

# Humanizing Propaganda in *Mrs. Miniver*

Peter Strauss

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1942 represented a time of great conflict for the people of the United States. The routines and social structure of the public was transformed as America entered World War II in December of 1941, making 1942 the pivotal year to gain support, finances, and recruits to ensure that the war effort would be successful. Propaganda became a major part of creating this foundation, not only with posters and radio commercials, but with feature films as well. Films were naturally costlier than posters or radio ads, but their impact on public perception was unparalleled. The public was required to invest their time and money into a film, they were removed from their peers or any form of distraction and in this solitude they would watch and listen to the plight of characters not unlike themselves struggle in a world embraced in war. Many films today maintain this type of social-political undertone, although films made during World War II never hid their motive. The messages of unity, endurance, and support were points to be proud of, and at the end of several movies, this film included, was a bold message stating "Buy War Bonds". And how could one not? After witnessing freedom loving people battle the injustice of Axis forces for two hours, always losing at least one loved one, emerging battered but still full of hope, it was a hypnotic formula that ensured public support like no other method.

The 1942 propaganda film *Mrs. Miniver* follows that formula faithfully. However, unlike most American propaganda films, it avoided the front lines of combat and featured no Americans. Yet, it won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1942, the highest honor a film can achieve in the United States as well as earning over five million dollars in American box office receipts (Trojan, 148). Its focus was

on a British family in London during the Battle of Britain. The success of *Mrs. Miniver* helped Americans relate and sympathize with their not-so-different allies in Europe at a time of extreme crisis, although the Battle of Britain was long since over by the time the film was released, Europe faced a much more immediate and vigilant threat than the most isolated population of the United States. It was, perhaps, the idea of focusing the film on civilians, not soldiers, that made *Mrs. Miniver* one of the most successful propaganda films of its era. Avoiding the frontlines of battle denied the audience the exhilarating simulation of crushing America's enemies the way that *Wake Island* (1942) may have offered, but the film allowed its audience to relate to a series of middle-class characters that exist in a world eerily similar to their own, only with air raids. Mrs. Miniver's son joins the Royal Air Force, but the audience only witnesses his civilian side, another practice of depicting the man, not the soldier. The characters maintain a sense of depth, opposed to depicting battle and carnage. This tonal shift from other propaganda films allowed for a more relatable story and universal message giving the masses something to inspire them, rather than traumatize them. Winston Churchill proclaimed that the film was "more powerful to the war effort than the combined work of six military divisions" (Trojan, 147). After the cultural impact and public connection with *Mrs. Miniver*, this proclamation proved to be incredibly true.

Although several sequences depicted shocking imagery of middle-class estates being found in ruins, people in bomb shelters, and death of main characters, the film's underlying agenda is to deconstruct the classist system and reinforce the sense of unity and national pride. One of the film's two plotlines is dedicated to a

rose contest where a wealthy aristocrat is challenged by a lower-class stationmaster. The film opens on both Mrs. Miniver and her husband indulging in expensive luxuries, while torn between their necessity and their appeal. In contrast, their son, Vin, arrives from Oxford with a newfound scholarly perspective on the classist system. While his parents acknowledge their desire for material objects, as well as having a maid, cook, and a son at Oxford, Vin himself denounces the idea of a stationmaster being persuaded against participating in an open contest. Vin's future wife, Carol, agrees with his belief in a unified community, but is critical of his academic stance of discussion without action – a direct message to the American viewers who discuss the war in Europe without taking action to resolve it. Carol expresses her own forward action in volunteering in the community while mocking Vin for only stating the obvious.

The flower contest plot is ignored for the second act of the film as the more significant pressure of war becomes the film's focal point, as pointed out by Mr. Ballard, the stationmaster, in response to his coworker predicting war and an end to the rose competition Ballard responds, "you might as well say goodbye England, there'll always be roses." The film uses this to demonstrate the ordinary being set-aside for the all important emphasis on war, but while the bombing raids threaten to destroy the morale of the public, the film revives this plot to emphasize the coming together of community and maintaining some tradition in the face of disaster. This communal event creates the notion of keeping faith and pride in one's country and fellow man. Early in the film Vin wonders aloud if this is "a time for dancing", to which he is rebutted by Carol whether it is a time to lose your sense of humor. These

two different outlooks on wartime represent the realistic pessimism of citizens, while offering an alternative outlook that suggests a positive attitude to boost the morale of the country, helping to ensure victory against Germany. When the people come together for the flower festival, Mr. Ballard is permitted to submit his flower, named Mrs. Miniver which, reflecting the character, represents kindness, spirit, and optimism. Realizing that some sacrifice is necessary for the good of the country, the long time winner, Lady Beldon, reluctantly gives the prize to Mr. Ballard. She breaks the barrier between their social classes and more importantly illustrates the significance of personal sacrifice for the greater good of creating a strong union between citizens.

The war aspects of the film takes place from the perspective of the Miniver family, allowing a sense of reliability between the non-military public watching the film and the characters on screen. The Miniver's deal with typical issues facing a middle-class family at the time; such as the dread of their son actually fighting, rather than merely flying in the Royal Air Force. Later, Mr. Miniver must aid in the Dunkirk evacuation, both examples of civilians voluntarily assisting the war effort how they can. The actual mission is never shown, only the dirty, bruised man who returns allowing the audience to fill in the blanks with their imagination. While Mrs. Miniver stays at home, maintaining her routine schedule while dealing with the uncertainty of both the men in her life being out of contact and on the frontlines. Mr. Ballard reminds her that the Bible is a valuable resource for such stresses, but reassures her that both men will be fine. This line, like most in the film, are spoken

to the audience just as much as they are to other characters, acting as specific dialogues as well as general advice to the public.

The threat of invasion is premeditated in the film by a radio broadcast delivered by “your English friend in Germany” who reminds the public how quickly France fell, and that England will be next. This fear of fighting too close to home is personified later in the film when a fallen German pilot is discovered by Mrs. Miniver in her backyard garden. The pilot awakens and holds Mrs. Miniver hostage in a fairly savage fashion. This scene is the film’s most apparent use of hospitality propaganda, accompanied by depicting the villainous German pilot as a subhuman beast who speaks in grammatically crude sentences of no more than three words such as, “keep door open!” or “food! Quick!” In contrast, Mrs. Miniver stays calm and collective, offering great hospitality to the hostile guest, offering to help him after he faints, and abiding by his every request. The civil nature of the British sharing the same frame with the vulgar actions of the German create a strong impression in the audience of the vast difference in humanity between the victimized British and the aggressive Germans. The pilot is constantly shot in shadow, savagely spilling milk on himself as he drinks, as if he has never drank from a bottle before. After he neglects to wipe himself off, he is seated, acknowledging his defeat but promising that Britain will fall, ignoring or just unaffected by Mrs. Miniver’s protest that thousands of innocents will be murdered, to which he denies their innocence, stating that opposing Hitler makes their deaths justified. Mrs. Miniver’s collective response to the home invasion and quick choice to call the police promote a sense of purpose to

the citizens at home, that their actions can be of benefit to the war just as much as the soldiers on the frontline.

The fears of air strikes are recurring throughout the film, however, it is not until the end of the second act that this becomes a reality for the Miniver family in London where the family hides in their bomb shelter. Despite facing a horrific situation using a facility reserved for only the most extreme circumstances, the characters attempt to maintain their traditions and use the immense willpower of the British to endure the raids. Mrs. Miniver reads an excerpt from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll to the children as they sleep, then with her husband, speaking it aloud. The chapter they recite is late in the story where Alice reminisces of her adventures to children in a sunny springtime, this sequence lends the book's allegory of "escaping down the rabbit hole" as the peaceful story acts as a mental escape for the couple who are actually surrounded by the sounds of falling bombs and rattling walls. Mrs. Miniver also uses this time to continue practicing her usual activities such as knitting, attempting to be ignorant to the destruction outside. This scene depicts Mrs. Miniver providing her expected comforting, motherly role upholding the values of order and civility, even in the chaotic state of her home and country.

The film concludes in a war-torn church, which is physically destroyed, but its spirit is still as strong as ever, perhaps the most prevalent underlying theme of the film. The Nazi forces may be able to destroy the buildings and take lives of their people, but the spirit of the nation is invulnerable to military attacks. The vicar gives

a powerful speech spelling out what has been suggested throughout the film, solidifying the film as a propaganda film, if the audience has somehow missed the message thus far, here it is. The vicar proclaims World War II as “the people’s war” and turns a speech of death into one of propaganda. Ultimately, the film leaves with the suggestion of living in the “now”, as constantly mentioned by both Carol and Mrs. Miniver that “time is precious” and should not be wasted, despite a seemingly depressing war looming overhead.

Ultimately, Churchill was correct, this film is one of the most powerful propaganda devices, rallying more support than any other form of media. Just as the film demonstrates that spirit is invulnerable to weapons, the real world repercussions of the film boosted public morale in American support for Britain, easing Roosevelt into creating a more open alliance with England where the public may finally ditch their isolated nature and give money and resources to this ally. While this is an American film, it has a message for the British as well, it speaks to them directly asking them to maintain their routines and social lives for the good of the country. Acting as a two hour one-way dialogue, the film is very similar to some of the Third Reich’s innovative propaganda techniques, particularly the radio. The audience of the film feels as though they are a part of the film, that the characters and experiences are emotionally tied to them. However, the film is a one-way dialogue, there is no opportunity for the audience to talk back but they are so invested in what they are seeing and hearing, they hardly notice. This relation to Nazi propaganda did not go unnoticed by the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Propaganda Minister,

openly acknowledged the film was an “exemplary propaganda film for German industry to copy.” (Troyan, 148)

After two hours of being shown what values they must uphold and the great divide between the humanity of the Allies and the savagery of the Axis, the film concludes with a proud, tightly coordinated group of fighters flying above London, fading out to a “Buy War Bonds” message on the end titles screen. Commercials and posters had the daunting task of capturing the people’s attention in a very small timeframe, whereas character-centric films demand sympathy pleading for the aid of the public. It becomes a moral choice rather than a political one, making the decision to support a war effort much more difficult to resist.

Proving that propaganda can cross cultural borders, the film became an international hit, but in America it became a true pop culture sensation, attracting the notion of defending freedom and civilization while stripping America of its isolationistic nature. Suddenly, America found common ground between their citizens and people like the Miniver’s, and the impact of war did not seem to be millions of miles away, but personally affecting at home.

## **Bibliography**

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