



Humdrum Epic

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FILM MAKERS and stars from France, Germany, and the United States have cordially collaborated in turning a dramatic moment of history—the struggle for Paris in August, 1944—into an unreal and unexciting motion picture.

Is Paris Burning? qualifies unmistakably, however, as an attempt at art. Gore Vidal wrote the screenplay with Francis Ford Coppola, René Clément of *Forbidden Games* directed it, Maurice Jarre wrote the music, and Paul Graetz produced it. But *Is Paris Burning?* fails as art, and artistic failure is often instructive. In this case failure serves as proof that film makers can botch a history book as easily as they can a novel or a play.

The film is named after the recent best-seller from which it was taken. Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, authors of the book, told in popular, dramatized fashion how Hitler's orders to destroy the city were never carried out. The film makers adhered to the book with surprising fidelity, far more than their peers willingly give real works of literature. But novels have served as hoary staples for moviemakers ever since *The Birth of a Nation*; history books pose quite different problems for the film, problems that are worth looking into.

Past events in themselves provide no drama. After all, we already know how they turned out. What makes history exciting is the play of character and motive. The historian must be an artist, telling not only what people did but also weaving in among the events an explanation of why they did it.

Collins and Lapierre are journalists rather than artists, but in telling how Paris was saved from German dynamite and bombs, they gave their story a dramatic center by focusing on the German commander, General Dietrich von Choltitz, and his decision not to carry out his orders. But they tried as well to suggest how a vast array of human motives and choices also played a role in the outcome, and they accomplished this, ironically, by borrowing a movie method—the technique of montage, of short, rapidly shifting scenes.

VIDAL, Clément, and Graetz began their work without a theory on transforming history into film, but quite clearly they could have used one. The primary difficulty they faced in turning dramatic historical writing into dramatic movie scenes is that motives and character can no longer be explained; they must be shown and acted. Failing this, the film makers might have dropped the idea of making a dramatic historical film and tried instead to create an epic film, where the pathos and splendor of the historical event itself provide excitement, rather than the drama of character.

Frédéric Rossif's recent documentary of the Spanish Civil War, *To Die in Madrid*, partially succeeded as an epic film. The trouble with even so good a documentary as *To Die in Madrid* is that it straddles the fence between epic and drama—between re-creating the historical event and providing an explanation for it.

What can compare with movies as a medium for creating the epic, broad, outward sense of life? The audacity and bravery of many cameramen lifts the viewer from his seat and sets him down in the middle of the scene. In *To Die in Madrid* the viewer takes part in an advance with Franco's infantry, runs through the streets of Guernica as the bombs begin to fall, rides the train carrying the International Brigades out of Barcelona. You participate: history falls away, and you live in the past as if it were present, share in the sense of an unknown future.

But the narrator still speaks. He explains what is going on, why it comes out one way and not another. You return to your seat, a wall grows up between you and the scene. The viewer after all is no more than a distant spectator at events from the irretrievable past. Despite the inherent advantage of the visual medium, documentary films like *To Die in Madrid* fail to sustain the breadth and immediacy of a historical epic.

THE BOOK *Is Paris Burning?* does possess a certain breadth and immediacy through its montage technique, and the film makers needed only to transfer the story to their far more effective medium in order to produce a successful historical epic. This in part they planned to do, and partially they carried it through. They too can lift you into the scene; and they can let the scene tell its own story, so that no narrator's voice intrudes to put you back in your seat.

There are moments in *Is Paris Burning?* when you feel you are in the presence of history: when leaders of the Resistance meet to vote on strategy, when Resistance fighters battle German Panzers alongside the Seine, when the bells of Notre Dame shake off their cobwebs and ring out for the first time in four years. The viewer is in the past, with all its uncertainty and suspense, just as the reader experiences the Battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*; only the film can move the viewer anywhere, can rapidly create a sense of the whole, without sacrificing suspense.

But this film does sacrifice nearly

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all its suspense. The film makers committed their rarest of errors, an excess of fidelity to the book. They tried to reproduce faithfully the montage technique the authors already had at second hand. But in the book, montage gives access to inner states of mind. The movie-makers could not re-create those inner states of mind, so they decided simply to make up for it—leaving aside the more obvious commercial motives—by using the movie industry's substitute for personality: the fixed image of the well-known movie star.

Sixteen members of the "stunning international cast" receive star billing. "Stunning" is precisely the word for them. They stun not only one's sense of participation; they destroy historical reality as well. One of the book's amusing stories relates how the young Resistance leader Yvon Morandat and his friend Claire bluffed their way to capture the Hôtel de Matignon. When Jean-Paul Belmondo and Marie Versini portray this scene in the movie, the audience is thrice removed: it is invited to identify not with the suspense of the scene, nor with the event itself, but with Belmondo and Versini.

THE FILM MAKERS lacked, in the end, the wit to see what their very skills as film makers could have created for them. Instead they tried to force the historical film into uncongenial molds, the mold of the history book, the mold of the made-up movie. They muffed their chance to make an effective historical epic because they failed to see that the epic film implies an attitude toward history.

Epic film suggests the universality of history, the destiny of individuals linked inseparably to events. In the best scenes of *Is Paris Burning?* it matters not who a person is but what he does. Here and there the film makers managed to re-create the sense of life, the sense of destiny we can sometimes share with the anonymous figures who move in blurred and grainy newsreels. They failed to realize that the greatest achievement of their art would be to make us feel the excitement of moving and acting in that gray and grainy world.



You Are Old, Father Bertrand

Bertrand said to
a lyndon his
eye he had pinned
on, "Let's
both go
to law: I
will prosecute you.—
I do not
stand alone,
but with Sartre
and Simone,
and a vol-
uble French
intellectual crew."
Said the
lyndon, "Dear me,
such a
trial would
be, with
no jury
or judge,
a judi-
cative
mess."
"We'll be
judge."
"We'll be
jury,"
said
Ber-
trand
with fury:
"And our
verdict
has
just
been
released
to the
press."

—OGDEN NASH