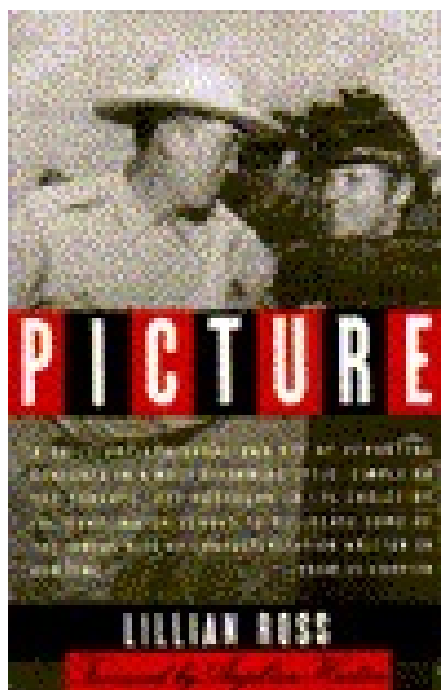




Picture

Lillian Ross

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Picture

Lillian Ross

Picture Lillian Ross

Fascinating history, pin-point accurate character portraits, and a riveting narrative make this book the best of its kind--and the first. In 1952, Ross observed John Huston and the MGM set while Huston made the now classic movie The Red Badge of Courage, starring Audie Murphy. A hilariously funny and neutrally vicious look at the insane world of movie-making.

Picture Details

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Elizabeth says

I loved this insiders look at the making and marketing of John Huston's film *The Red Badge of Courage* (based on the novel by Stephen Crane). Embedded journalism is about the coolest (and most enviable) form of writing there is, and Lillian Ross pulls it off with a great deal of skill. There are many things to like about this narrative (which originally appeared as several long-form pieces in *The New Yorker*): its close attention to several main figures (rather than an intensive character sketch of one of them), its detailed account of behind-the-scenes negotiations (which sound an awful lot like those you imagine Hollywood execs have today, minus the martinis), and its beautifully intricate descriptions of minute events that would otherwise go unchronicled (like John Huston's casting of a pig). Despite all of these aspects to admire, however, what I most liked was how far outside the narrative Ross herself seemed. I'm a great fan of first-person narration in journalism, but reading this made me realize (again) that its popularity goes hand in hand with the ease of writing oneself into an account of a great event. Ross does very little of that here, and I think the story she tells benefits from it. It's old school journalism at its best, which is to say it's as enjoyable to read now as it probably was when it was first written.

Alyce Champagne says

Today, Lillian Ross is mostly remembered for snubbing the young Joyce Maynard. She is forgotten, but "Picture" remains. Her fans have called it the most revealing book about Hollywood, but I think not. She chose for her behind-the-scenes project John Huston's "Red Badge of Courage," a boring, all-male movie based on the even more boring "classic" book. What resulted was a boring book about a boring movie. Thanks, Lillian.

Cameron says

I only recently discovered Lillian Ross's journalism, and she's amazing. Her quiet observational style is beyond compare. And this, a collection of her writings about the production of the film "The Red Badge of Courage" is an amazing piece of work. Her access to the director John Huston as well as all the bigwigs at MGM in 1951 makes for a brilliant read, and an incredible insight into Hollywood at that time. This is a real joy.

Geraldine says

"Picture" is the history of the making of "The Red Badge of Courage" by the great director John Huston, who although he may have been talented, certainly comes off in this book as a lout.

While this book is interesting for those of us who love anything about Hollywood of the past, it covers a lot of ground that is incredibly boring. It follows meeting after meeting after meeting prior to the making of "The Red Badge of Courage," during the making of the movie, and it post-production hand-wringing.

The book does, however, show the struggle in the industry as television began to cut into the revenue of the

big studios. It follows in particular the inner workings within MGM and the resignation of Louis B. Mayer, who ran the studio with an iron fist for years. He hated "The Red Badge of Courage" because it was an "art" film--something akin to what the Europeans were making at the time. He hated realistic movies and only wanted movies that entertained. However, by the 1950s, Americans were tired of musicals and films with Esther Williams. They were looking for more realism, so Mayer was pushed out and men with greater foresight moved the motion picture business to what it is today.

The author writes as a reporter would have written in the mid-20th Century, and perhaps that's what makes the reading tedious. People talk and talk and talk and although a motion picture ultimately was made, one wonders how that really happened.

Mike says

Lillian Ross' book is something of a classic in terms of discussing the film industry. It's creative reporting long before that was an accepted term. It's also deeply cynical, letting the voices of the various people involved speak for themselves, and reveal themselves.

Whether Huston was right to try and make *The Red Badge of Courage* the way he did is a moot point; whether the various producers were right to chop it to bits and perhaps ruin it is a moot point. Whether it needed a better script, a better story, who knows. It was a commercial failure, and in Hollywood that's pretty much all they're interested in - then and now.

I would have liked more about the actual making of the movie, but I don't think that was Ross's approach: she was interested in the *money* side of things, because money above all is what Hollywood is interested in. As many artists have found to their great discouragement.

You have to wonder what the Hollywood insiders thought of Ross's book, and her picture of them. Perhaps they thought that like the movie, the book was too much 'high art' and not worth worrying about.

Shaun Bossio says

So much has changed in Hollywood in the last seventy years, and yet it remains eerily similar in its short-sightedness. A great look at the creation of a movie from concept to release.

Tina says

Fascinating story of the making of the film "The Red Badge of Courage," from the initial meetings, through the writing, planning, filming, editing, scoring, and post-production tinkering, to the world-wide release. It's pretty damning about the waning Hollywood studio system. No one except Gottfried Reinhardt comes out looking like they have much integrity. Now I am going to have to watch the film....

Evan says

This book, an immediate classic upon its publication in 1952, has long been considered one of the great works of reportage about the inside workings of Hollywood movie-making in the golden age. I'm happy to report that it retains its front-rank status.

In the early 1950s, *New Yorker* magazine reporter Lillian Ross did something that no one before her had ever done: write a full-length true-life narrative about the making of a Hollywood movie from the first germ of its origin to the aftermath of its release. *Picture* was the first inside Hollywood narrative not issued by, and filled with the lies of, the Tinseltown PR machine. It captures Hollywood at an interesting moment of its development: catching the town in panic mode with the onset of television, reeling from the divestiture orders of the Paramount decision of 1948 and the fundamental changes to the studio system that resulted, buckling under to greater profitability and cost-cutting pressures, operating during the era of the Red Scare and the Korean War and watching as Tinseltown's greatest studio underwent power plays and a changing of the guard as almighty Louis B. Mayer was forced aside to hand the MGM reigns to Dore Schary.

The book recounts in incredibly vivid detail the tumultuous making of director John Huston's masterful --but ultimately artistically compromised -- 1951 MGM adaptation of Stephen Crane's Civil War novella, *The Red Badge of Courage*.

These kinds of books have been legion since, but this one set the high-bar standard at the outset and provides an invaluable detailed panorama of the workings of Hollywood at the tail-end of its golden age. The book, in vividly hewn prose filled with ample dialogue, reconstructs the on-set logistics, the back-door meetings, the phony glad-handing and sycophantic ass-kissing of the film community, the incredible tirades (of MGM's Louis B. Mayer, for one), and much more. Ross gained access to every executive of importance at MGM at the time, including studio head Louis B. Mayer, production chief Dore Schary and the elusive Wizard of Oz himself, Nicholas Schenck, the real man on the throne of MGM, operating the business from parent company Loew's Inc, in New York.

Ross deftly and with straight-faced bemusement nails the craziness and kitschiness of the Hollywood world and takes satirical, critical and wry jabs at the players simply by reporting; she has a sly eye for irony, hypocrisy and contradictions -- the narrative is filled with running jokes and patterns pointing out the barely veiled sleaziness of the Hollywood way of life and business. Huston himself, the main lynchpin of the story, comes off not always flatteringly; a bit of a pampered phony, despite his masterly directorial and artistic skills. Perhaps the saddest character of this book is Gottfried Reinhardt, the film's producer, an essentially decent man who finds himself virtually abandoned when things take a turn for the worse and the studio begins to lose faith in its own product. The book is essential fodder for those interested in and debating the dichotomy of art vs. entertainment inherent in the Hollywood business model.

The book is great and it reads like lightning. I've wanted to read it, literally, for decades, and it was worth the wait.

Graceann says

Lillian Ross knew how to put words together and make them magical. Thank goodness for that, or I would have given up on this book at page 10. As it is, it took me more than two months to get through just over 200 pages, and though I am a slow reader, I'm rarely *that* slow.

Picture is about the making, from idea to release, of *The Red Badge of Courage*, starring Audie Murphy as the young soldier terrified at his first battle. The film was not a success, and some of the inside information provided here may explain why.

The problem I had was that this story is so "inside baseball" that I just couldn't bring myself to care enough to slog a little further. Perhaps if I'd adored the film it was about, I might have been more interested. Even if it had been *Gone with the Wind* (my favorite film) my eyes might have glazed over a bit at the minute

discussion of scoring every frame of film and the endless cutting and re-cutting of the same scenes.

I found it fairly interesting that once John Huston finished directing the film and had handed it off to the editors and musicians and publicity department, he pretty much checked out and moved on to his next project. Only dogged determination kept me from doing the same.

If you are a filmmaker, or you are deciding which branch of filmmaking to go into, and would like a detailed look at how a film got from page to screen during the last gasp of the Studio Era, this is going to be invaluable to you. For those of us who just want to sit in the dark, have a little popcorn, and enjoy the show, it might just be a bit much.

ALLEN says

This is one of filmdom's best "Making Of" books. An unabashed fan of works like THE MAKING OF THE WIZARD OF OZ, I really don't know how I missed Lillian Ross's PICTURE for so long. In this moderate-sized book -- which began as five long articles for the NEW YORKER magazine -- Ms. Ross follows famed director John Huston in 1950 as he writes, readies and films an adaptation of Stephen Crane's Civil War novel, THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. Huston already had a reputation as a perceptive director with a flair for seeing the drama within the ordinary, but this film posed challenges both in its making and in the clash of studio politics nearing its peak back at MGM headquarters. Outdoor temperatures when climactic battle scenes were filmed topped 105 degrees and in Culver City, Huston and others had to struggle with the mixed messages the company was sending about the film; Louis B. Mayer, still officially head of the studio, would not green-light the movie, but the rising Dore Schary as "head of production" did.

Film buffs can glean insights into how such a movie was filmed, but a major theme of corporate intrigue and corporate narcissism also arises from the power struggle between Dore Schary and Louis B. Mayer, and the curiously self-justifying logic that set in when people were confronted with -- yet refused to fully face -- that this MGM movie was not going to be a classic. Even when director Huston's responsibilities were done and he headed to Africa to start on a new movie (an independent, far from MGM's control), the argle-bargle continued. Late in the book Mayer let his contract lapse and Schary took full control of the studio, now in the hands of MGM executives who, terrified by negative remarks at several previews, started tinkering with Huston's movie. Ms. Ross's investigative technique was simple but brilliant: she took meticulous notes and quotes the principal players at length, essentially letting them impeach themselves. Since PICTURE reads as excitingly as a novel, I consider it somewhat akin to Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" IN COLD BLOOD (1966) or John Berendt's MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL (1997), though in this case I doubt any fictive discursions were necessary on Ross's part. Suffice it to say that PICTURE always ranks at or near the top of cinema-journalism surveys, and rightly so.

"I have a washbasin but no shower in my office. Dore has a shower but no bathtub. L.B. has a shower AND a bathtub." -- Unnamed studio exec.

The above quote gives us some insight into a culture in turmoil (at over half a century's remove, many would say "decay"), one that substitutes status symbols and trappings for more substantial indicators of achievement. Although Ms. Ross does not inject overt humor into PICTURE, the post-production and publicity people at MGM do it for her, spouting off defensive optimism whose tenor changes from day to day depending on whose philosophy they were emulating. At book's end Ross visited the annual MGM stockholder's meeting in New York and met MGM corporation head Nick Schenck, to whom Mayer and Schary were both subordinate and who was quite unconcerned about the size of his office suite or even that his salary was less than L.B. Mayer's. Therefore, in PICTURE, Lillian Ross has given us a fascinating document that still rests among the best of books on film and will provide some uncomfortable clues about

why so many pictures from the Hollywood system seem to be ham-handedly edited, perhaps with the goal of appealing more to critics than the mass audience. Oh, and that picture John Huston "escaped" to Africa to film? It became *The African Queen*, a top-ranked movie without the ministrations of MGM or any other major studio here or abroad.

NOTE: A lot of inaccurate bibliographic information is floating around the Internet about this book. When I checked recently, Amazon, Goodreads and Barnes & Noble were all claiming pub. dates between the late Eighties and the early 2000's. It's great to have the book available, but it was first published in 1951 (and IMO should never have been allowed to go out of print).

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Emma says

So at first I was like 'oh it's too dry, too objective, the prose too cold/stodgy' and then it became clear that no embellishment was needed all the drama was there in the facts. I don't know if Huston's original film was any good by modern standards, but I do know that we can never ever see it because it no longer exists, having been rejigged out of existence, and this book is the closest we will get to understanding what it was or might have been. Ross doesn't have to even characterise anyone, they characterise (damn?) themselves through their words and actions. It's a fantastic document about creativity and the process of manifesting a creative vision in the actual real world. The translation is always flawed to some degree, but what happened to Huston's picture is, taken within the general sphere of artistic endeavour, tragic. I mean, if you think of an idea or a creative vision as being born all little, and growing up and being about to attempt to achieve its potential, and then basically being kidnapped and mutilated and, like painted over with an ugly pastiche-of-itself face, and re-presented as the idea itself; then that's this. I don't think this aspect of the studio system has changed one bit, which makes me think it's amazing any good films are ever made by studios. Maybe it would be interesting to look at the 'good' films made by committee (studios) and see how they differ from independently produced 'good' films. PhD anyone? See also Michael Tolkin's *The Player* which funnily enough everyone including me knows from the film, which is fucking amazing and the best Robert Altman film, in my opinion. Altman and Tolkin worked together pretty closely on it and I guess he had enough power not to have so much interference. Yet there are movies like *Donnie Darko* in which the studio interference produced a tighter, better and more ambiguous film than the director wanted. I guess the talent of the studio execs is key as well.

Nick says

This book is an amazing account of Hollywood in the 1950s. Ross writes with aplomb and her nuanced descriptions of every feeling and thought of these larger-than-life characters strike one as both perfectly representational and beautiful, possibly what every journalist aspires to create. My one disappointment was ending with Schenck and not with Huston--it just didn't have quite as much punch as I would have liked for such an exciting read. That aside, the book reads very quickly and is very funny at times, so it's still highly recommended.

Mark says

The author was a staff writer for the New Yorker and was invited in 1950 to shadow John Huston and his colleagues while they made the movie version of the Red Badge of Courage. Either she had a photographic memory or she made constant notes, since she seems to have heard everything everybody said to each other in person, on the phone, by mail or telegram. We learn how a picture is made and more about the conflict between the movies as a business and as an art. Reading John Huston's comments was especially fun, since I could hear him saying them.

james says

A tragi-comic murder story.

Justin Decloux says

Little details, all piling on top of each other, until the film's final fate almost seems like it's in the rearview mirror before it arrived. Brutal stuff, especially because it doesn't feel that brutal until you think back on it.

Jason Fagone says

A perfect book. As an exploration of the inner workings of Hollywood, it's hard to imagine how it could ever be topped, but the book is broader than that; it's the most revealing thing I've ever read about the intersection between art and commerce, talent and cynicism. This is one of the books that made me want to be a writer.

Billhotto says

Ross wrote this book for the New Yorker magazine. She followed the development, filming, post-production and marketing of John Huston's 1952 adaption of Stephen Crane's classic, "The Red Badge of Courage". Huston is the dominant figure in the beginning. However, once the film is in the can, he loses interest and goes off to Africa to shoot "The African Queen". The fate of the Red Badge is left in the hands of the producer and especially MGM executives. Ross gets to follow a studio power play in which Dore Schary unseats Louis B. Mayer. She learns that the real power at MGM is in New York with money man Nick Loewe. She attends the numerous test screenings which are used by the suits to alter a film to meet their own taste. After which it is quietly dumped onto the market before being written off as a tax loss. An hilarious account, all the more so for being written in a straight forward manner.

Nancy Loe says

The loss of Lillian Ross this year was very sad - I've always loved her writing. Ross's eye for detail, but the protagonists made the whole thing a bit of a slog.

Mark Taylor says

Lillian Ross' 1952 book *Picture* is widely considered to be one of the best books written about Hollywood filmmaking. Ross followed the production of John Huston's 1951 film *The Red Badge of Courage* from beginning to end, and gained access to everyone involved in the film. Ross even met with Louis B. Mayer, the vice-president of MGM.

Huston was a good friend of Ross, and he encouraged her to observe the production of his latest movie. Ross was, and still is, a contributor to *The New Yorker*, and she's the only writer to contribute to the magazine under all of five of its editors. Ross has a new anthology of her writing coming out this week, *Reporting Always: Writings from the New Yorker*. Ross was one of the first writers to write long-form non-fiction using some of the same techniques that fiction writers used, and her influence can be felt on writers like Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and other practitioners of New Journalism. Ross wrote a famous profile of Ernest Hemingway for *The New Yorker* in 1950, and Huston is certainly a man cut from the same cloth as Hemingway.

Although *The Red Badge of Courage* was Huston's movie, as he both adapted Stephen Crane's classic novel and directed it, the main character that we follow in *Picture* is producer Gottfried Reinhardt. Reinhardt is smart, honest, and quite funny. The book needs a character like him to be the person that we follow all the way through production and post-production. As the film is being made, Reinhardt is always saying, "This must be a great picture." (p.41) My favorite quote from Reinhardt in the book is his tart assessment of Hollywood: "Everybody in Hollywood wants to be something he is not. Albert is not satisfied to be your assistant. He wants to be an actor. The writers want to be directors. The producers want to be writers. The actors want to be producers. The wives want to be painters. Nobody is satisfied. Everybody is frustrated. Nobody is happy." (p.30)

Filming of *The Red Badge of Courage* went fairly smoothly, although the picture did go four days over schedule, but it was in post-production that everything seemed to go wrong. Louis B. Mayer had always been against making the movie, and it was only because of the support of Dore Schary, vice-president in charge of production at MGM, that the movie was greenlit. Mayer expressed his frustration about the movie to Ross, saying, "A million and a half. Maybe more. What for? There's no story." (p.20) After a preview screening goes poorly, Reinhardt and Huston start having serious second thoughts, and the movie starts changing drastically. Huston left for Africa just after the preview screening to start filming *The African Queen*, a movie that would be much better received than *The Red Badge of Courage*. Eventually Dore Schary ended up making the final edits to the movie, and although it garnered some good reviews from critics, the movie flopped at the box office, and lost MGM more than a million dollars.

One of the most astute comments on *The Red Badge of Courage* was from the film critic for *The New York Post*, who wrote, "The picture does not become a fully realized experience, nor is it deeply moving. It is as if, somewhere between shooting and final version, the light of inspiration had died, Huston got tired of it, or became discouraged, or decided that it wasn't going to come off." (p.197) I think that criticism was correct, I think Huston did essentially give up on the movie. Once he left for Africa, he was focused on *The African Queen*, and didn't participate in the post-production battles over the film. Who knows if the film would have turned out differently if Huston had been more involved, but it's certainly possible his vision would have been preserved on the screen. But I would also argue that Huston didn't have a clear vision of the movie. I don't know if Huston stopped trusting his own judgment, but I thought a key moment was when, after the first preview, Reinhardt convinced Huston to add voiceover narration from Crane's novel, and a prologue that explained to the audience what a classic novel *The Red Badge of Courage* is. If you're adding a voiceover and narration to your movie at the 11th hour, you don't have a clear vision for your movie.

Picture is a great book that illustrates the ongoing battle between art and commerce. Unfortunately, in

Huston's version of *The Red Badge of Courage*, neither art nor commerce won. Watching *The Red Badge of Courage*, I couldn't help but feel that it's a perfect example of a great book that simply doesn't translate to the screen very well. I would agree with Mayer, there isn't any story, which is fine for a novel, but doesn't always work well in a movie. The narration that was added is super cheesy, and totally unnecessary. Huston took a gamble by casting many actors who were not professional actors, like the World War II cartoonist Bill Mauldin, who created the famous World War II soldiers Willie and Joe, and won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning at the age of 23. Huston cast another World War II vet, Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier of World War II, in the lead role of Henry Fleming. I thought Murphy did a good job, and he reminded me a little of Henry Fonda. But I think Mauldin and some of the other amateur actors just weren't that good. Everyone's accents seemed very fake to me. Movie buffs should look for Andy Devine in a small cameo as "the cheery soldier." Andy Devine will always hold a fond spot in my heart because he's the voice of Friar Tuck in Disney's classic 1973 animated *Robin Hood*, which was one of my favorite movies as a child. (And as an adult.)

Picture shows us Hollywood in transition, as television is starting to become more of a threat, and the big studios are being forced to divest themselves of their theater chains. During the writing of *Picture*, Louis B. Mayer resigned from MGM, a moment that marked the end of an era.

Ross' writing is sharp, and her ear for dialogue is superb. (I wonder if she had "98% total recall" of conversations, a talent that Truman Capote claimed to have.) Ross never inserts herself into the action gratuitously, and by simply observing all the action around her, she came up with a masterpiece about Hollywood.

Juliana says

Então, eu sempre gostei de cinema. Quero trabalhar com isso algum dia, provavelmente quando nada mais der certo pra mim. Daí meu professor, que sabe da minha paixão, me mandou ler esse livro e disse "é um retrato interessante da indústria".

É exatamente isso.

Um diretor com a ideia, não tão fixa, de fazer uma obra-prima, um produtor que acredita e confia em seu diretor e uma empresa que se importa mais com o lucro, são os elementos que completam esse conto de Lillian Ross, que passou todos os anos, desde a pré-produção até a estréia e distribuição, com os responsáveis do filme.

Minha única reclamação é que achei o desfecho de Lillian Ross muito superficial, considerando toda a profundidade de detalhes, colocações convenientes e observações corretas que ela escreveu em 300 páginas. Excelente livro para quem acha que fazer cinema é só flores.
