

## Adrift in Steinbeck's *Lifeboat*



After the cinematic success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* in 1940, Steinbeck received some remunerative offers to write screenplays. He himself had no hand in the first screen adaptations of his work; the scenarios for *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* were by Eugene Solow and Nunnally Johnson respectively. Steinbeck was in no hurry to write commercial screenplays either of his own work, that of others, or original scenarios. He turned down \$5000 a week from Darryl F. Zanuck in order to work for no pay on *The Forgotten Village*, which Herbert Kline filmed in Mexico. Since the production used illiterate Indian villagers who knew no English and in some cases spoke only Aztec, Steinbeck could not create a conventional script with dialogue but wrote a narrative, spoken by Burgess Meredith. He had no hand in the next two films made from his own books — MGM's 1942 version of *Tortilla Flat* and 20th Century-Fox's 1943 production of *The Moon Is Down*. When Nunnally Johnson asked Steinbeck for suggestions in adapting the latter, Steinbeck replied, "Tamper with it." Johnson did so successfully, in the process overcoming complaints that the story was "soft" on Nazism.

Steinbeck's first writing for commercial cinema was for *Lifeboat*, a 20th Century-Fox film that was one of the more interesting movies of 1944. *Lifeboat* brings together the unlikely team of Steinbeck and Alfred Hitchcock. The screen title announces "Alfred Hitchcock's production of *Lifeboat* by John Steinbeck." The actual scenario is by Jo Swerling, based upon an original unpublished story by Steinbeck. Whether the initial idea was Steinbeck's or Hitchcock's is unclear. Neither 20th Century-Fox nor the Steinbeck estate has any correspondence concerning the script, and Hitchcock does not answer inquiries. His own comments are only partially enlightening.

I had assigned John Steinbeck to the screenplay, but his treatment was incomplete and so I brought in MacKinlay Kantor, who worked on it for two weeks. I didn't care for what he had written at all . . . and hired another writer, Jo Swerling, who had worked on several films for Frank Capra. When the screenplay was completed and I was ready to shoot, I discovered that the narrative was rather shapeless. So I went over it again, trying to give a dramatic form to each of the sequences.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 113.



The result is an uneven conglomeration of Hitchcock suspense, Steinbeck philosophy, and Swerling situation and dialogue. The finished film has a good deal of Hollywood slickness, melodrama, and cliché; but its underlying meaning and several startling scenes are quite unconventional, and they provoked considerable controversy when the film was first released.

Though most of the dialogue and some of the details of plot and characterization are Swerling's rather than Steinbeck's, the structure and philosophy of the film resemble some of Steinbeck's novels. As in *The Wayward Bus*, Steinbeck isolates a group of representative individuals and then has them interact. The cast of *Lifeboat* consists of eight survivors of an American freighter which had been torpedoed by a German submarine, plus the commander of the U-boat, also sunk in the encounter, adrift in the ship's launch. Except for the ending, when an Allied destroyer sinks a German supply ship, all the action is confined to the lifeboat, which becomes a microcosm. Thus *Lifeboat* becomes an allegory of the war, with the representatives of democracy drifting aimlessly at sea.

The survivors are Connie Porter (Tallulah Bankhead), a wealthy and arrogant reporter; Rittenhouse (Henry Hull), a conservative millionaire; Gus (William Bendix), a seaman with an injured leg; Kovac the oiler (John Hodiak), an embittered member of the proletariat whom Connie calls a fellow traveler; Stanley Garrett, a British radio operator (Hume Cronyn); Alice MacKenzie, an American Red Cross nurse (Mary Anderson); Joe (Canada Lee), a Negro steward nicknamed Charcoal; an English woman with her dead baby; and the Nazi (Walter Slezak).

The controversy came over the characterization of the Nazi vs. the representatives of democracy. While the latter sometimes quarrel among themselves and are often confused and ineffectual, the Nazi shows intense singleness of purpose. He is the most dynamic character on board and has such supreme resourcefulness that he becomes in effect their captain. He prevents the boat from capsizing, rows when the others are too weak, becomes navigator, maintains morale with his humor and determined good spirits, and demonstrates such self-confidence that the others turn to him for leadership. He is a philosopher and a surgeon who amputates Gus's gangrenous leg. Some critics had charged that *The Moon Is Down* made the Nazis too sympathetic by avoiding the standard wartime stereotype of Hun monsters and by showing some of them as lonely, homesick human beings. Now hostile critics charged Steinbeck with making the Nazi commander too strong and with promoting the myth of the Aryan superman. Dorothy Thompson gave *Lifeboat* "ten days to get out of town."<sup>2</sup> What her ultimatum would be after that deadline she did not say, and the movie proceeded to have a long and successful New York run.

Certainly neither Steinbeck, Hitchcock, nor Swerling was pro-Nazi. *The Moon Is Down* argues that a free people cannot be kept down by oppression, and the Norwegians rise up to drive out their German conquerors. Instead of abetting the enemy, Steinbeck wrote the book after a conference with Colonel William J. Donovan of the OSS on methods of supporting

<sup>2</sup> David Lardner, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 19 (February 4, 1944), 65.

resistance movements in countries occupied by the Axis power.<sup>3</sup> Hitchcock had made several anti-Nazi films, one of them (*Foreign Correspondent*) even before America's entry into the war. Though some viewers complained that the Nazi is the most admirable character in *Lifeboat*, he is, in fact, consistently treacherous, and his good humor has a sinister edge. While the others suffer from hunger and thirst, he has food tablets, energy pills, and a secret supply of water that he keeps to himself. With a concealed compass, he steers the boat towards a German supply ship; and when Gus, whose life he saved by amputating the gangrenous leg, discovers his deceit, he drowns him. Realizing his treachery, the others turn on the Nazi in murderous rage, beat him in a frenzy, and drown him as he had drowned Gus. In terms of the film's allegory, Hitchcock explained that it signified that "while the democracies were completely disorganized, all of the Germans were clearly headed in the same direction. So here was a statement telling the democracies to put their differences aside temporarily and to gather their forces to concentrate on the common enemy, whose strength was precisely derived from a spirit of unity and of determination."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Hitchcock observed that, "In the analogue of war, he [the Nazi] was the victor at the time."<sup>5</sup> Lewis Jacobs elaborates: "Made at a crucial period in the war, at a time when many people were calling for a second front and the danger of German rocket and missile attacks from the French coast were imminent, *Lifeboat* was a grim reminder against underestimating the resourcefulness and power of the enemy."<sup>6</sup>

Gradually the democratic survivors do learn to work together ("There's a hunger in men to work together," Steinbeck wrote in *In Dubious Battle*) and learn lessons of humanity. The millionaire learns to respect Kovac the oiler and to do his share of seamanship; Mrs. Porter surrenders her snobbery and has a romance with Kovac, who comes from the same Chicago neighborhood from which she escaped; the radio operator and the nurse fall in love; and all of them learn to respect Joe, the black steward. The ordeal teaches them something of the code of Crane, Conrad, Hemingway and Faulkner — to prevail through pity, compassion, sacrifice and endurance.

The critical verdict was mixed. The *New York Times* and *Newsweek* found *Lifeboat* provocative and exciting, and *Time* called it "one of the most ambitious films in years . . . remarkably intelligent."<sup>7</sup> David Lardner of *The New Yorker* admired the film's mixture of grim realism and humor; in a second review he commented on the political attacks against the presentation of the Nazi. Finding him not admirable but "painfully smug and arrogant," Lardner thought it plausible that the U-boat captain would be the most highly trained and capable of the group; he also did not find the Ameri-

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Gannett, "John Steinbeck's Way of Writing," *Steinbeck and His Critics*, ed. E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Truffaut, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," *Film Culture*, 47 (Summer, 1969), 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>7</sup> "Cinema," *Time*, 43 (January 31, 1944), 94.

cans helpless. Hitchcock himself told François Truffaut,

One of the things that drew the fire of the American critics is that I had shown a German as being superior to the other characters. But at that time, 1940-41, the French had been defeated and the Allies were not doing too well. Moreover, the German . . . was actually a submarine commander; therefore there was every reason for his being better qualified than the others . . . But the critics apparently felt that a nasty Nazi couldn't be a good sailor.<sup>8</sup>

Bosley Crowther complained that though Hitchcock and Steinbeck "certainly had no intention of elevating the 'superman ideal,' — nor did the responsible studio, Twentieth Century-Fox . . . we have a sneaking suspicion that the Nazis, with some cutting here and there, could turn 'Lifeboat' into a whiplash against the 'decadent democracies.'"<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, Crowther found *Lifeboat* a "tremendously provocative film . . . tense and vital drama . . . an allegorical film which is startling in its broad implications."<sup>10</sup> *Time's* reviewer called *Lifeboat* "an adroit allegory of world shipwreck," paralleling e. e. cummings'

Kings Christ this world is all aleak;  
and life preservers there are none . . . .<sup>11</sup>

James Agee considered that "As allegory, the film is nicely knit, extensively shaded and detailed, and often fascinating. But the allegory itself is always too carefully slide-ruled, and the basic idea is artificial."<sup>12</sup> *Life* found the film full of "prodigious suspense" and "fine shipshape characterizations," but also summed up the misgivings of the hostile critics: they say the Nazi "is the only 'nice guy' in the picture. They argue that the film if captured by the Nazis, could, with minor deletions, be exploited throughout the Third Reich as promotion for the Nazi superman myth. Joe, the Negro, they also complain, is presented as a servile member of his race, a short of minstrelman pickpocket." Most of the blame was put on Steinbeck, who "disclaimed any responsibility for Director Hitchcock's and Scenarist Jo Swerling's treatment of his material."<sup>13</sup>

A careful reading of Steinbeck's original unpublished script shows that Steinbeck's disclaimer is justified. In it, the Nazi is not a superman, Joe is far from servile, and the slide-rule allegory is not in evidence. There are considerable and significant differences between the film as shown with Swerling's screenplay and the original Steinbeck script. No critics seem to have read the latter, and neither Mrs. Steinbeck nor Steinbeck's agent Elizabeth Otis knew whether or where it existed. Film historians simply

<sup>8</sup> Truffaut, pp. 113-14.

<sup>9</sup> Bosley Crowther, "Lifeboat," *New York Times*, January 13, 1944, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Time*, loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> James Agee, "Films," *The Nation*, 158 (January 22, 1944), 108.

<sup>13</sup> *Life*, 16 (January 31, 1944), 77.

mention that the scenario is based upon an unpublished story by Steinbeck. I finally obtained a copy of Steinbeck's text from the Research Department at 20th Century-Fox, where it had lain for over 30 years, and was astounded to discover that it is not a short story but a short novel, 158 pages of typescript. It is not written as a screenplay but is a first-person narrative, told by one of the surviving seamen. The characters are not precisely the same as in the scenario; the slick and wise-cracking dialogue is not there; much of the melodrama is missing; and the controversial role of the Nazi is almost entirely different. Steinbeck's novel is free from the contrived cuteness that sometimes mars the screenplay, such as Connie's writing her initials on Kovac's bare chest with lipstick, the talk of jive and jitterbug, and slick dialogue such as Alice's saying to the injured Gus, "I want to look at your leg," and his leering reply, "Sure, Babe — an' maybe sometime you'll let me return the compliment."<sup>14</sup>

Instead, there is much more description of the sea and narrative of sailing, storms, and survival. A whole page describes a school of porpoises. Instead of letting the camera show the episodes of seamanship, Steinbeck evokes in sometimes poetic prose the epic on men against the sea. His narrative has more in common with Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* than with Hitchcock's lifeboat in a studio tank.

Several critics faulted the film for a lack of realism. *Life's* reviewer complained that "There is no bilge water in the boat, Nobody's lips swell up to hideous size from thirst and exposure. No merchant seaman would be utterly ignorant of celestial navigation. No one man can row a heavy lifeboat by himself. And how Hitchcock's survivors stay so energetic and fresh — looking for so long remains a mystery to the experts."<sup>15</sup> Manny Farber added that "no one is silent or discomforted, or hungry, or cold, or afraid, nor are you supposed to feel much of that."<sup>16</sup> This is true of the film, but not of Steinbeck's original narrative. For the screenplay, Swerling contrived a good deal of artificial glamour, reinforced by Hitchcock's direction. For example, when we first see Connie Porter (Tallulah Bankhead), she is already in the lifeboat. She is wearing a Révillon Freres mink coat, a Hattie Carnegie suit, has an alligator-skin case, and a deluxe movie camera. "From her purse (by Mark Cross) she takes a gold cigarette holder (Tiffany), selects a cigarette, puts it into a silver cigarette holder (Cartier), lights it with a jewelled lighter (Dunhill)."<sup>17</sup> She also salvages a typewriter, electric hair dryer, and steamer blanket. Her first line is a whispered "Son-of-a-bitch" when she finds a run in her nylon. When Kovac, the oiler, comes aboard, he says that Mrs. Porter doesn't look shipwrecked, to which she replies, "Man, I certainly feel like it. Look at my bracelet. The clasp's busted. There's a run in my stocking, and one of my fingernails is broken. I've never been so buffeted about in my

<sup>14</sup> Jo Swerling, *Lifeboat*, Revised Final Screenplay, July 29, 1943, 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Life*, loc. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Manny Farber, "Among the Missing: Hitchcock," *The New Republic*, 110 (January 24, 1944), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Swerling, p. 2.

life.”<sup>18</sup> She proceeds to film the wreckage, and her only reaction to the torpedoing is to gloat over the “lovely stuff” she has photographed. Clearly Swerling developed this dialogue for its incongruous humour, which is sustained through the bitchy characterization of Mrs. Porter and Miss Bankhead’s performance in the role.

Steinbeck, however, has the women rescued from swimming in an oil slick. Mrs. Porter has retrieved her alligator bag but nothing else. “She’s a kind of blonde, but you couldn’t tell that until later because she’s so covered with oil now. Her hair’s all full of oil and hangs down around her shoulders.”<sup>19</sup> The boat is constantly full of bilge that the men bail out with their shoes, and during one storm the narrator comments on the absurdity of the women’s trying to protect themselves from rain with a tarpaulin while sitting waist deep in water. No one tries to row a lifeboat alone; when all the men try to row after a school of fish, they collapse from weakness. Swerling’s characters have a good deal of fun during the shipwreck; the oiler and millionaire play cards much of the time; but for Steinbeck’s group it is a more harrowing ordeal. The narrator does know celestial navigation. And his narrative constantly stresses the survivor’s weakness, worn and wasted appearance, hunger, fears, and despair. Their lips do not swell up only because everyone, including the men, puts on Mrs. Porter’s lipstick. In the film, the men develop only a slight stubble, but Steinbeck’s men grow a week’s beard during their ordeal afloat. After they survive a cyclone, the narrator says,

“I don’t think I’d ever been so tired in my life. My arms and my legs hung on me like sacks of pain and my head was heavy and there wasn’t any place to put it down. We weren’t a boat anymore. We were just a water logged tub nearly full of water . . . . I couldn’t feel my skin when I touched myself. My flesh was dead . . . . When the dawn came, we were just a boat full of half dead people, lying in the water . . . . I think we were all ready to die, all of us, and none of us cared very much.” (pp. 238-39)

A comparable realism prevails throughout Steinbeck’s narrative.

Its main weakness is the first-person narrative by a seaman unfortunately named Bud Abbott at the time when Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were the movies’ favorite comedy team. Abbott is a not-too-bright high school graduate whose language, for purposes of realism, is sometimes deliberately slack, run-on, and repetitive. It is in character and consistently sustained, but it becomes monotonous. Instead of Swerling’s polished if sometimes corny repartee, Abbott often summarizes the conversation of his shipmates. For example, “Brennan told Albert he’d better just sit down and cool himself off. Brennan said, he wouldn’t let him throw the German overboard. Well, Albert said, maybe he’d like to fight about it. Brennan said no, he wouldn’t like to fight about it, but he just wouldn’t let Albert do it ” (pp. 33-34). Ordinarily, Steinbeck writes working man’s dialogue better than any other American writer, but Abbott’s lacks the sinewy strength of the strikers in *In Dubious Battle* or of the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Abbott is not very interesting as a person, and his language, only occasionally striking, lacks the incision of Hemingway’s narrators or the racy vernacular of Huck Finn or

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> John Steinbeck, *Lifeboat*, Revised March 26, 1943, unpublished manuscript, 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation, p. 19. Subsequent references to Steinbeck’s *Lifeboat* will be cited in the text.

Faulkner's Ratcliff. However, he represents the common man's commonsense attitudes towards politics and economics, and Steinbeck gives him extensive meditations on these subjects. As for the style, the narrative was not intended for publication in its existing form, and doubtless Steinbeck would have done extensive revision had he planned to publish it. The question is unresolved as to why he wrote a first-person narrative as the draft for a screenplay, especially since he was a playwright himself.

James Agee considered *Lifeboat* "more a Steinbeck picture than a Hitchcock,"<sup>20</sup> but the reverse seems to be the case. Swerling's scenario makes Steinbeck's story more cinematic, turning narrative description into dialogue and replacing the narrator's musings on the meaning of events with more episodes of melodramatic suspense. Some of the characters are different. In Steinbeck's original, the oiler is not Kovac but Albert Shienkowitz, a Pole from around Chicago; he is not a near-Communist, and instead of having a love-hate romance with Mrs. Porter, he and the nurse (called Alice Both instead of MacKenzie) fall in love. Mrs. Porter, a reporter in the film, is in the novel a Congresswoman who was formerly an actress. The novel's millionaire is named Brennan rather than Rittenhouse, and he manufactures planes, whereas Rittenhouse is a shipbuilder. The radio operator, who in the film falls in love with the nurse, is not in the novel, nor is Gus, the seaman whose leg is amputated. Steinbeck's narrator, Abbott, is also missing in the screenplay. Abbott does have an injured leg which heals; his injury is transferred to Gus, who develops gangrene.

The crucial change from novel to scenario is the treatment of the Nazi, whose characterization as a superman is not in Steinbeck's original text and seems to have been developed by Swerling under Hitchcock's direction. Steinbeck's Nazi has a broken arm; instead of rowing the boat, he nurses his painful injury. He has no water, compass, food tablets, or energy pills. He is not a surgeon, has not read Freud, cannot speak English (Mrs. Porter converses with him in high school German), and does not take command. It is never certain that he is in fact the U-boat captain, though Abbott suspects so because his insignia is missing. Nor is it certain that he has betrayed them by steering East. When the German relieves Abbott at the steering oar and turns the boat East against the consensus of the others, Abbott discovers his subterfuge and tells his colleagues that he thinks the Nazi is trying to direct them to a German supply ship, whereupon Albert knocks the man overboard and he drowns. Then the survivors decide maybe the German was right and head East after all. The killing is more casual in the novel, whereas in the screenplay it is an episode of vigilante violence. It may be instructive to contrast the scenes. In the novel,

a funny thing came over that boat then. I could see it in the faces of every one. The German saw it and I think he knew what it meant too. We were scared and we were mad and we were fierce.

Brennan said, "Well, God Damn him anyway!"

Then Albert said, "Let's throw the Son of a Bitch overboard!" Well it was kind of like a craziness that ran through us. All of a sudden we were crowding back to where the German was holding the oar. He half stood up. The next thing I knew, I heard Joe yelling.

"Don't you do nothing to him — don't you do nothing to him." . . .

<sup>20</sup> Agee, p. 108.



Albert said, "I'm going to sock the Son of a Bitch." And he let go.

Albert was pretty weak from hunger. I don't think he really hit him hard and I don't really know what happened but the German went overboard. . . . The next thing I knew there was a splash and there was that nigger Joe swimming out after him. I don't know what pulled the German down so fast. Maybe he was weak or maybe he was so scared he got a gulp of water. . . . Maybe the German was hit on the button and that's what made him go down so fast. He sank right away. (pp. 224-25)

Afterwards, Abbott "felt as though we murdered that German, just murdered him in cold blood. Alice, the nurse, who had not been involved, says, "I don't understand about people hurting each other and killing each other . . . . It doesn't make any sense to me at all. I'm doing the only thing I can, trying to put them together again when they get hurt . . . . That's the only way I can keep from going crazy, because the whole thing is crazy to me . . ." (p. 231).

In the screenplay, by contrast, Alice "with an animal cry, is the first to hurl herself at the German." Her face is so transfigured with hate that it is barely recognizable. "Alice's attack is like a trigger that releases in them — men and women alike — the same uncontrollable desire to kill. Now they all leap at the German." All but Joe, who has seen enough of lynch mobs. When the German knocks Alice back, Joe tries to hold her, but she

wrenches herself free and hurls herself forward again. The ferocity of the attack is intensified by the complete silence under which it takes place. The German is like a bear, ambushed by a pack of wolves. The two women, if anything, are more unbridled and primitive in their attack than the men. Alice, who knew nothing of war, and whose business was only to mend, now finds out about war and thinks only of how to destroy. Mrs. Porter's brittle sophistication has cracked in her lust to kill . . . . They fight with fist, tooth and nail, hitting, kicking, biting, clawing. They are lost in their orgasm of murder.

Clawed and bleeding, the German tries to hold on to a seat, but Mrs. Porter kicks his hands and the men boot him in the face. "You get the feeling it's a snake or some poisonous toad that's being killed, rather than a man." Thrown overboard, the German grabs the side of the boat, but Kovac and Stanley kick at his hands and Rittenhouse smashes him in the face with the shoe from Gus's amputated leg until he lets go."<sup>21</sup>

This scene does resemble Steinbeck's story "The Vigilante" and the scenes of mob violence from *In Dubious Battle*, and its animal imagery is Steinbeckian. In *In Dubious Battle*, "when the crowd saw the blood they went nuts . . . it was just one big — animal . . . It's different from the men in it. And it's stronger than all the men put together . . . It's a different kind of animal . . . When it gets started it might do anything."<sup>22</sup> Earlier, Doc Burton says "it might be worthwhile to know more about group-man, to know his nature, his ends, his desires . . . Maybe group-man gets pleasure when individual men are wiped out in a war."<sup>23</sup> Possibly this episode in the scenario

<sup>21</sup> Swerling, pp. 139-40.

<sup>22</sup> John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1936), pp. 316-17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

is Steinbeck's revision rather than Swerling's; it seems so on the basis of style and content, but in the absence of supporting evidence, we cannot tell. evidence, we cannot tell.

The original narrative argues instead against the insanity of war, as Alice says, "When you've helped take the arms and legs off young men, when you heard them raving in the night, then maybe it wouldn't make any sense to you either . . . don't ask me to think about whether that German was telling the truth or not. He was just a man with a broken arm" (p. 232). When the German first comes aboard, Albert wants to throw him overboard, but after he helps Alice set the arm, he is ready to fight to save him. "Albert said he could still hate Germans, but he said once you laid your hand on a man why you couldn't hate him the same anymore . . . He may have been the dirtiest son-of-a-bitch in the world, but he was our son-of-a-bitch now" (pp. 39-40).

This broad humanitarian outlook would not have pleased the superpatriots anymore than the scenario's superNazi did. David Lardner wrote that "the opponents of this film . . . would like to see the case against the Nazis not merely stated but overstated. They would like to see more of the same exaggerated super-salesmanship which the movies have often used during this war and which, I think, may well be a perilous thing."<sup>24</sup> Steinbeck agrees with Lardner's objections to patriotic supersalesmanship. In a lengthy interior monologue, Steinbeck's narrator complains of wartime propaganda and news commentators trying to stir up Americans to mindless hysteria by polarizing people into heroic allies and bestial enemies — manipulating them, in fact, into losing their individuality and becoming group-man. The passage is worth quoting at length as a significant, if unpublished, statement about the nature of democracy in time of war.

I got to thinking about the war and all the parts of it that didn't make any sense to me. It seemed to me that most people were kind of comfortable with war, because they didn't have to think any more. We were all good and the enemy was all bad. And it made it kind of simple. When they bombed us they were murderers and when we bombed them, why we were winning for some good reason. And if they sunk our ships, they were stabbers in the back, and if we sunk their ships we were winning a war. You have to put a good name on a thing in a war, and I haven't seen any papers from Germany or heard any speeches, but I'd like to take a small bet that everything we say, they say, only it's the other way around . . . and I bet they believe it just as much as we do. (p. 75)

Steinbeck's attacks on self-righteously mindless propaganda resemble George Orwell's statement that "Actions are held to be good or bad, not on their own merits but according to who does them, and there is almost no kind of outrage . . . which does not change its moral colour when it is committed by 'our' side . . . The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lardner, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), pp. 165-6.

## Steinbeck's narrator continues with the notion that commentators

take us for a bunch of God-damned fools — they're always talking about what the common people ought to think, and how the common people ought to get mad, and how if the common people aren't fighting mad they can't win a war . . . . I guess I'm the common people . . . Well, anyway, if they get us all steamed up and we start foaming at the mouth, then we'll go out and win a war for them . . . . And I wonder if those fellows think they're kidding us. Or I wonder if they believe all that stuff themselves — how we're all white and noble and the enemy is all black and wicked, evil and mean. I don't know much about the enemy because I never had much contact with them outside of having a couple of ships sunk under me . . . . But when they tell us we're all noble and white, that's just a bunch of horse manure. I know fellows in my own town that's mainly interested in the war so they can get a little contract; I know women that've got a basement full of canned goods. We've got a woman in our town who's always talking about how she gave two sons to the Army; she yelps about it all the time; she gave 'em see? Well, she didn't. They went. She did her best to stop them, too. And she raised a hell of a howl because they were working and making good wages when they joined the Army. But now they're gone she's got a service flag on the front door and she's got one in each side of the window. She goes to meetings and talks about how she gave her sons. That makes me sick. She wouldn't give anything. I know quite a lot of fellows . . . and they think that's a bunch of horse manure. Of course when they make speeches they'll say what everybody expects them to say — how they want more and more cracks at the Japs and how they just wish they could get in there with a bayonet and slaughter up a few Germans. Because that's the way those commentators tell 'em they ought to be . . . . But I'm pretty sure way down deep they don't think that way at all . . . . I think most of those fellows are just like me. They know that war is a dirty business — both sides of it — every part of it. When you've got to clean out a cesspool you do it quick . . . . You don't have to get fighting mad to do it. You just know you've got to clean out that cesspool, because it's stinking up the place where you're living and your toilets won't flush." (pp. 75-77)

## Abbott says that though he signed up for sea duty, he

never was much for duty and things. And I know the fellows that went in the Army from the poolroom up home; they never were much for duty and stuff like that, either. The point is that this big stinking thing happened and they want to get it all over with — get back to shooting pool again — and trying to stay off relief or trying to stay on relief . . . . the thing that bothers us fellows more than anything else is all this shouting at us and pointing at us and telling us "Do this" and "Go there" — we know there's chiselers in the Government and we know there's crookedness, but now it's unpatriotic to say it. Now you can't say it because you're interfering with the war effort. Those chiselers are absolutely protected for the duration of the war. I think that's bothering us as much as anything else, but I think all of us know that's just a part of the big stick, just a part of the dirt of war. And we'll fight this war . . . . and we'll win it but we hate to be kidded all the time, and we hate to be yelled at and told what we ought to think and what we ought to do . . . . It makes it pretty simple for Albert just to say he hates Germans; . . . . It gets him out of doing any thinking. But when he sets this guy's arm, then he's got to think . . . . The commentators wouldn't like that. (pp. 77-79)

The film has much less political consciousness. It makes some superficial attempts at political controversy but never develops them. Kovac, the oiler, is a roughneck fellow traveller, whom Mrs. Porter calls a communist, but his politics are never examined. He is a foil to her high-society *hauteur*: "You've been all over the world," he tells her, "and you've met all kinds of people — but you never write about them. You only write about your-

self. You think the whole war's a show put on for you to cover, like a Broadway play, and if enough people die before the last act, maybe you might give it four stars." She replies, "All right, Tovarich."<sup>26</sup> However, their antagonism masks a basic attraction; later she play footsie with him, lipsticks her initials on his chest, and reveals that she comes from the same gutter that he does in the Chicago southside. A foil to them both is Rittenhouse, the multimillionaire tycoon, an old buddy-antagonist of Mrs. Porter, who greets him with "Ritt, you old rat!" Swerling's scenario describes him as "the sort of one hundred and ten percent American that would make an admirable model for Norman Rockwell or the late Grant Wood. Strictly American Gothic." But there is no viciousness in him. A cartoon capitalist, he smokes cigars throughout the film, whereas Steinbeck's character has salvaged nothing but the clothes on his back. There is some conflict between him and Kovac for command of the boat, but the film ends with the near-Fascist manufacturer and the near-Communist oiler becoming friends. It makes a pitch for war-time solidarity and suggests that under the surface all Americans are pretty good guys. "We're all sort of fellow travelers here, in a mighty small boat on a mighty big ocean," says Rittenhouse,<sup>27</sup>

Steinbeck's novel makes the opposite point, that there is a lot of corruption at home, profiteering, and economic exploitation and that when the GIs return, there must be radical reformation. In its attacks on propagandistic paranoia and in its comments on the less than utopian post-war world to which the veterans will return, it strikingly resembles current criticism of the Vietnamese War, its aftermath, and political and corporate crimes of the Watergate era. Abbott, the narrator, muses,

Albert, he says that some of the fellows that're yelling the loudest about protecting Democracy against Germany are the same guys that were using machine-guns on labor unions before the war. Albert, he says, well maybe the war changed those fellows and they aren't like that any more. Well, maybe they aren't. We'll find out when the war is over. What I hope is that those commentators don't think that if we get good and fighting mad the way they want us to that we won't do any thinking any more, 'cause that's not the way it is. (pp. 79-80)

Reminiscing about the Depression, in which his father and others who lost their jobs were accused of laziness, Abbott considers that there are 10 million men in the Armed Forces, and when they come back after the war,

they're going to be all full of vitamins and vinegar and they're going to be tough guys, and they'd better come back to something besides relief because they're not going to like that. I don't think anybody in the Army or out of it is so dumb to think that there is nothing wrong with this country. But it seems to me the reason they're all fighting because the good thing, the one thing that's best of all is that in this country if enough of you don't like a thing — you can go about and change it. Well, all those fellows are going to come back from the Army, and they're going to find a lot of people elected to office, that were elected by people who weren't in the Army, and they're not going to be the kind of people who'd . . . see that the Army didn't go back on relief. You see I remember when a bunch of Congressmen got up and said if they voted two billion dollars to feed starving people in this country it would bankrupt the nation and then a little later those same Congressmen

<sup>26</sup> Swerling, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Swerling, p. 26.

they voted a hundred billion dollars for the war. Maybe they weren't scared then. But when we were hungry that two billion dollars looked awful big to us. Maybe we were as scared as those Congressmen are now. Maybe all this kind of thing isn't a good thing to think about and talk about in a time of war, but I never could get the idea the best thing to do wasn't to tell people the truth. (pp. 81-82)

Mrs. Porter, the spokesman for laissez-faire, tells Abbott "she wanted to free the American workingman from a dictatorship of labor unions," but he reflects "that the people who were most anxious to free us laboring men from dictatorship and the unions were the same people that the unions made raise wages a little bit. Maybe what they wanted to free us from was good wages." He recalls a shipmate's saying that "we got one great right in the United States. He said poor people and rich people they both got the right to starve to death. But he said rich people don't very often exercise that privilege" (pp. 91-92). Mrs. Porter continues "about how the unions were full of labor racketeers." "Well," thinks Abbott, "you know it's a funny thing and it's flattering to working people. If there's one racketeer in a labor union why the whole country's all upset about it. But if a board member of a corporation goes west with the treasury, nobody thinks very much about it; they kind of expect it of him" (p. 93).

Steinbeck's novel makes a detailed case for the liberal position on economics and warfare. Unfortunately, most of his ideas, being part of Abbott's interior monologue, are not translatable to the screen. Swerling's dialogue fails to pick them up and turn them into conflict among the cast – probably sensibly so in terms of cinematic drama, but a loss in terms of social consciousness.

The objectionable features in the portrait of Joe, the black steward, are Swerling's, not Steinbeck's. Swerling partly reduces Joe to a stereotype and give him the offensive nickname "Charcoal." In the scenario, Joe is a pick-pocket and a minstrel-show type who plays "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" on the flute. His one memorable moment comes when he refuses to join in the virtual lynching of the Nazi. Steinbeck's Joe not only refrains from the murder but leaps overboard and tries to rescue the drowning German. Earlier, he has rescued the English woman with her dead child; and at the end, he rescues Mrs. Porter when their boat is capsized in the fight between American destroyers and a German raider. Abbott repeatedly comments on Joe's courage and concludes, "I think Joe was about the bravest man I ever saw" (p. 243). Steinbeck describes Joe as a handsome man and portrays him as a sensitive individual. Far from being a minstrel type, Steinbeck's Joe is a classical musician who plays the flute with a chamber music group, after being unable to get into a symphony orchestra. "He told me it was pretty hard for a colored man to get good music to play because everybody expected he was going to break into the St. Louis Blues," says Abbott (p. 200). Some of the narrator's more eloquent passages are his descriptions of Joe's flute playing.

You might have thought that music came out of the wind or you might have thought it was blown off the crest of a wave. It was just like the ocean and it drove me back inside myself. It made me think of things that were gone. It made me think of my old man sitting beside the kitchen stove trying to figure out how we were going to live, and how he locked himself in the bed-

room after he had been out looking for a job and couldn't get one, locked himself in and stayed for a long time." (p. 202)

Far from being racist, Steinbeck's narrative attacks racism. Abbott thinks "how hard it must be for him [Joe] to be in this boat, even harder than it was for the German. Nobody had anything against Joe except his color. We hated the German because he was an enemy (p. 203). But again, these musings do not transfer to the soundtrack.

Instead, the movie ends on a racist note of a different sort. When the German supply ship is sunk, the lifeboat survivors rescue a 17-year-old boy, who proceeds to pull a pistol on them. Rittenhouse says, "You see? You can't treat them like human beings. You've got to exterminate them." When Joe disarms the German, though the others then become almost excessively concerned for the boy's injured arm, Kovak asks, "What're you going to do with people like this?"<sup>28</sup> Stanley and Mrs. Porter answer that maybe the Nazis' dead victims could give the answer. And the film ends.

Despite its clichés, stereotypes, and simplistics, the Swerling-Hitchcock film is more exciting than Steinbeck's more realistic, meditative version. Most of the melodrama is in the scenario – Nazi's plotting, the amputation of Gus's leg, the murder of Gus, the marriage of Stanley and Alice (just a page after Alice leads the lynching of the Nazi), and the Nazi gunman at the end. But the gain in suspense is accomplished by a loss of substance. By omitting Steinbeck's serious commentary on the Depression, capitalism, war, propaganda, race, and his psychological perceptions of the survivors, the film amounts to little more than slick entertainment except for the shocking scene in which the Nazi is murdered. It is highly entertaining, however. The claustrophobic setting gave Hitchcock the opportunity for some ingenious directing. He even managed to insert the customary picture of himself into the film; in this case he appears in a newspaper ad for "Reduco – the sensational new obesity slayer." As a result, he "was literally submerged by letters from fat people who wanted to know where and how they could get Reduco."<sup>29</sup> Tallulah Bankhead (in her first film in 11 years), William Bendix, John Hodiak, and Walter Slezak gave the best screen performances of their careers.

*Lifeboat* is significant in its treatment of such recurring Steinbeck themes as group-man, the nature of leadership, the animality of people hypnotized by mass action, and the stripping away of civilized surfaces to reveal the primitive human. But the finished film is more slick than substantial, more a nautical *Stagecoach* than a serious study of survival, war, and politics. These elements are in Steinbeck's novel, but he never polished it for publication. James Agee claims that *Lifeboat* could have been "a great and terrifying film,"<sup>30</sup> but it is essentially an ingenious entertainment.

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<sup>28</sup> Swerling, p. 161-62.

<sup>29</sup> Truffaut, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> Agee, p. 108.