston's reenactments was Lance Bertelsen in an essay first published in the Southwest Review in the spring of 1989. Bertelsen's essay was as much about how war is represented in different artistic forms as about the documentary nature of *San Pietro*. He was followed in 1993 by Peter Maslowski's *Armed With Cameras: The American Military Photographers of World War II*, whose account of the making of *San Pietro* drew on first hand information provided by the combat cameramen who worked on it. Huston's reenactments were also described for a wider public in the year 2000 when Richard Schickel's film *Shooting War: WWII Combat Photographers* was broadcast on television in the United States. Appearing in the film was another Hollywood filmmaker, Ed Montagne, who had covered the actual fighting in the San Pietro area with combat photographers before Huston arrived. Huston incorporated some of Montagne's material in *San Pietro*. In the television film Montagne pointed out that the cameramen covering this kind of fighting could never obtain the shots seen in Huston's film. To do so would have required a cameraman to be standing upright in a firefight, when men are diving into foxholes and scrambling for their lives in ditches, or to be ahead of advancing troops. Montagne ruefully admitted that his superiors in the United States complained that if Huston could provide such dramatic combat footage, why couldn't his men?[xiii]

At a rough count, I estimate that about fifty percent of *San Pietro* is made up of reenacted scenes.

FIVE REELS AND THREE REELS

Historians have often cited a now vanished five reel version of *San Pietro* as evidence of major interference by the War Department in Huston's artistic vision. Huston himself often referred to a longer "original uncut version of the film" and these writers assumed that the "uncut" and missing five reel versions were one and the same. The scripts show that the five reel version is in fact the longer of the two now in circulation. There is no other missing version.

The first script is dated October 12 1944 and is identified as "Narration Script;" the second, dated March 16 1945, is identified as "taken from Moveola of Approved Release Print." (A moveola is a film editing machine.)

The October 12 1944 script is for five reels, which are clearly marked. Timing this script against the longer HR-2 version of the film shows that each reel, with remarkable consistency, covers approximately seven and a half minutes of film, giving a total running time of just over 38 minutes with final titles. In contrast, the release script of March 16 1945 (CR-2) is for three reels, each of approximately ten and a half minutes, giving a total running time of just over 32 minutes, including final titles.[xiv] The texts of the two scripts are almost identical. A few sentences in the earlier script have been cut from the final version and some corrections have been made in the final script to describe more accurately decisions made in relation to attacking Mount Lungo, one of the German strongpoints overlooking the town of San Pietro. There are word changes here and there and a sentence has been added to the release script about the danger to the townspeople of German mines and booby traps. Structurally the two versions are the same.

The five reels of the October 1944 version of 38 minutes, therefore, were cut to three reels for the release version of 32 minutes. But the first of these three reels of the release version contains an introduction by General Mark Clark, the commander of the American Fifth Army in the Italian campaign. Clark's introduction lasts one minute and forty-two seconds, material that is not included in the earlier five reel script. The total loss of original film from the five reel version is therefore closer to seven minutes and forty-two seconds – or one whole reel, measuring a reel at seven and a half minutes in length.

Huston began work on editing his film in the spring of 1944. It does not seem that he was under great pressure of time. No doubt some early assembly of material took place to organize the large quantity of reenacted material into sequences corresponding to stages of the real action. Special charts were made and at least one request by Huston over the summer of 1944 for an army film crew in Italy to photograph scenes in the ruined church of San Pietro. Two pages of the October 12 1944 script are dated "25 July 1944." All the other pages are dated "12 OCT 1944". That two pages carry a July date may be a clerical error or it may reflect continuity with an earlier draft prepared in July 1944. Jules Buck, Huston's chief photographer, said the editing was completed "sometime around late summer (August perhaps) 1944."[xv]

It is reasonable to infer that the first screening of Huston's film to senior army officers took place on or shortly after October 12 1944, the date of the first script, and that the script was prepared for this screening. It was only in the last months of 1944, after October 12, that comments on details in the film appear in the documents. The Undersecretary of War, Judge Robert P. Patterson, who took a close interest in the film, was particularly concerned that in one section audiences would be confused by the similarity in sound between the words "Italians" and

"battalions" (pronounced "bittalions.") The commanding general of the division involved in the battle in the Liri Valley corrected one point on the American order of battle. There were requests from several senior officers that the faces of American dead should not be identifiable. Another demand was made that shots of dead Americans "being pulled aboard a truck" should be cut. In answer to this last point, it was explained that these were shots of dead Italians, which satisfied the objection.[xvi]

These and similar points are surely typical of what might be expected in a sponsored film of this kind. But there is no hint that an even earlier version has been censored nor is there any record of a screening that disgusted some senior officers. At one screening, Judge Patterson found that the "Italian"/"bittalion" confusion was still in the script. He left his seat in the front of the theater and walked to the rear to make a fuss. It is possible Huston had this incident in mind when he wrote about the negative responses of officers at one of his screenings.[xvii]

On November 16 1944, General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, viewed the film. The officer recording this screening called it "the long version of the picture 'Battle of San Pietro.' " With the General was Ben Hibbs, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Marshall at first thought that although the film was "a very strong portrayal" of an infantry battle it was "too heavy a picture to be shown to the American public." Hibbs took a more positive view. "The picture," he argued "was just what was needed to awaken the American people." Marshall was persuaded. He approved release of the film with some changes.[xviii]

The memorandum recording this meeting is silent on the matter of reenactments, as are the other documents of the time relating to *San Pietro*. Marshall must surely have been told that the combat scenes were mostly reenacted, though it would have been obvious to him at the screening. The Army had rules against reenactments, or faking as some might call it. Yet Huston could not have worked as he did without authorization from both his own superiors and commanding generals in the field. His arrival at the front in Italy coincided with the change in policy over the kind of images of war that could be shown to the public. Prompted by Roosevelt's concern at "public complacency," censors now began to sanction pictures that focused more on the war's grim reality. *Life* magazine first showed a photograph of a dead American soldier in September 1943. By December the War Department was instructing Signal Corps operatives in Italy to provide still and motion picture images of actual combat action to show "the dangers and grimness of war."[xix]

Perhaps it was knowledge that Huston's film was in large part a Hollywood director's skillful reconstruction of combat that made the film a sensitive issue in the War Department. Added to the release print of *San Pietro*, however, was a final title card whose purpose can only have been to conceal rather than be open about the reenacted nature of the combat footage. It reads:

> "All scenes in this picture were photographed within range of enemy small arms or artillery fire. For purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before and after the actual battle of SAN PIETRO."[xx]

But the documents also make clear that the main issue between army and film industry representatives was not the film's content but its length. Experience with other films in the *Why We Fight* series produced by Frank Capra's unit had shown that audiences stayed away from feature length documentaries about the war and its origins. The film industry pressed for shorter films that could be shown in the same program as regular features. Three reels was the absolute

limit for most theaters' programs; two reels were preferred. Huston later said that the War Department's justification for shortening the film to three reels was "a proper one."[xxi]

CAPRA'S CUTS

Once Marshall decided that *San Pietro* could be released to the public, Frank Capra took charge of the film. Capra had a close relationship with Marshall and it is possible that it was he who arranged for the General to view Huston's film. Capra assigned William Hornbeck, a veteran of the *Why We Fight* series, as editor and recommended that General Mark Clark provide an introduction, which Huston said he wrote for the General. At this time, Huston himself, it seems, was working on a film on Japan – possibly *Know Your Enemy—Japan*.[xxii]

By cutting material from many parts of the five reel film, Capra and Hornbeck reduced it to three reels. A substantial portion came from an early scene setting sequence on how the small township of San Pietro was built by the peasants of the region, themselves "born masons." Significant cuts were also made to the original fifth reel showing the town coming back to life after the battle, the material here being reorganized and new shots added to it.[xxiii] Many of the remaining cuts were made by shortening action sequences, sometimes by 60 seconds, often by a shot here and another there. One cut of about twenty seconds eliminated a gun barrage. Another cut took care of a shot of dead Americans, one of whom, lying on his back waiting to be placed in a body sack, could be easily identified. In this way Capra succeeded in respecting Marshall's thoughts about shortening the battle scenes and taking care of the persistent request by senior officers that the American dead should not be recognizable. Capra insisted that to make further cuts beyond this three reel version, sometimes called "the Capra cut," was impossible.[xxiv]

It cannot fairly be said that these cuts destroyed the integrity of the film. Huston himself once said, "the body of the picture was left intact."[xxv] But they did have some significant aesthetic results. The opening of the battle is signaled by an artillery barrage that lasted throughout the night. In the longer version, this sequence takes about 40 seconds and you can count ten large flashes that have synchronous booming sound effects laid over them, along with other gun fire and minor explosions. In the release version about 18 seconds have been cut from this nighttime sequence and with them all but one of the large booming explosions. Lost is the effect of a realistic sound track, professionally laid to synchronize with picture, which gives this sequence its individuality and power; in the release version it becomes a conventional nighttime montage.

Immediately after this sequence comes "H" hour and the advance of the foot soldiers through olive orchards toward the town of San Pietro, a striking section of staged action. In the longer version specific sound effects can be heard. There is the occasional whine of a bullet mixed in with machine gun fire and other explosions. As one bullet whines close by, the camera in a quick movement catches a man who has been "hit." He falls to the ground beside a tree behind some undergrowth. But again, Capra's cuts, while significantly shortening the action scenes, have also robbed them of the specificity of the sound effects. The shot of the man falling to the ground has been retained, but we hear no bullets whining close by us in the release version.

LEFT HANDED RIFLEMEN

Bertelsen was one of the first to point out the unusually high numbers of American infantrymen who appear to be left handed. In the DVD that contains the CR-2 release version, in an introductory page of written text, a click of the remote control or computer mouse brings up shots of Americans throwing grenades with their left hands. The shots belong to a sequence describing the capture of Mt. Lungo, one of the key German strongpoints overlooking San Pietro. The narration here is the same in both versions:

> "On Mt. Lungo, however, despite bitter resistance, battalions of the 142nd – in successive waves, kept pushing upward – until in the early daylight hours of the 16th of December its foot soldiers had gained the summit and were wiping up what remained of a stubborn enemy."

The longer version of this sequence lasts just over 60 seconds. American soldiers run across open ground and over rocky terrain and scrub; men fire their rifles, one an automatic, and throw grenades as they move forward. They advance through scrub and another shot gives us a wider view of a hillside. They arrive on the summit, where some of them peer into the recently occupied German bunkers. Throughout the Americans are all right-handed.

Capra and Hornbeck cut almost two thirds of this sequence, substituting a map of the San Pietro area identifying "Mt Lungo" for the scene-setting shots of the longer version. Gone too are the wider views of the terrain that lead, in the longer version, to the arrival of the soldiers on the summit. In the few shots that are left, the man with the automatic rifle and the grenade throwers are now left-handed. Capra or Hornbeck, presumably, flipped them to maintain a sense of visual continuity with the arrival of the troops on the summit. The whole sequence runs about 22 seconds. In this instance, shortening the sequence produced the left-handed riflemen and grenade throwers.

TRUTH TELLING

Huston never admitted in public that he had staged the combat sequences of *San Pietro*. It is disconcerting to see in the original reels in the National Archive American soldiers playing dead; some of these shots are included in the final picture. Among all those who were actively engaged in filming the war in Italy there was agreement that the only way to satisfy Roosevelt's demands for grittier depictions of the fighting was through staging. Before being assigned to Italy Huston had himself assisted in a reconstructed version of the landings in North Africa, reenactments which he called "trash."[xxvi]

But a consequence of his silence when *San Pietro* was praised for what was taken to be live reality, is to sow mistrust about the truthfulness of his public statements about the film, a point that has been made by the two scholars who have done most to straighten the record.[xxvii] The film artist whose trade is in fictional realism may be less scrupulous about truth in the nonfiction form, less concerned, that is, about factual accuracy and the authenticity of his visual sources.

In his autobiography, published in 1980, Huston described a calamitous American attempt to storm the town of San Pietro with a column of tanks whose only approach was on a single narrow road easily covered by German artillery.

> "After it was over, we crept forward and photographed the disastrous results. It wasn't pretty. There was a boot here - with the foot and part of the leg still in it - a burned torso there, and other parts of what had been living human bodies scattered about. *These shots were in the original uncut version of the film*." (Italics added)

This doomed assault by American tanks appears in both versions of *San Pietro*. Huston created a vivid sequence by using shots from several different sources, locations and times. In both his narration is factual, almost detached, but with the same sardonic tone to his voice that makes the film so memorable. In both, picture, sound and narration are identical, but there are no traces in either of the boot with part of the leg still in it or the burned torso or other body parts as described in the autobiography. The sentence italicized above is mistaken, if by "the original uncut version of the film" Huston meant his longer five reel version.

In the autobiography Huston immediately followed his account of the tanks by describing a sequence he planned which never made it to the release version of his film.

> "Previous to our first attack I had interviewed – on camera – a number of men who were to take part in the battle. Some of the things they said were quite eloquent: they were fighting for what the future might hold for them, their country and the world.
>
> Later you saw these same men dead. ... *In the uncut version I had their living voices speaking over their dead faces about their hopes for the future.* … we later decided not to include this material."[xxviii] (Italics added)

The historian Barnouw along with many other writers have taken Huston's word that this sequence, like the one about the tanks and the body parts, existed in the longer five reel version of *San Pietro*. The italicized sentence is explicit on this point; in the context the same "uncut version" is clearly meant. But again Huston is mistaken. A sequence with GIs' "*living voices speaking over their dead faces*" does not appear in the longer five reel version of the film.

In both these cases, then, it seems that Huston either suffered a memory lapse or intentionally set out to confuse, if not deceive his readers. In the first case, concerning the tanks, we have something to go on. In the National Archives there is a reel dated December 18, 1943 titled "Capture of San Pietro" which is made up of authentic actuality footage taken by Signal Corps cameramen on the day American troops entered the town. Among the shots on this reel is one that pans down from a ruined American tank to what could be a boot or a human foot severed at the ankle and other remains, though the details are hard to make out. It is described in the Archive's summary listing like this: "CU, MS, knocked-out M-4; dead soldier nearby." Several shots from this reel appear in Huston's film, though not the one that pans down to the boot/foot. These scenes were probably taken by some of the cameramen working under Montagne who may have gone on to join Huston's team, and it is likely that Huston viewed the unedited reel along with all the other material he'd assembled when he returned to the United States and began work on *San Pietro*. Perhaps this Signal Corps reel, then, was what he meant by "original uncut version."[xxix]

The question of what happened to Huston's sequence of soldiers' "living voices speaking over their dead faces," if it ever existed, may have a similar explanation. Both versions of *San Pietro* contain striking close ups of living American soldiers' faces and shots of dead American soldiers, of bodies being placed in sacks and scenes at a cemetery of graves being filled and tags

nailed to wooden crosses. The Archive reels contain more of the same; in one reel in particular there are several shots of soldiers' bodies, some laid out on the ground and some being lifted into shrouds so that their "dead faces," easily recognizable, are brought close to the camera lens as described by Huston in his autobiography. One shot from this Archive reel showing a dead soldier's body laid out on the ground is included in the longer five reel version of *San Pietro*. His face can be recognized. As mentioned earlier, Capra cut it after the screening for General Marshall. Huston may at one time have considered using the other shots on the same Archive reel to create a sequence that would have given some kind of a voice to the men who lost their lives in the war. Since he arrived on the last day of the fighting in the San Pietro area, however, it is hard to understand how he could have carried out his idea in the way he described in his book. He later admitted that such a sequence would have been "unbearable" and he thought better of it.[xxx] In this instance, then, as in the case of the tank and the boot, in writing of an "uncut version" Huston may have been thinking of the unedited Archive reel. If anything resembling his description existed in roughcut form, it never made it to the longer version. It was Huston's decision not to go forward with it. If this was censorship, it was self-imposed. In both the five reel and the release versions, over the cemetery shots that mark the end of the combat footage, it is only Huston's voice we hear in a brief but eloquent tribute: "The lives lost were precious lives, to their country, to their loved ones – and to the men themselves."[xxxi]

ART AND FACTS

From this study, then, I conclude that we must accept that there is no other earlier, more original and longer version of *San Pietro* than the one we already have; which is the 38 minute HR-2 version that has now been in circulation for at least twenty years. If this version turns out not to match Huston's "uncut version" it is because Huston misled his readers in writing like this. It would therefore seem wisest for us to treat with caution what Huston said and wrote about the making of the film and to accept that the two versions now in circulation are the original five reel and the three reel release versions.

San Pietro is a compilation film. Huston's artistic achievement is displayed in the skill with which he wove together images from different sources, times and places, many of them shot under his own supervision, as many by others for other, general use. The result can best be compared with an epic French history painting of the nineteenth century, titled, perhaps, in Huston's own phrase, "the passing battle." It may not have been the film the Army originally expected of him or the one he originally intended to make. Huston did not take kindly to the orders he received in Italy from Colonel Gillette, the Signals Corps officer to whom he reported.[xxxii] His animus against the Army is evident in his later writing and interviews. He could list a number of grievances from this first encounter with a senior officer in the field to his dealings with Army bureaucrats in Washington and the Army's refusal to release *Let There Be Light*, his third film about shell-shocked servicemen taken at a psychiatric hospital in New York in 1945. By the time he came to write his autobiography these grievances made him an appealing anti-establishment figure in the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the Nixon era.

It is also evident, however, that Huston was a difficult and at times offensive person to work with, a man prone to exaggeration and falsehoods in his talk and one who would resort to bluff and "Patton-like bluster" to get his own way.[xxxiii]

Many well known World War II nonfiction films used reenactments. Why, then, did Huston never admit that his combat scenes in *San Pietro* were fabricated? There would have

been no shame in doing so. Technically, they were skillfully executed and edited. So authentic, indeed, did they seem that shots from *San Pietro* were reused in other fictional war films like *The Story of GI Joe.*

San Pietro, however, was unlike other American World War II propaganda films in the personal tone of its narrative voice, literally Huston's own. This made it seem much closer to an eyewitness report, in which the moral authority of the reporter guarantees the authenticity of the whole, pictures and sound effects included. Even if the visual effects were artfully constructed, the words are factual, intense and moving. As spoken by Huston himself, their power has led some writers to compare *San Pietro* to the syndicated columns of Ernie Pyle who was reporting from the same battle front when Huston arrived in Italy.[xxxiv]

To his critics, Huston's failure to acknowledge the fabrications in *San Pietro* and his unreliable statements about the making of it cast a shadow over the film. Perhaps Huston thought his moral position in voicing his own script would be compromised if it were widely known that the combat scenes were faked. Perhaps he did not think it mattered anyway, considering the reenactments that appeared in other films. The Army itself did not seem to hold it against him. As Huston often pointed out, after he'd finished *San Pietro* the Army rewarded him by promoting him from Captain to Major.[xxxv]

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[i] John Huston, An Open Book, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, 107, 109; Peter Maslowski, Armed With Cameras: The American Photographers of World War II, New York, The Free Press, 1993.

[ii] Huston, 119; see also "The Courage of the Men, An interview with John Huston" in Robert Hughes, ed. Film Book 2: films of peace and war, New York, Grove Press, 1962, 28; David Culbert, ed. Film and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History, Vol. III, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1990, document 111; "Revisiting the Recordings of Wars Past: Remembering the Documentary Trilogy of John Huston," by Gary Edgerton in Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience, Gaylyn Syudlar and David Desser, ed., Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1993, 42.

[iii] According to Charles De Arman, Librarian, Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Reference Branch, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS), National Archives, in an email of July 26, 2005, the first film in this series, Combat Report No. 1, was The Liberation Of Rome. If this had been Huston's original assignment, presumably it was taken over by someone else.

[iv] Culbert, documents 68-114; chapter 3 of Maslowski's Armed With Cameras is a detailed study of the genesis of San Pietro and of the battle itself based on exhaustive research with eyewitness accounts of the combat cameramen involved.

[v] Culbert, documents 88 and 114. Recording timings on VHS and DVD equipment viewed on a home television monitor is not as accurate a method as one could wish, but it was the only one available to me. I hope that others who are interested in this film will correct or add to this report. I have not discovered how the longer VHS version entered the market. Was its provenance Huston himself?

[vi] Hughes, 24.

[vii] Culbert, documents 86-114; Maslowski, 76-78. The small town of San Pietro formed part of a German defensive line in Italy that blocked the entrance to the valley and continued across the Abruzzi Mountains to the east coast. The Allied armies faced intensive fighting for each

strongpoint as they battled their way northward from one German defensive line to the next. The series of battles for control of the Liri Valley culminated in the one for Monte Cassino, which was not taken until May 1944. Rome fell soon after. It seems that Huston came to Italy thinking he was to make a film about the impact of war upon Italian citizens. For this reason, he at first disputed the order to make a combat film that he was given by his superior officer in the Signal Corps, a Colonel Gillette. But Washington confirmed the order for a combat film. It's possible Huston preserved something of his original purpose by including lengthy scenes of the villagers of San Pietro returning to their homes after the fighting. Many of these scenes were cut for the release version of the film. Calling it San Pietro might have been a compromise title. The shorter title suggests placing the emphasis on the impact of the fighting on civilians rather than on military strategy. But in fact San Pietro had been so badly destroyed by the fighting that most of the villagers abandoned it. According to Maslowski, 94, it was Gillette who completed The Liberation of Rome, a "more genuine" film than San Pietro "but also much duller."

[viii] Maslowski, 90, for a scene in the last part of the film showing a woman supposedly killed in San Pietro by a German booby trap who was in fact killed in another town altogether, one that was already in Allied hands, which mistakenly was bombed by an American plane. See note 23 below.

[ix] Maslowski, 74-94; Lance Bertelsen, "San Pietro and the 'Art' of War," Southwest Review Spring 1989, 230-256. Bertelsen's essay was reprinted in Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, vol. 75, ed. Jennifer Gariepy, Detroit, Gale, 1998, 266-74, under "Ernie Pyle."

[x] Hughes, 26.

[xi] Erik Barnouw, Documentary: a history of the non-fiction film, Oxford University Press, 2nd Revised Edition, 1993 (first published 1974); Richard M. Barsam, Nonfiction Film, A Critical History, Revised and Expanded, Indiana University Press, 1992 (first published by E.P. Dutton, 1973). The quotation is on p. 231. Roger Manvell, Films and the Second World War, J. M. Dent, London, 1974, 181.

[xii] Maslowski, 89. Copies of the cards themselves are printed in Culbert, documents 68-83. Maslowski, 65-74, discusses War Department policy against staging combat photography.

[xiii] I am grateful to Richard Schickel for sending me a transcript of his interview with Ed Montagne, which was recorded on May 19, 1999.

[xiv] Document 113 of Culbert gives the length of the reels in 35 millimeter feet, 982, 936, 991.

[xv] Hughes, 27.

[xvi] Culbert, documents 89, 90, 99, 103.

[xvii] Culbert, document 103; Huston, 119.

[xviii] Culbert, document 92.

[xix] George H. Roeder, Jr., The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993. Life Magazine's photograph is on page 34; Maslowski, 71-94.

[xx] Bertelsen, 254, calls this title card "patently false."

[xxi] Hughes, 28.

[xxii] Culbert, document 94, 97, 98, 102; Hughes, 28, 29.

[xxiii] In both versions there's a short sequence in which men dig a woman's body out of the "wreckage" of a town with American soldiers looking on. The woman's distraught husband (a surmise, this; the Archive card describes him as "grief stricken Italian civilian") holds up his bloodied hand and is restrained by his fellow townspeople. In the longer version the scene is shown as part of the destruction of San Pietro caused by the fighting. As reconstituted in the

release version two shots have been added, one of an American soldier defusing a German booby trap in San Pietro and another of an explosion in a town that does not appear to be San Pietro. A new line of narration has also been added: "The townspeople were warned against enemy mines and booby traps which were in the process of being cleared." Consequently, the woman's death is now attributed to a German booby trap. See note 8 above. The soldier defusing the German booby trap is from the National Archive reel 111-ADC-10395, dated December 18, 1943, titled "Capture of San Pietro." Scenes of the dead woman's body is on reel 111-ADC-663, dated February 22 1944.

[xxiv] Culbert, document 100.

[xxv] Edgerton, in Studlar and Desser, 42. Huston is quoted from a television program broadcast in Los Angeles in 1981 "John Huston: A War Remembered."

[xxvi] Huston, 103.

[xxvii] Culbert, xi, xix-xx; Maslowski, 74-94.

[xxviii] Huston, 110.

[xxix] NWDNM(m)-111-ADC – 10395; CU = close up; MS = medium shot; M-4 = type of tank.

[xxx] Studlar and Desser's Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience, is a collection of articles about and interviews with Huston. His comments on interviews he made with young American soldiers and how he planned to use their words over shots of their dead bodies are on page 207 and come from an interview he gave to a French magazine in 1970. "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 …" These words suggest that Huston himself decided against the idea. In another interview given in 1973 he said "some of the soldiers with whom I had dialogued during the making of the film had been subsequently killed in action. I had used their voices over later shots of their dead bodies covered with blankets, and it was thought that this would have upset their families should they see the film." ("Talking with John Huston," by Gene D. Phillips, in John Huston Interviews, edited by Robert Emmet Long, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001, 38) In the autobiography he described filming the corpses of GIs in such a way that their dead faces were brought into close-up in the camera lens. The Archive reel containing these shots is 111-ADC–663, dated February 22 1944. Signal Corps cameramen would not normally have taken such shots, knowing they would not be used.

[xxxi] The British writer Eric Ambler was with Huston and his chief cameraman, Jules Buck, on the day the Germans withdrew from San Pietro. Huston's bravado that day nearly cost them their lives. Buck took some shots of soldiers waiting to advance into the town who were keen to have their pictures taken. Ambler wrote that these shots appeared in the film: "it was the only part of the film that moved me when I saw it; I knew that all those smiling young men had long been dead." Buck was using an Eyemo for these close-up faces; they would have been silent shots. Eric Ambler, Here Lies: An Autobiography, New York, Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1986, 201.

[xxxii] See note 7.

[xxxiii] Lawrence Grobel, The Hustons, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989 248-253; Maslowski, 83-94; Ambler 200-204; Roeder, 96.

[xxxiv] For Bertelsen, Huston's San Pietro and Pyle's column "The Death of Captain Waskow" were "two of the great documentary works of art to emerge from World War II."

[xxxv] There's another possible explanation, one that is simpler and more in keeping with Huston's character. Huston began work on his film at the Astoria Studios on Long Island, lodging for a time at the St Regis hotel just off Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. To the many women he courted he could present himself as a romantic hero fresh from the Italian battlefield, with mud on his boots

to prove it. To one attractive seventeen year old, according to her later account, “John talked about San Pietro, and how he had followed soldiers into battle. He described one scene where soldiers were darting behind trees and he said, ‘I found myself following one man and hoping that he would be shot, because then I would have a good shot.’ “ How could he admit it was faked? Grobel, 254.

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