

## MANIPULATION AND MEMORY

in John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*\*

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In May 1945, a few weeks after the war in Europe ended, James Agee, writing in *The Nation*, praised John Huston's just-released documentary, *The Battle of San Pietro*, as the best war movie he had ever seen. That the filmmakers were themselves combat veterans explained, for Agee, "how they all lived through the shooting of the film; how deep inside the fighting some of it was made; how well they evidently knew what to expect."<sup>1</sup> However, we learned years ago – although many film critics and viewers still seem unaware – that Huston and his crew were not actually present during the fighting that destroyed the village of San Pietro Infine in December 1943. Huston reconstructed the battle and restaged and filmed the combat scenes over the course of the following months, inviting his viewers to assume that they were witnessing a real battle as it unfolded, and in subsequent interviews and his own memoirs, he maintained the falsehood.

The story of Huston's manipulation is not new. Lance Bertelsen first uncovered it in an award-winning 1989 article, and Mark Harris recounts it a recent book.<sup>2</sup> Italian historians and film scholars have provided even more detailed evidence of how Huston actually made the film. That story is fascinating but, in some sense, beside the point, because Bertelsen

himself, even while exposing the false pretenses under which Huston presented *San Pietro*, nevertheless praises it as "one of the most harrowing visions of modern infantry warfare ever filmed: a documentary that conveys the raw, repetitive grind of battle and the grim vulnerability of the men who fought it with a respect and bitterness unprecedented in the history of film."<sup>3</sup> It is a just assessment, and it pushes the historical inquiry into the film forward, to its cultural reception, rather than strictly backward, to its historical reconstruction.

The Italian reception of Huston's film is, in particular, the most striking example of this shift in emphasis. *San Pietro*, despite its inaccuracies and falsifications, has come to represent the limit of *meaning* to a war, the point at which futility becomes palpable. An abiding sentiment of pacifism in the Italian public can be traced to this single film. In Italy, the image of the destruction of San Pietro Infine, a village of about 1,400 people first settled in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, has become inseparable from Huston's cinematic rendering of it.<sup>4</sup> We often think, as Plato did, that representation is always secondary, a bad copy of reality, but *The Battle of San Pietro* represents war more effectively to Italians than does the lived experience of World War II itself. The film's portrayal of the Allied campaign has incorporated but then altered and superseded the actual memories of the war and its aftermath. Survivors of the carnage remember Huston's depiction of their own experiences rather than what actually happened. Italians put themselves *into* his movie at times and places they don't belong. And they put Huston into their biographies where and when he was absent. The citizens of San Pietro (*Sampietresi*) have used their destroyed village and Huston's film in the service of what Svetlana Boym called "reflective nostalgia," a pattern of "longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."<sup>5</sup> Huston created a palimpsest, erasing and adding, that produced, not a history, but a unifying memorial experience.

That experience of the film captures a deep emotional conflict. Some of the most destructive fighting of the Italian campaign took place following the Allied landing at Salerno in September 1943, as the troops making their way along Highway 6 through the Liri Valley toward Rome came under assault from well-entrenched German forces in the mountains surrounding them. When the "liberation" of the village of San Pietro Infine came, it was and still is

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associated in Italian memory with other prominent symbols of the war's devastation, such as the Allied bombing of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century abbey at nearby Montecassino during the same campaign to take Rome. To the Allies, liberation of a city signaled unalloyed gain, both moral and material. To Italians, liberation signaled moral gain, generally, but also cataclysmic material loss. For Americans, witnessing the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, which were completed in 1973, was a culturally depleting experience. Nearly three decades of this material presence had accumulated into a powerful sense of identity. The Italians had accumulated nearly three millennia of such material presences. Huston's film captures that ambivalence: the gratitude of the Italians for liberation from a brutal Nazi occupation, yet their resentment over the destruction caused by the combat itself.

In Italy, no media discussion of Huston fails to mention *La Battaglia di San Pietro*.<sup>6</sup> The film figures prominently not just in retrospectives of the director's work and of cinema related to war – including a festival of war movies shot in and around the village of San Pietro Infine itself – but also in museum exhibits and general commemorations of World War II. In the 1990s, Huston's film even played a role in helping to fend off Silvio Berlusconi's attempts to rehabilitate wartime fascists in the service of his political coalition. The film continues to exert historical agency. Manipulation has become memory, which itself has become renewed manipulation, producing an Italian "history" of war and peace that is both false and just.

During World War II, rather than directly opening a second front in Nazi-occupied France, Allied efforts focused first on driving German and Italian forces out of North Africa and then mounting an invasion of Sicily in July 1943. Defeat in Sicily led the Italian government to depose and arrest fascist leader Benito Mussolini later that month. His successor, General Pietro Badoglio, withdrew Italy from the war in September as the Allies landed at Salerno. They faced fierce opposition from the Germans, who poured in further troops across the Brenner Pass in the north and staged a rescue of Mussolini from prison. Although Mussolini established the Italian Social Republic under Nazi tutelage in a northern enclave, most Italians were eager to see the end of fascism and war. They impatiently awaited liberation by the Allies, but the

campaign to take Rome from the south was slow and uncertain – literally an uphill battle against determined German resistance.

In 1943, the US Army Signal Corps commissioned then Captain John Huston to film a documentary intended to convey to Americans what their soldiers were fighting for in Italy – and why it was taking so long. Huston, whose previous credits included *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), produced a film that seemed to portray the horror of war too vividly for his army superiors, however. They refused to release *The Battle of San Pietro* for general public viewing until the war in Europe was nearly over, and only after extensive cuts.<sup>7</sup> The film that resulted – too late to serve its intended purpose – also presented a number of inaccurate images, aside from the re-enacting of the battle scenes, a fact revealed much later. It shows, for example, crowds of inhabitants welcoming the American liberators. In truth, many Italians had fled, and those who remained by the time Huston's crew arrived on the scene had to be reassembled to act out their welcome.

By the same token, the film alludes to some factual elements of the Allied war effort that today's Italians would prefer not to remember. The Americans' difficulty in scaling the mountains under German fire led to a command for all of the available resources of the Fifth Army – including artillery and tanks, as depicted in the film -- to be trained on San Pietro Infine, effectively destroying it to save it. The battle itself extended over more than a week, from 8-17 December 1943, during which the village was constantly pounded as entrenched German forces continued to fire on the approaching infantry troops. But Huston's film then falsely portrays the initial rebuilding of the village after its liberation, signaling a kind of cultural restitution and reintegration. The village never was rebuilt. Instead, a new town was erected nearby, and San Pietro Infine was left as a ruin to commemorate the war's destruction, like a fracture between history and memory. The only functioning building left there is a museum, with a poster of John Huston.

### **Manipulation in the presentation of *San Pietro***

To acknowledge that the combat scenes in *San Pietro* were reconstructed after the fact is not to denigrate the quality of the film itself or to suggest it does not deserve to be considered a "documentary" – a genre

that few would claim represents an unmediated reality.<sup>8</sup> Jan Mieszkowski has pointed out that even today, when

anyone with a computer or a smartphone can access combat footage from around the world...the spectacle of warfare remains curiously uninformative...News outlets that have shared battlefield videos shot from soldiers' helmet cams have found it necessary to curate this material extensively, cutting it and interweaving it with oral or written narratives to the point that the "raw" footage becomes anything but.<sup>9</sup>

Artistry, rather than history, makes *San Pietro* such a forceful work; the act of shaping, not of recording, explains the film's enduring impact on Italian popular memory of the war. Huston's aesthetic techniques merit, therefore, serious historical attention, for they reveal how a powerful art form like cinema both creates and destroys reality.

#### A Film at war with itself

The manipulation of reality in Huston's *San Pietro* starts before any footage from the village or any combat even appears on the screen. Although not included in every version of the documentary available nowadays on the internet, Huston's film began with a prologue by General Mark W. Clark, commander of the Fifth Army in Italy, explaining the purpose of the Italian campaign – the ostensible topic of Huston's film. Clark's remarks constitute a manipulation of the facts as most historians have come to understand them and the truth that seemed apparent to many, including the soldiers themselves, at the time. Clark stands outside, looking a bit ill at ease, and begins to recite, out of the corner of his mouth: "In 1943 it was one of our strategic aims to draw as many German forces as possible from the Russian front and the French coastal areas and to contain them on the Italian peninsula, while liberating as much of Italy as might be possible with the means at our disposal."<sup>10</sup> Was this the reason US soldiers were in Italy? Had Clark assimilated the film to a political aim, or had the film assimilated Clark to an aesthetic one?

By December 1943, when Allied forces were slogging through the Liri Valley in the mud and winter rain, they had good reason to wonder why they were in Italy at all. Mussolini's fascist cronies had arrested the dictator in July. Badoglio signed the armistice in

September. The Italian army disintegrated; soldiers headed home; the Italian fleet escaped capture by the Germans and surrendered to the British at Malta. Italy was out of the war. As John Griggs writes, "with the fall of Sicily and the signature of the armistice, was there any point in going on" to invade mainland Italy?<sup>11</sup> Clark's notion that the Italian campaign was drawing German troops from elsewhere disregards the fact that it also required Allied troops that could have been used elsewhere – namely in attacking Germany through France. Were the Allies "containing" the Germans on the peninsula, or was it the other way around?

Once the decision to invade Italy was made, did it make any sense to approach Rome from the south, through valleys observed and defended from looming mountains? After all, nearly every invader since Hannibal and his elephants had approached it from the north. "Anyone holding a topographical map of Italy could sense a problem in this plan," as Tim Brady put it. "The geography of the country made it obvious that the German defenders would hold the high ground and all the mountain passes."<sup>12</sup>

Clark's prologue ignores such questions, however, as it focuses in on the battle at hand: "San Pietro, in the Fifth Army sector, was the key to the Liri Valley. We knew it, and the enemy knew it. We had to take it, even though the immediate cost would be high. We took it, and the cost in relation to the later advance was not excessive."<sup>13</sup> Why does Clark distort the cost of the campaign? "The battle for San Pietro is a case study of a Pyrrhic victory," explains Peter Maslowski, "since the Allies achieved minimal gains at an enormous cost both to the fighting forces and to the villagers...Allied casualties were staggering."<sup>14</sup> By the time Rome was liberated on 4 June 1944, the toll of Allied casualties – killed, wounded, or missing – reached over 43,000 (German losses were estimated at 38,000).<sup>15</sup> At San Pietro alone, there were some 1,200 military casualties, including 150 deaths – and a similar number of civilians killed.<sup>16</sup>

And why was capturing Rome considered so crucial? President Roosevelt, in his speech announcing the fall of Rome to the US public on 5 June 1944, acknowledged the fact that taking the Italian capital was hardly a military necessity: "From a strictly military standpoint," he pointed out, "we had long ago accomplished certain of the main objectives of our Italian campaign -- the control of the islands -- the major islands -- the control of the sea lanes of the

Mediterranean to shorten our combat and supply lines, and the capture of the airports, such as the great airports of Foggia, south of Rome, from which we have struck telling blows on the continent." Rome was important not for its strategic value but for its symbolic value. "The first of the Axis capitals is now in our hands," declared the president. "One up and two to go!"<sup>17</sup> Western culture had been rescued from the mercenary Huns. Civilization was being restored. Historical destiny was resuming.

*The Battle of San Pietro* was commissioned to justify the enormous sacrifice of the Allied troops, a fact that lay before everyone at the time. Huston understood that political aim, and Clark's prologue certifies it. Yet the film itself undermines the spirit of its own prologue. It forgoes any of the upbeat, morale-building tone of its successful predecessors, such as William Wyler's *Memphis Belle* (1944). The film, like the Italians, is caught between two impulses, between patriotism and pathos. Bertelsen is right that the film's vision is harrowing, and its narration, composed and delivered by Huston, is bitter and ironic. "Still badly shaken by the loss of life he had seen in Italy," writes Harris, Huston "had chosen to make a documentary that was true to his own emotional experience, a film that emphasized the terrible cost of the Allied campaign in Italy rather than its strategic importance, tactics, or ultimate success."<sup>18</sup> In his memoirs, Huston was scathing in his criticism of the military decisions taken at San Pietro – especially the attempt to send tanks up an exposed, narrow road where stone-walled terraces provided insuperable barriers. Thus, it is ironic that the ultimate manipulation in Clark's prologue is the work of Huston himself. For all his doubts about the Italian campaign -- and the fact that the film itself offers the clearest refutation of the general's claim that the cost was "not excessive" -- it was Huston who wrote the text that Clark recited. The director composed a draft of what he thought the general might want to say. Huston assumed that Clark would revise it. Instead, the general memorized and spoke exactly what the director had written.<sup>19</sup> The prologue, in other words, presents the military voice and vision against which the film subsequently argues.

It's possible that Huston was answering a pragmatic need, as well, by stamping his film with Clark's imprimatur, particularly after having shown the original, longer version of the film, which lacked the prologue, to a hostile audience of Army brass in the summer of 1944, who summarily labeled *San*

*Pietro* "anti-war." Huston writes, "I pompously replied that if I ever made a picture that was pro-war, I hoped someone would take me out and shoot me. The guy looked at me as if he were considering just that."<sup>20</sup> General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, did ultimately support the project, but only provisionally, arguing that a realistic portrayal of battle would be useful at least for training purposes. The version finally released to the public in July 1945 was about 32 minutes long.<sup>21</sup> It was widely and favorably reviewed, in *Time*, the *New York Post*, and *The Nation*. All the reviewers seemed to believe that they were seeing actual footage of the battle, rather than reenactments, an impression that Huston -- in interviews, for example -- did nothing to dispel.<sup>22</sup> It was therefore certified as characteristically American history.

But Huston had embedded in the film an Italian perspective he thought crucial, a woe and a devastation that his own prologue could not upstage. It is a perspective that might have come from some cognitive dissonance he was experiencing at the time, even when he was drafting Clark's prologue. Huston had already been told by his Signal Corps supervisor in Italy, Colonel Melvin Gillette, that his narration for the film was too preoccupied with the goal of liberating Italian towns such as San Pietro. As Gillette wrote to Huston in October 1944, "most prefer to think that the objectives of the war are far greater than liberating towns of an enemy country."<sup>23</sup> The colonel was asking Huston to promote grander patriotic causes because to Gillette—and this detail is most telling—Italy was still an "enemy" country, more than a year after the armistice agreement took Italy proper out of the war and provoked its occupation by German troops. Italians were not seen as allies. Huston's *San Pietro*, however, remains sympathetic to those Italian civilians who were dangled in various towns by ongoing military maneuvers, and that sensitivity was quite rare among Allied military officials and rank-and-file soldiers, who even after liberation often treated Italians with disdain.<sup>24</sup> How could a director capture such a fraught experience as the one that "liberated" Italians were enduring? While answering the concerns of propaganda, Huston was simultaneously resisting the prevailing impulse to render the Italian experience in wholly American terms. The despair cannot be transmuted to American historiography.

That dissonance in Huston only grew with time. If bound strictly by the facts, which memoirs and interviews conducted by diligent scholars have revealed, we would have to accept that Huston was not even present at the principal battle for San Pietro, which began on 8 December 1943. Huston and his crew apparently arrived in the zone of operations by the 14<sup>th</sup>, in time, yes, to have filmed some of the actual battle, but, when he reported to Major General Fred L. Walker, commander of the 36th Division, Huston was told that it was too dangerous to accompany an infantry attack, because his camera operators would come under enemy fire.<sup>25</sup> Huston drove to San Pietro Infine only after the Germans had begun their retreat, most likely on 17 December. He was accompanied by his colleagues Eric Ambler and Jules Buck, a film crew, and an interpreter. Amber, whose account from his memoir is generally considered more reliable than Huston's own (despite the title, *Here Lies Eric Ambler*), recalls that, while driving in a jeep towards San Pietro, they came across a company of soldiers from Texas waiting to pursue the retreating Germans. The soldiers asked that their pictures be taken, so Buck filmed a number of close-ups. Huston then included these shots in his "documentary." Ambler reports that "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."<sup>26</sup> Ambler's reaction to the dispiriting specter of loss and futility, captured for this team member all too factually in only one segment, is what Huston had sought and had achieved through all the fabrications to which Ambler, knowing them to be such, could not respond. Italians could, though. Loss and futility were daily inundations. The goal of creating that reaction throughout the film possibly explains Huston's refusal to dispel the "documentary" myth. The film was, to this extent, an honest documentary of Ambler's response writ large, beyond American sensibilities (and certainly beyond the film crew's). To Huston, it was a necessary response that the facts of history threatened to erase. It had to be made real.

#### Pathos among the ruins

Good portions of the film nonetheless stand the test of documentary footage. Although he did not film the actual battle, Huston seems to have been among the first to enter the ruins of San Pietro Infine, following the German withdrawal, but before army engineers

had finished checking for booby-traps and mines -- and, indeed, before the Germans had ceased shelling the ascent to the village to protect their retreat.<sup>27</sup> So when Huston's crew arrived at San Pietro there was still a risk of intermittent shelling and attacks by snipers -- a risk Huston chose to ignore. As he and his colleagues climbed the terraced hill towards the town, they came under mortar fire and dove into a ditch for protection. Huston insisted that Buck film the attack. Ambler described the task as "attempting the impossible," according to "rule one for makers of war films: shots of bursting high explosives are only convincing when they have been properly set up by a good studio Special Effects department." As a result, "the only usable film that Jules shot during that minute showed the earth spinning round the sky as he tried to anticipate wherever the next ear-shattering blast would come from and at the same time keep his head out of the hail of earth and splintered stone that came with it." Huston subsequently "used this spinning in his film as cutaway footage instead of conventional optical dissolves."<sup>28</sup>

But many experiences simply could not be filmed, and so, in the tradition of so much war documentary, they had to be recreated, and, in that margin between reporting and representing, artifice found moral expression. The next day, Huston and company returned to San Pietro, assured by army intelligence that the way was clear. All that was left of San Pietro, in Ambler's words, were "mounds of rubble," with "one or two stumps of wall still standing, but nothing, not even the church, that could be identified as a particular building." As Huston was directing Buck to set up his camera for an establishing shot from what was left of the main *piazza*, the crew once again came under attack by German howitzers. They sheltered in the crypt of a destroyed church with six exhausted villagers -- an elderly man, two middle-aged women, and three children.<sup>29</sup> Although his film includes scenes of *Sampietresi* villagers welcoming their American liberators, in Ambler's account, which Harris also credits, these were the only civilians Huston encountered in San Pietro before he and his crew made their escape back to the jeep -- and they were not filmed. The next day Huston was safe in Naples, where, according to Ambler, they "spent a boozy night" with a visiting Humphrey Bogart.<sup>30</sup> Huston did return to San Pietro Infine to do additional filming, but not until the middle of January 1944, a month

after the German retreat. As Harris concludes, the “idea to document the celebratory liberation of a town with villagers timidly emerging to cheer on the American troops was a fantasy.”<sup>31</sup> Yet those six villagers caught with the crew had suffered the terror of liberation in Italy, and Huston did film that experiential reality in his recreation.

By the time he composed his life story, that experience, having grown as general feeling rather than as specific fact, was translated into Huston’s own memory, or at least into his willed memory of the liberation. As Harris explains, Huston used his autobiography to embellish his unsuccessful attempt to film the actual liberation of San Pietro, and “he invented a joyous scene after the battle had been won – ‘What a welcome the people of San Pietro gave us! Whole cheeses and bottles of wine appeared from God knows where.’”<sup>32</sup> We know from both U.S. and Italian sources how false this claim is. The movie itself belies it. According to interviews with surviving residents of San Pietro Infine, the Germans had abandoned the town during the night of 15-16 December. The first Americans to arrive were a small patrol of soldiers who stopped by on the 17<sup>th</sup> to verify that the Germans were gone and then continued on into the Valle della Morte. The appearance of Huston, Buck, and Ambler on the outskirts of the town apparently failed to attract the attention of whoever was hiding in the *grotte* – the caves that the locals had dug into the hillside to hide from the Germans and the bombing. The next morning, 18 December, the first substantial numbers of Americans arrived, noted first by local children who ran back to spread the word, at which point the *Sampietresi* left the caves to greet their liberators. Far from saving hidden stores of wine and cheese, people were near starvation – subsisting on dried figs, constantly short of water, and crawling with lice from lack of sanitation. In their hungry state they were fascinated by these soldiers who were constantly chewing but never swallowing anything – their first acquaintance with gum.<sup>33</sup>

Did Huston simply lie? William Allen, a photographer from the Associated Press who accompanied the U.S. soldiers as they entered San Pietro on the 18<sup>th</sup>, confirms this basic account in a letter he wrote to his wife that same day, but his report turns from confirmation of the horror to confirmation of the joy, substantiating not the facts of wine and cheese but the undeniable feeling of gratitude: precisely the devastated Italian memory

that Huston had sought to capture in the film. “Honey, you have never seen, nor could you imagine, such a sight...not one building had been spared,” writes Allen. He makes no mention of John Huston or a camera crew. The facts exclude them. But then Allen says he walked with the soldiers through the town to the outskirts, encountering only an elderly woman on the way, and Huston’s falsified voice takes on a strange memorial reality:

There was a ravine here that led out of town and I saw a couple of Italian men standing there. I went up to try to talk to them and saw a small opening in the side of the hill. As I came up, a little boy came out of the opening and in a few minutes he was followed by several others. It went on this way until there were about 250 people along a path that led from this small hole. They had been living in caves all together to get out of the terrific pounding that had been necessary to give the town to get the Germans out. When we arrived, it was the first time they had been in the daylight for days. There were tears in their eyes as they recognized us as Americans. Old men kissed my hands. One old woman hung on my arm and cried. I never felt so helpless in my life. There was nothing I could do for them.<sup>34</sup>

#### Factual sources of the *San Pietro* footage

Having established that Huston was not present at the battle for San Pietro Infine, historians and film scholars have sought to understand how he created such a realistic portrayal of combat and where exactly he obtained such convincing footage. In recent years, Bertelsen’s pioneering work has been supplemented by Harris’s book and by the painstaking research of Italian scholars, most of it unknown outside Italy.

From his study of the unedited footage stored in the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, Bertelsen found that several scenes in the finished version of *San Pietro* “appear on two or more reels and indicate that once a scene was set up, several cameramen would record the action simultaneously from different angles.” He describes the creation of one scene where soldiers toss smoke grenades into a farm building in order to force out any enemy troops who might be hiding there:

During one sequence, in which a camera continued to roll after the “action” had stopped, we see a soldier in a knit cap come into the frame and attempt to kick a smoking grenade away from the door while the troops stand around watching. Behind the building a second cameraman is visible, and as the soldier who kicked the grenade moves away from the building a third cameraman comes into view on the right.<sup>35</sup>

Bertelsen’s work also benefited from his interview with Captain Joel Westbrook, a survivor of the battle. Westbrook was a fellow officer and close friend of Captain Henry Waskow, a company commander in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and the subject of the most famous dispatch by an American journalist during World War II, Ernie Pyle’s “The Death of Captain Waskow.”<sup>36</sup>

The verisimilitude of Huston’s battle scenes owes much to the fact that Captain Westbrook was assigned as a consultant to the director. “He recalls that he and Huston would go over maps together, with Westbrook describing parts of the battle and Huston asking if they could be recreated. Huston would then be assigned troops and move to the designated areas” – not necessarily, as we shall see, where the actual combat took place.<sup>37</sup> Any shortcomings in the realistic nature of the battle scenes owe to Hollywood conventions rather than to any memory lapses on Westbrook’s part. As Bertelsen explains, “the careful viewer will notice a remarkable number of left-handed soldiers, and even a bolt action rifle with the bolt on the left side. These shots have been reversed following the Hollywood prescription that the good guys must always attack in the same direction so as not to confuse the audience.”<sup>38</sup> In a longer version that began circulating after the publication of Bertelsen’s essay, the reverse shots have been corrected, some additional material is included, the order of some of the shots is rearranged, and, oddly, General Clark’s prologue is missing.<sup>39</sup> There are fewer left-handed grenade throwers, but still many shots suggesting that, even though under heavy fire from the Germans, more than one cameraman was able to get into a trench far ahead of advancing US troops and then film a “soldier already in perfect focus jumping in after him.”<sup>40</sup>

But perhaps more striking for how it reveals the assimilation of war to film during this period— not, in other words, the assimilation of film to war,

which is the standard equation used to explain the constraints upon filmmaking—is Huston’s extensive conscription of soldiers to the production of the film *after* the fact. The historian Giuseppe Angelone and the journalist Roberto Olla, a film specialist with the Italian state television network Rai, between them have reconstructed reasonably well the sequence of Huston’s shooting schedule. They relied on the memoirs of the camera operators on Huston’s team, analysis provided by Peter Maslowski in his 1998 book, *Armed with Cameras*, and especially their own study of unused footage in the National Archives. Most of the reels are labeled, although not always accurately. From his research, Angelone determined that of 46 tags, corresponding to rolls of 35-millimeter film, nine are undated, 33 are dated after the battle, and only four date from the period of the battle itself – including presumably the material Jules Buck managed to film on 17 December before and while coming under fire.<sup>41</sup> Angelone supplemented Bertelsen’s sophisticated visual study of the original archival footage with local knowledge of his native province of Caserta, whose towns of San Pietro Infine and Mignano Monte Lungo suffered some of the fiercest fighting on the road to Rome, and whose victims – although not direct relatives -- share Angelone’s name. Huston was continually making actors of soldiers, making fictions of facts.

On this basis, it is apparent that from 4-14 January 1944 Huston’s crew worked with soldiers from the 143<sup>rd</sup> regiment of the 36<sup>th</sup> infantry division of the Fifth Army, based at a rest camp in Alife. This is the same regiment whose 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions had fought at San Pietro, but it not known what proportion of the actual participants was available to reenact the battle. The 143<sup>rd</sup> required 1,100 replacement troops in the wake of San Pietro.<sup>42</sup> One day was spent filming a scene with antiaircraft artillery and an attack of armored vehicles and tanks. From mid-January until mid-February, Huston worked in San Pietro and the surrounding valley, at the Infantry Replacement Depot at Caiazzo and the 111<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital, where he filmed scenes of wounded soldiers. From 12-15 February, Huston restaged the attack on San Pietro of the previous 12-13 December, but on Monte Sambúcaro (what the Americans called Mount Sammucro) rather than at San Pietro Infine.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from the analysis of the reel labels, and material from memoirs and interviews, the Italian scholars have made creditable use of visual evidence from the completed film as well as the

unedited footage. They provide ample evidence that Huston filmed much of his documentary in locales other than San Pietro Infine, and his subjects were not its residents. Even the disturbing scenes of burying dead soldiers and civilians were filmed far from San Pietro, in temporary cemeteries elsewhere in the region.<sup>44</sup> The work of the Italian scholars confirms Bertelsen's conclusion that Huston's disclaimer – "for purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before and after the actual battle," but all "within range of enemy small arms or artillery fire" – is not merely misleading, but "patently false."<sup>45</sup> If we ask whether or how such falsifications matter, we find ourselves back at the film's own dilemma, between reporting an event and representing its experience.

This dilemma is played out most glaringly, perhaps, in a scene that shows a man crying after a house explodes and crumbles and his wife's dead body is extracted from the ruins. The spectacle is wrenching. Loss and futility abound. But the narrator stolidly anticipates the scene with these words: "The townspeople were warned of enemy mines and booby traps, which were in the process of being cleared." The narrator's feeble deflection of pathos is complicated historically, however, by the fact that, although the widower's grief was genuine, it had nothing to do with the battle for San Pietro or a German mine. The scene was filmed by Gordon Frye, Huston's lead cameraman, while the director was carousing with Bogart in Naples. The explosion took place in Caiazzo, when an air attack damaged the middle school, where the 163<sup>rd</sup> Signal Photo Company was quartered, and destroyed the building across the street. The bombs were not German but *American*. Members of the U.S. bomber crew mistakenly believed they had reached the German line at Cassino and dropped their bombs on Caiazzo instead. Frye himself escaped the building, but was seriously wounded by flying debris in the street. Nevertheless he returned to the third floor to grab his camera and film the devastation below.<sup>46</sup> It was Huston's decision how to describe what his viewers were watching. As Harris quotes Huston's notes, "the woman that is dug up from the ruins should be a casualty caused by German shelling."<sup>47</sup> This travesty of documentary presentation raises one of the oldest questions about the prerogatives of art: at what point does art submit to historical accuracy? What ethical constraints define "history" against "art"?

### War, peace, and memory in postwar Italy

In the United States, the extent to which the reenacted nature of *The Battle of San Pietro* is understood varies widely, among film critics, historians, and the general public. The same is true in Italy. Despite the careful analysis of Angelone and Olla, the basic fact that Huston did not film the actual battle for *San Pietro Infine* has escaped the attention even of people who have studied the film and its history.<sup>48</sup> For many Italians, especially those whose families suffered most during World War II, the important point is not whether Huston recorded a battle accurately as it took place, but that he produced a different kind of truth: an unassailable condemnation of war and a visceral testament to the suffering, both personal and civic, that war causes. For this reason, regardless of these Italians' awareness of the film's actual production history, in the "memory" of the war, *San Pietro* has become an icon of pacifism, "the most solemn protest against war that ever appeared on a screen," in the words of film critic Morando Morandini.<sup>49</sup>



Photograph of an original slate from Huston's filming in *San Pietro Infine*, with the director's image superimposed – a photo montage created by Giuseppe Angelone. It shows the date of 22 January 1944 (more than a month after the battle) and the name of the camera operator, Gordon Frye. Located in the museum/visitors' center of the Parco della Memoria Storica, San Pietro Infine. Author's photo.

### *San Pietro* as an anti-war statement

The Italian interpretation seems true to Huston's purpose. If "the best anti-war film has always been the war film," it is not surprising that *San Pietro* so



often appears at the top of the list of best war films.<sup>50</sup> The more we see of the footage that Huston originally intended to include, the more we understand the film as a bitter denunciation of the folly of war. Bertelsen and others have called attention to the ironic tone of the narration at the film's start, when a panoramic shot of snow-capped mountains towering over the Liri valley accompanies a description that would appear to suit a travelogue: "In winter the highest peaks of the Liri range ascend into the snow. But the valley floor, with its olive groves of ancient vines, its crops of wheat and corn, is green the year around – that is, in normal times." At this point the images on the screen – broken and burnt trees, scorched earth -- make clear that these are not normal times. Huston drily understates the obvious: "Last year was a bad year for grapes and olives, and the fall planting was late. Many fields lay fallow."

In an early scene introducing the village, included in the original full version, the contrast between the narration and the image turns out to be even more bitter: "The Italian peasant is a born mason. He cuts and lays and mortars in the stone with great skill and patience, building – not for himself alone – but for future generations." The scene is not of masons building a house, however, but of men sifting through the rubble of several destroyed buildings, salvaging the more intact rocks. As the narrator intones "for future generations," the camera shows a young girl lying dead on the ground, a water bucket still draped over one arm. Then the camera zooms in from another angle for a close-up of her face. She was evidently killed by incoming artillery or mortar fire while trying to fetch water – most likely from the Allied side, since during the battle the Germans were firing *from* the town. In the scope offered here, civilization has been ruined by "liberation." No wonder Huston thought his Army superiors might want to shoot him. This scene, along with others that lingered over dead bodies, was removed by Huston when editing the publicly released 32-minute film, but it has been reinserted into the 38-minute version, available on the internet, reminding modern viewers of how facts—along with fabrications—could be counted either in or out as history in 1944, just as they are today. The question of usable "fact" was and is that of the purpose the fact is meant to serve.

The ebb and flow of historical purpose

"Purpose" guides the usability of facts even now. *The Battle of San Pietro* has remained prominent in Italian public memory of the war thanks in part to political developments – both local and national. At the local level, residents of San Pietro Infine, along with their relatives who emigrated to North America, have sought to preserve the memory of its destruction not just as a symbol of peace but also as source of revenue for the town through tourism.<sup>51</sup> In the immediate aftermath of San Pietro's destruction, of course, it was not obvious that the town would be abandoned and left as a ruin or a monument. A few families whose houses were barely inhabitable did move back, for lack of anywhere else to go. The Italian authorities declared that the town had been destroyed to a level of 98 percent. Only five towns in the area – including Cassino – had suffered more damage and were judged to have been 100 percent destroyed.<sup>52</sup> In September 1970, an earthquake further damaged what was left of the old San Pietro Infine and the town was abandoned for good. A couple of years later, the authorities in the new San Pietro financed a project to plant trees around the ruins. But for what purpose? The idea at the time was "to cancel out in some way the signs of war and revitalize the zone, creating a quiet place suitable even for picnics." The memory of San Pietro as a theater of war was not usable. Over time the trees themselves have obscured the ruins, and their roots have contributed to the "slow but inexorable destruction of what remains."<sup>53</sup> In the 1980s, people began buying or stealing materials from the destroyed buildings and even the public streets of the old town. In the early 1990s, a fund to employ local young people was used to clear rubble and brush from the center and to light the *vecchio centro* to attract tourists, thousands of whom visited during those years. But when the funds ran out, the trees and weeds resumed their encroachment. San Pietro as a physical space has been assimilable to aesthetic or political or commercial exploits as the town was—and as its beleaguered inhabitants and the soldiers conscripted for re-enactment were—when Huston took control of its history with a camera.



*The ruin of San Pietro Infine, May 2013. In Huston's ironic narrative he calls attention to this church, built in 1438, and destroyed by Allied bombing and artillery: "Note interesting treatment of chance." Author's photo.*

In 1991 the U.S. National Film Registry selected Huston's *San Pietro* for permanent preservation. About the same time, residents of the village of San Pietro Infine were becoming increasingly convinced that the original site should also remain preserved -- in its destroyed state. With the fiftieth anniversary of the town's destruction in 1993, the idea arose to try to get the old center declared a UNESCO protected site. An effort was also launched to provide evidence that San Pietro Infine, through its suffering, merited the Medaglia d'Oro al Merito Civile -- the gold medal of civic merit awarded by the national government. Local historians -- most notably Maurizio Zambardi -- reconstructed the cost of the war in physical and human terms, describing in detail the reprisals and wanton murder carried out by the Nazi occupiers in the weeks leading up to the Allied assault, and compiling a list of the names of the scores of civilians killed in the course of the unremitting Allied bombardment. In 1998, at a ceremony in the old town attended by national and international figures, San Pietro Infine was declared a "world monument to peace." After resistance for years (though San Pietro had received a silver medal in 2000), in 2003 the Italian government agreed to award the gold medal in "recognition for so many civilian victims of both the bombings and the German killings, as well as the total destruction of the village."<sup>54</sup> As a space and architecture of memory, the town has been certified, once again, as veridical history—but this time characteristically Italian.

### The good war?

The individual stories of the victims of the battle for San Pietro go a long way toward explaining how the war and *The Battle of San Pietro* are remembered in postwar Italy. The Germans emerge as clearly villainous, but the deaths caused by the Allies in San Pietro outnumber those caused by the Germans *ten to one*. The Germans were killing civilians intentionally. The Americans were killing them mostly unintentionally, according to some accounts, because they believed the town had been evacuated. In most quarters the Americans have been forgiven, yet the civilian losses are mourned to this day.<sup>55</sup> The Nazi depredations were particularly cruel and unforgiveable. The occupiers forced all males between 18 and 45 years of age to build trenches and fortifications, to haul ammunition, and to plant landmines; they deliberately executed anyone who tried to avoid conscription. They requisitioned food and took all the village livestock and its four automobiles. Anyone who was caught wearing German boots or clothing, even if taken from soldiers who had died, would be shot on sight. In the meantime, to drive the residents out while they turned San Pietro into a redoubt, the Germans forbade access to water and deliberately poisoned wells by throwing animal carcasses into them.<sup>56</sup>

With the men in hiding or working for the occupiers, women and children were responsible for trying to obtain water during the week-long battle -- and they sometimes died in the process. In one case, American artillery troops deliberately tracked and fired at the two Zambardi brothers, aged 12 and 14 years old, as they dashed away from the cistern, mistakenly thinking that the gleaming flasks of water they carried were stocks of ammunition intended for the German defenders. So, as Maurizio Zambardi writes of his relatives Antonio and Eduardo, "their fears were justified, but the danger" this time "came not from the Germans but from the Allies." The boys survived, but Rosa Fuoco, a tall woman running just behind them, was incinerated by a smoke bomb, intended to help the soldiers concentrate their artillery fire.<sup>57</sup> Because the Americans literally destroyed the village to liberate it, the *Sampietresi* -- and Italians overall -- are disinclined to consider World War II unambiguously the "Good War." It was common for people to flee one area under combat

for safety in another, only to find that the war had followed them, with fatal consequences.<sup>58</sup>

Despite their tremendous suffering under Allied bombardment, however, *Sampietresi* did welcome the Americans when they finally entered the destroyed town, and those who survived have maintained fond – if not entirely accurate – memories, perhaps because relief from bombardment was a good in itself, which opened up a wellspring of gratitude to whoever had *stopped* it. The continuing importance of Huston’s film reveals itself in the way the survivors blend their own memories with what the film portrays, no matter how contradictory the result. One of the hopeful scenes inserted toward the end of *The Battle of San Pietro* is of a teenaged girl holding a baby. Locals have identified her as Maria Cortellessa and the baby as her brother, Rosvelto – evidently named in honor of the U.S. president. In 2011, a journalist tracked down Rosvelto Cortellessa and recorded this personal story of the American imprinting of identity upon Italians at large because of Huston’s film:

My name is Rosvelto Cortellessa. I was born on 15 December 1943, here at San Pietro Infine, in the caves, under the bombs. Yes, I’m named after the president of the United States, Roosevelt. I was baptized by an American chaplain, who asked my father, “what should we call him?” The soldiers said, “like our president,” and my father agreed. Here none of the refugees knew of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but the Americans, yes, they knew him well. My mother always told me how the American soldiers passed me from arm to arm when I was only a few days old. And even today, when my fellow villagers meet me in the street they call, “Oh, it’s Rosvelto, the president of the United States.”<sup>59</sup>

It is a wonderful story, but one that actually undermines the authenticity that Huston claimed for his film. Huston was not at San Pietro Infine to film the newborn Rosvelto or his baptism in December 1943. In the scene from *The Battle of San Pietro*, reproduced as a photo, Rosvelto looks to be at least a couple of months old (he is able, for example, to hold his head up on his own). If Huston filmed him, or any *Sampietresi*, on 17 December – something Ambler denies and Harris and others doubt – Rosvelto would have been only two days old. It makes sense that a baby born during the battle for San Pietro would

have to await the arrival of the Allies for his christening. The Nazis had arrested the parish priest, Don Aristide Masia, even as he lay ill, and deported him to a camp in Germany.<sup>60</sup> It is probable that Rosvelto was not, in fact, baptized in December but in February, when, according to his mother, he also received his Christian name, Michele -- one he never used.<sup>61</sup> This circumstantial evidence has been confirmed by Giuseppe Angelone, who located the relevant roll of film at the National Archives and established a date for the photo--22 February 1944-- further evidence that Huston did most of his filming at San Pietro Infine long after the battle.<sup>62</sup>

Another survivor of the battle has blended her memory of the siege with Huston’s artifice. Erminia Colella, who passed away in 2014, was 84 years old when interviewed in 2011, and the mother of the mayor of the relocated San Pietro Infine. In the film, she was a smiling girl of 16 years old. “I was the first to be photographed,” she told a journalist. “It was before Christmas.” “‘Hello,’ I heard. ‘Alò,’ I responded. There was a single American with a camera. He made a sign for me to smile and took the first photos. Yes, I was the first to be photographed. Then this American opened his jacket and pulled out some chocolate. Yes, this day John Huston was by himself. Then he went into the village and little by little met other children, other mamas, and took a photo of each one.”<sup>63</sup> It is a tribute to John Huston as a director that so many *Sampietresi* want to be associated not just with him but with the movie that depicts how the *Allies* destroyed their town. Accuracy—the fact that Huston was not there at that time—gives way to a different historical necessity: the film, though at war with itself, even perhaps because of that internal strife, opens up the consciousness of American documentary to Italian consciousness.

#### *Non c’è futuro senza memoria:* The Janus face of television

If the brutal experience of war made it difficult for Italians to think in terms of good guys versus bad guys, some have argued that the government of Silvio Berlusconi, for its own political purposes, took that position to an extreme. At the beginning of the 1990s, San Pietro Infine became caught up in the transformation of Italian politics occasioned by the *Tangentopoli* bribery scandals and the collapse of the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties, the

mainstays of postwar governments. This was the dawn of the era of Berlusconi, the television magnate from Milan who came to dominate the Italian political scene for the next two decades. His efforts risked distorting the memory of the war in a way that would have dishonored the experience of the people of San Pietro Infine – something like the restorative nostalgia that Boym contrasted to the reflective version.<sup>64</sup> Yet the *Sampietresi* responded by reasserting their understanding of the war and promoting it throughout the country. Ironically, despite Berlusconi's control of TV and mass media, they were aided by sympathetic television producers who shared their view that "there is no future without memory."<sup>65</sup>

In 1994, a series of programs was shown on the Italian national television network Rai-Uno regarding the Second World War in Italy. The first show was broadcast on 5 April, a little more than a week after Berlusconi and his new party, *Forza Italia*, had won the national elections. To put together a coalition, Berlusconi needed allies on the right, and his choices proved controversial. The *Lega Nord* favored the break-up of the unitary Italian state in favor of independence for its richer, northern regions, and the *Alleanza Nazionale* was the successor to the Italian fascist party. To broadcast a widely advertised multi-program series on World War II at a time when possible inclusion of "post-fascists" in the government was on the table was bound to provoke controversy. The nature of the broadcast was itself quite unusual. It stemmed from the discovery by Rai's Roberto Olla of a trove of unedited footage in the U.S. National Archives, some 3000 rolls filmed by the U.S. forces as they invaded and occupied the Italian peninsula. Thus the English-language title for the series: *Combat film*. Among the material Olla obtained were all the outtakes from John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*.

What made the series controversial, besides its timing, is explained in a fascinating study by Simona Monticelli.<sup>66</sup> For our purposes, two points are worth making. First, the series violated some familiar conventions of Italian cinematic portrayals of the war, by putting both the Allies and the partisans of the Resistance in unfavorable light, and treating as well-meaning patriots the young fascist recruits to the army of Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. The host of the program declares that "the dead are all equal," emphasizing the need to reach reconciliation by assigning blame equally to anyone who caused

destruction; moral distinctions were less important than consequences.<sup>67</sup> As representative of the shared image of the war, consider Roberto Rossellini's 1945 neorealist classic, *Roma, Città Aperta* (Open City). Its portrayal of a priest and a communist making common cause in the Resistance – and suffering a common fate of torture and murder at the hands of the Gestapo – found broad resonance in a country whose wartime experience took on much of the character of a civil war following the armistice. *Open City* was the top-grossing film in Italy during the 1945-46 season; it contributed to the emerging self-image of *Italiani, brava gente* – Italians, good people, who, with the exception of some fanatics, were basically anti-fascist victims of a dictatorship and who actively engaged in liberating themselves through the Resistance. Yet this was the portrayal that *Combat film* challenged – apparently, some argued, in the service<sup>of</sup> Berlusconi's attempt to rehabilitate the post-fascists enough to have them join his coalition government.<sup>68</sup>

Rossellini's own anti-fascist coalition represented on film was short-lived long before Berlusconi arrived on the scene, but the reasons for cultural dispute were not dissimilar. With the onset of the Cold War, the cooperation between Catholics and communists broke down, and the Communist Party -- Italy's second-largest -- was consigned to permanent opposition. The "Left" was dangerous international territory, and for a long time. The end of the Cold War promised new political alignments, however, as the successor to the Communist Party -- the Democratic Party of the Left -- pursued a reformist course, shedding a more radical faction that had formed its own party, and seeking a broad progressive coalition by making overtures to former members of Catholic and centrist parties. This left-leaning reconciliation is precisely what Berlusconi had sought to prevent by pursuing his own coalition possibilities with the post-fascists. Berlusconi's strategy combined a seemingly anachronistic red-baiting of the Democratic Party ("anti-communism without communists") and a rehabilitation of the *Alleanza Nazionale* without acknowledging what its tradition represented ("anti-fascism without fascists").

The second point about *Combat film* is that it revived interest in Huston's *San Pietro* by exposing audiences to the outtakes in the National Archives. A subsequent series of DVDs drawn from the TV program included "La guerra di John Huston," making

those images available to a wider audience still. Why was *San Pietro* pivotal in the 1990s? Huston's anti-war sentiments offered a mordant vision, drawn from the will to memory as much<sup>68</sup> from any historically accurate memory itself; the film's indictment of war in moral terms is broader than those of fascist vs. communist vs. Catholic, and it artfully avoided taking sides on such a fraught conflict. Many Italians preferred to forget. In the microcosm of San Pietro Infine, Italy had been destroyed by history as "parties." By reviving interest in Huston's work, *Combat film* supplied moral "ammunition" for the opponents of factionalism, specifically of the hyperbolic anti-communism and the attempted rehabilitation of fascism offered by Berlusconi, thereby offering a way to neutralize the effects Monticelli identified.<sup>69</sup> Huston's approach fit well with the sentiments of many Italians at the turn of the millennium – condemning the role fascism played in dragging Italy into a devastating war, certainly, and grateful to the Allies as liberators, but not without deep reservations about what "liberation" meant in the most proximate terms to the cities, villages, and individual lives of Italians caught in the middle. The Allied military strategy – the overreliance on bombing and the decision to fight Nazi Germany for two years on Italian soil – had come at a high cost for Italy, something *The Battle of San Pietro* had bravely conveyed like no other film.

#### Film & History in San Pietro Infine

Following up on the interest generated by *Combat film*, San Pietro Infine sought to promote itself as a location where film and history meet. Indeed, it makes sense to link *The Battle of San Pietro* to Italian and international film. Huston's cinematic style presaged in some ways Rossellini's neorealism. Both *Open City* and *San Pietro* seek to occupy that creative border zone between fiction and documentary, each approaching the other genre from opposite directions.<sup>70</sup> The town has played host to international film festivals, held under the rubric *Storie nella storia* – Stories in history – that aim to connect San Pietro, as both a historical object and an aesthetic process, to the past and the future of the cinema of war and peace. Then-mayor Fabio Vecchiarino was encouraged by the declaration of Italian president Giorgio Napolitano in March 2008 to declare old San Pietro Infine a "national monument." The mayor worked with Angelo Villani as artistic

director in staging the first international film festival in 2010. These developments, along with the film festivals, have brought continued attention to San Pietro, with several television documentaries produced. All of them use footage from Huston's film.

Already in 1959 San Pietro Infine was serving as the backdrop for several scenes in Mario Monicelli's anti-war comedy about the First World War, *La grande guerra* (1959). Notable documentaries made in later years include *Ritorno a San Pietro* (Return to San Pietro), a project of cinema students under the direction of Carlo Alberto Pinelli of Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, shown at the 2010 festival, and Giuseppe Angelone's 2009 *Benvenuti all'inferno* (Welcome to Hell), crafted from film of the Caserta region during the war found at the Imperial War Museum in London and the U.S. National Archives and shown at the 2011 festival.<sup>71</sup> In 2014 director Luca Gianfrancesco worked with Angelone to produce a documentary, *Terra bruciata* (Scorched earth), part of which was filmed in the ruins of San Pietro Infine. The film recounts the fate of more than a thousand victims of Nazi reprisals in the Caserta region and the birth of what the director called a "proto-Resistance" or "larval Resistance." As such, it constitutes an important effort to counter the Berlusconi-era denigration of the partisans.<sup>72</sup>

At the 2010 festival the organizers sought to go beyond World War II to the wars of the present by screening *The Hurt Locker*.<sup>73</sup> Promoters of San Pietro try to maintain their Hollywood connection not only through the link to John Huston, but to more recent figures as well. They make much, for example, of the fact that the multi-media features introduced in 2008 at the museum of the Parco della Memoria Storica were designed by the Italian special-effects artist Carlo Rambaldi, "the father of E.T."<sup>74</sup> Television specials focusing on the war in San Pietro and surrounding regions rely heavily on Huston's footage. In one documentary, the mayor of Montelungo, site of some of the fiercest fighting in the autumn of 1943, is describing the failures and successes of the Italian soldiers who fought against the Germans on the Allied side for the first time. The screen, however, shows not actual footage of the Italian soldiers, but images from *The Battle of San Pietro of American* soldiers reenacting the parts of Italian soldiers.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to attracting foreign films to their international film festivals, supporters of San Pietro Infine are also keen to "export" their product – John

Huston's film and their interpretation of it. In 1987 they were pleased that the Irish rock band U2 chose Huston's images of the children of San Pietro to include in a video for its song "In God's Country." Bono's humanitarian activism represents sentiments that the *Sampietresi* share. In 2006 many of those same images were projected onto the grand pyramid and castle that adorn Porta San Paolo-Piazzale Ostiense in Rome as part of a celebration of the 63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the armistice. The event included an outdoor screening of documentaries such as *Ritorno a San Pietro* and drew a crowd of nearly a thousand visitors. The main attraction at Porta San Paolo was an exhibit of photos culled from Huston's filming in and around San Pietro Infine that ran for three months. According to the preface of the invaluable collection of essays published in connection with the exhibit, curator Giuseppe Angelone chose the photos to produce "the emotional effect that Huston himself" intended, "that is to communicate visually more the tragedy" of the civilian victims "than the exaltation of the victors."<sup>76</sup>



Viewers watch a recent film of interviews of the survivors of the battle for San Pietro at Piazzale Ostiense in Rome, while images from John Huston's *San Pietro* are projected onto a pyramid and the Porta San Paolo, to celebrate the 63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the armistice, 8 September 2006. The event kicked off a photographic exhibit, "Da San Pietro Infine a Porta San Paolo," which continued at the Museo della Via Ostiense until mid-December 2006. [Source: Angelo Pellegrino and Maurizio Zambardi, eds. *San Pietro Infine: L'avanzata delle truppe alleate verso Roma da San Pietro Infine a Porta San Paolo* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 2006).]

### Conclusion: a "Pompei of our times"

Owing mainly to its anti-war message, Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* continued to attract Italian audiences in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the "Global War on Terror" that seems never-ending. Even in an era when

governments seek to justify the use of military force – with greater or lesser plausibility -- for humanitarian purposes, as in Libya in 2011, many Italians still remain staunchly pacifist. The subtitle of a recent study of the use of Italian military force abroad in the post-Cold War era is revealing in that regard: *Just Don't Call it War*.<sup>77</sup> The publicity associated with San Pietro Infine's international film festivals has amplified that message. When director Massimo Spano was interviewed on television after his film, *Figli strappati*, had won the 2010 festival's first prize and he was asked his views on the genre of war films such as *San Pietro*, he at first hesitated: "For me, war...I'm a pacifist by nature, so I'm against any kind of war, so when I speak of war I feel bad even hearing the word."<sup>78</sup> Festival director Villani echoed the same sentiment: "I am not interested in war, but in telling people's stories."<sup>79</sup>

Visiting and reading about San Pietro Infine, one often hears the old town described as "a kind of Pompei of our times."<sup>80</sup> The residents and their supporters have certainly been making every effort to promote that image – to make their understanding of the lessons of the battle for San Pietro permanently fixed -- with Huston's film as their main resource. Angelone says of the importance of *San Pietro* that "the documentary recounts the suffering not only of the troops, the combatants, but also of the civilian population. It is a real anti-war manifesto...it mainly documents the tragedy of the civilian population." Like the village itself, the film continues to shape our sense of the history of war as a tally of suffering, not as a roster of winners and losers. Giuseppe Troiano, a resident of the town, suffered that tragedy personally: as a small boy, he lost an eye during the conflict, and was lucky that the infection was halted before it blinded his other eye. Troiano has made a practice of visiting schools to talk about his experience and show Huston's film. He reports that the children draw a different conclusion from experts such as Angelone on what *San Pietro* shows about the relative pain endured by soldiers and civilians. For whatever it says about war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (or what they are taught about war), Italian school children nowadays *expect* civilians to be harmed, and they are amazed, Troiano says, to see that not only the civilian population suffers during war, but also the soldiers, because the military are supposed to be heroes. Soldiers can be victims? Their deaths can be senseless? Troiano points out to the students that the military are trained to defend

themselves against armed enemies, whereas civilians are not. Civilians “hide in caves; they die without knowing why. The soldiers know why. This is the difference between soldiers and civilians.”<sup>81</sup> But the general vulnerability of people—whether soldier or civilian—is what the children, especially as Italians, register first and last.

It seems that promoters of *San Pietro*'s message, such as Giuseppe Vecchiarino, the mayor elected in 2011 on the Peace and Progress list, have their work cut out for them in maintaining the memory of war and the hope for peace in successor generations. For, although one journalist was inspired by the showing of Huston's *San Pietro* at the town's film festival to declare *San Pietro Infine* “a community that had won, at long last, the war against war,” that larger battle is in fact ongoing.<sup>82</sup> Factionalism and the propagandizing of war into good and evil forces, though not untrue in many cases, lose their existential potency in the moment of actual suffering. Huston understood this deeply “Italian” truth. Even with its authenticity as historical record in doubt, Huston's film remains a morally accurate and detailed portrait of war. For many viewers, especially in Italy, it illustrates a universal truth about the futility of war when it actually comes home.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Nation*, 26 May 1945, p. 608.

<sup>2</sup> Lance Bertelsen, “San Pietro and the ‘Art’ of War,” *Southwest Review*, Spring 1989; Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014). All page references are to the Kindle version.

<sup>3</sup> Bertelsen, “San Pietro,” p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> Huston's narrative quotes a figure of 1,412 “at the last census.” Maurizio Zambardi, the preeminent local historian, provides similar figures in “San Pietro Infine,” in Angelo Pellegrino and Maurizio Zambardi, eds. *San Pietro Infine: L'avanzata delle truppe alleate verso Roma da San Pietro Infine a Porta San Paolo* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 2006), p. 8; and “San Pietro Infine: Civili uccisi per errore nel dicembre 1943,” 31 December 2001, available on the website, [davolturnoacassino.it](http://davolturnoacassino.it).

<sup>5</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. “Dalla ‘Battaglia di San Pietro’ ad ‘Annie’: il cinema di John Huston, regista ribelle,” *Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 2001.

<sup>7</sup> The film's original title was *San Pietro*, which still appears on the title screen, against the backdrop of an image of the town's patron saint. Since the announcement of the first public screening in the *New York Times*, 25 April 1945, it has been known as *The Battle of San Pietro*. I use both titles interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Jan Mieszkowski, “War, With Popcorn,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 August 2014. For historical discussion, see Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> General Mark W. Clark, prologue to John Huston, dir., *San Pietro* (1945), available at [https://ia902300.us.archive.org/12/items/battle\\_of\\_san\\_pietro/battle\\_of\\_san\\_pietro\\_512kb.mp4](https://ia902300.us.archive.org/12/items/battle_of_san_pietro/battle_of_san_pietro_512kb.mp4)

<sup>11</sup> John Grigg, *1943: The Victory That Never Was* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), p. 110. The best overall account of the Italian campaign is Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007). It includes a chapter on the battle for San Pietro.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Brady, *A Death in San Pietro: The Untold Story of Ernie Pyle, John Huston, and the Fight for Purple Heart Valley* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013), p. 139 (Kindle version).

<sup>13</sup> Clark prologue to *San Pietro*.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Maslowski, *Armed with Cameras* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> *Rome-Arno 1944*, US Army Center for Military History Publication 72-20, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> On civilian deaths, see Zambardi, “San Pietro Infine” (n. 4), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> “Address of the President on the Fall of Rome,” 5 June 1944, available at <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/060544.html>

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 332.

<sup>19</sup> John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Perseus Books, 1994), p. 138; Morando Morandini, *John Huston* (Milano: Il Castoro, 1996), p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 332.

<sup>21</sup> This version is available at [https://archive.org/details/battle\\_of\\_san\\_pietro](https://archive.org/details/battle_of_san_pietro).

<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Angelone, “‘Real War versus Hollywood War’: Il regista John Huston e le riprese per il film

'San Pietro,'" *Quaderni Vesuviani Campania 1* (2008), pp. 73-74.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Colonel Melvin E. Gillette to John Huston, 28 October 1944, quoted in Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 333.

<sup>24</sup> Grigg writes that the Allied military government "was an expensive and insensitive apparatus which, to put it mildly, did little to generate enthusiasm for the Allied cause." Grigg, *1943*, p. 110; for a fictionalized account of the treatment of Italian civilians in the occupation of Naples, see John Horne Burns, *The Gallery* (1947), reissued by New York Review Books Classics in 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Angelone, "Real War," p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Ambler, *Here Lies Eric Ambler: An Autobiography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), Kindle edition, loc. 3732.

<sup>27</sup> Angelone, "Real War," p. 73; Ambler, *Here Lies*, loc. 3826.

<sup>28</sup> Ambler, *Here Lies*, loc. 3779.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 3886.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 3920.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 269.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> Author's discussion with Nicola Nardelli at the museum of San Pietro Infine, May 2013; and Maurizio Zambardi, "San Pietro Infine: La guerra dei civili," in Pellegrino and Zambardi, eds., *San Pietro Infine*, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> The letter of 18 December 1943 was uploaded by William C. Allen, Jr. on 15 June 2011 to the website, [https://archive.org/details/battle\\_of\\_san\\_pietro](https://archive.org/details/battle_of_san_pietro)

<sup>35</sup> Bertelsen, "San Pietro," p. 253.

<sup>36</sup> The article is available at <http://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/pyle/waskow.html>. Bertelsen's "San Pietro" insightfully links Pyle's journalism with Huston's film making.

<sup>37</sup> Bertelsen, "San Pietro," p. 253.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>39</sup> I was able to download it from:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2Spd6E7Z0I>.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 280.

<sup>41</sup> Angelone, "Real War," p. 76, n. 45.

<sup>42</sup> "36<sup>th</sup> Division in World War II," Texas Military Forces Museum website, <http://www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org/36division/archives/sanpiet/sanpietr.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Angelone, "Real War," p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> Giuseppe Angelone, "Cimiteri temporanei di guerra nel Medio Volturno," *Annuario A.S.M.V. [Associazione Storica del Medio Volturno] – Studi e ricerche*, 1 April 2014, available at

<https://dalvolturnoacassino.it/asp/doc.asp?id=307>.

<sup>45</sup> Bertelsen, "San Pietro," p. 254. The 38-minute version of the film, unlike the 32-minute one, does not include the disclaimer at the end.

<sup>46</sup> Angelone, "Real War," p. 76-79, drawing on Maslowski, *Armed with Cameras*; Roberto Olla, *Combat film* (Rome: RAI-ERI, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Harris, *Five Came Back*, p. 280.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Marco Pellegrinelli, *La Battaglia di S. Pietro di John Huston* (Venafro: Edizioni Eva, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Morandini, *John Huston*, p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. x-xi.

<sup>51</sup> The Associazione Famiglie Sanpietrese di Montreal is especially active: <http://afsanpietrese.com/>

<sup>52</sup> Maurizio Zambardi, "La ricostruzione del cassinate da parte dell'ericas negli anni 1949-1953," in Pellegrino and Zambardi, eds., *San Pietro Infine*, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Zambardi, "San Pietro Infine," in Pellegrino and Zambardi, eds., *San Pietro Infine*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> For a critical view of the Allies' campaign in the south, see Gigi Di Fiore, *Controstoria della Liberazione: Le stragi e i crimini dimenticati degli Alleati nell'Italia del sud* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Zambardi, "San Pietro Infine: Civili uccisi per errore nel dicembre 1943," "Gli eccidi tedeschi di San Pietro Infine," and "Al di là del filo spinato...per non morire di fame," all available on the website, [davolturnoacassino.it](http://davolturnoacassino.it).

<sup>57</sup> Zambardi, "San Pietro Infine: La guerra dei civili" (n. 33), p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> For some examples: Antonio Grazio Ferraro, *Cassino: dalla distruzione della guerra alla rinascita nella pace* (Cassino: Francesco Ciolfi editore, 2007), pp. 39-41; Zambardi, "Gli eccidi tedeschi di San Pietro Infine."

<sup>59</sup> Antonio Ferrara, "Il festival di guerra a San Pietro Infine: 'Mi chiamo Rosvelto, come Roosevelt,'" *La Repubblica* (Naples edition), 29 August 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Zambardi, "San Pietro Infine: La guerra dei civili," p. 27; The parish ceased to exist. When the town fell to the Allies, a monk at the Abby of Montecassino wrote in his diary entry for 17 December 1943 of "the tragic



death of the parish of San Pietro Infine." Faustino Avagliano, ed., *Il bombardamento di Montecassino: Diario di guerra di E. Grossetti e M. Matronola con altre testimonianze e documenti* (Montecassino: Pubblicazioni Cassinesi, 2011), p. 43.

<sup>61</sup> In a television interview, Cortellessa confirms his birthdate of 15 December 1943, but also mentions the name "Michele" that he was given in February 1944. Catholics are typically expected to baptize their children with saints' names. Interview with Vito D'Ettorre on the TV2000 program, "Nel cuore dei giorni," 29 May 2014, <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhWfONCOQM8>.

<sup>62</sup> The roll is 111-ADC-613, dated 22 February 1944. I am grateful to Professor Angelone for sharing this information in an email message of 28 September 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Ferrara, "Il festival di guerra." Her interview is available at <http://www.nelcuoredeigiorni.tv2000.it/san-pietro-infine-un-paese-simbolo-della-memoria/2011/11/04>.

<sup>64</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, ch. 4.

<sup>65</sup> This was the title of a documentary produced by Stefania Forlini and Elia Rubino, promoting the international film festival at San Pietro Infine in 2010, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlrAlMmIU-A>.

<sup>66</sup> Simona Monticelli, "National identity and the representation of Italy at war: the case of Combat film," *Modern Italy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2000), pp. 133-146.

<sup>67</sup> See Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy*, Oxford UP: 2013, p. 152.

<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately this characterization simplifies Monticelli's subtle and sophisticated argument, by not providing her convincing visual and other evidence. For a similar argument about the political implications of the series, see Giorgio Bocca, "I due falsi storici del 25 aprile," *La Repubblica*, 14 April 1994.

<sup>69</sup> In May 1995 *Combat film* was screened in an open-air showing at Piazza del Popolo in Rome, in a program that included films on the Nazi looting of Italian art works and efforts by a special unit of Resistance fighters that sought to save them. Roberto Olla participated, suggesting that however the Rai broadcast of *Combat film* seemed to serve Berlusconi's interests in denigrating the partisans (Monticelli's thesis), the film maker himself did not necessarily share that goal. "RAI: 'Combat film' in

Piazza a Roma,"

[http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/1995/05/27/Spettacolo/RAI-COMBAT-FILM-IN-PIAZZA-A-ROMA\\_102200.php](http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/1995/05/27/Spettacolo/RAI-COMBAT-FILM-IN-PIAZZA-A-ROMA_102200.php)

<sup>70</sup> Pellegrinelli, *La Battaglia di S. Pietro*, p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> *Ritorno a San Pietro* is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQzO83UuSi8>

<sup>72</sup> Interview with D'Ettorre (n. 61). The film's subtitle is "the Italian laboratory of Nazi ferocity." For more information and press coverage, see [http://www.lucagianfrancesco.com/eng/lavoro.asp?id\\_1=12](http://www.lucagianfrancesco.com/eng/lavoro.asp?id_1=12). I thank Giuseppe Angelone for additional details.

<sup>73</sup> Antonio Ferrara, "Storie di guerra a San Pietro Infine: Il festival dal 24 al 27 agosto, *La Repubblica* (Naples edition), 23 August 2011.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, and author's interview with Nicola Nardelli, San Pietro Infine, May 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with D'Ettorre (n. 61).

<sup>76</sup> Angelo Pellegrino, preface to Pellegrino and Zambardi, eds., *San Pietro Infine*.

<sup>77</sup> Fabrizio Coticchia, with Giampiero Giacomello and Piero Ignazi, *Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just Don't Call it War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> "Festival cinema – Storie nella storia, seconda parte," at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=galrtjQhndw>

<sup>79</sup> "Festival cinema – Storie nella storia, prima parte," at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlrAlMmIU-A>

<sup>80</sup> Ferrara, "Storie di guerra" (n. 72).

<sup>81</sup> Interviewed by D'Ettore (n. 61).

<sup>82</sup> Giampiero Casoni, "Il Parco della Memoria di San Pietro Infine," *Cancello ed Arnone News*, 24 March 2011, <http://www.cancelloedarnonenews.com/2011/03/24/il-parco-della-memoria-di-san-pietro-infine/>.

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