CHAPTER 2

WAR AND PEACE

Howard Hawks’s *Air Force*

![Air Force](image)

*Figure 8. Air Force (1943); director: Howard Hawks*

This is the odyssey of a Flying Fortress crew that receives the news of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor while on a mission. The base from which the B-17 “Mary Ann” has taken off is in flames. It flees from island to island across the Pacific, constantly threatened by enemy planes and ground forces. Everywhere, American positions surprised by the treacherous Japanese are falling before the enemy’s material superiority; but everywhere, there is growing determination to avenge these “temporary” defeats and clamber back up the slope of disaster—to fight again.

Nothing could be more different from Soviet war films than American war films. The Russian cinema is not much bothered with special effects. It owes its power
to the authenticity of live documentary footage (of which, alas, there is a generous supply) and the violence of patriotic sentiment. American films, by contrast, are still primarily “cinematic.” As directed by Howard Hawks [1896–1977], Air Force, although it deals with reality, is part of a whole traditional lineage in which skillful trickery and the acrobatic prowess of camerawork play an essential role.

Actually, there is something in Air Force that recalls Tarzan [1932–42] and Stagecoach [John Ford, 1939]. (Isn’t the vehicle in Stagecoach also fleeing from a war, from one temporary haven to another?) Air Force is thus not just a prodigious documentary on the lives of American airmen during World War II; it will survive as a high point of the adventure film, an astonishing piece of pure cinema (Le Parisien libéré, February 16, 1945).

On Frank Capra’s Why We Fight: History, Documentation, and the Newsreel

War and the apocalypse it brings are at the heart of a decisive new revelation in documentary reporting. The reason is that, during a war, facts have an exceptional