

## ***Let There Be Light* (1946) and Its Restoration**

by Scott Simmon

John Huston's World War II documentary *Let There Be Light* is so legendary for its censorship controversy that its sheer power as a film has been easy to miss. Produced by the U.S. Army in 1945, it pioneered unscripted interview techniques to take an unprecedented look into the psychological wounds of war. However, by the time the film was first allowed a public screening—in December 1980—its remarkable innovations in style and subject, which in the 1940s were at least a decade ahead of their time, could be taken as old hat, especially because of the poor quality of then-available prints. This new restoration finally reveals the film's full force.

The subject of *Let There Be Light* is what we'd now label PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder—among returning soldiers, and if the term is of more recent invention than Huston's film, that's in good part precisely because such sympathetic examinations of the condition were swept under the rug until after the Vietnam era. What World War II soldiers still called “shell-shock” was variously labeled “psychoneurosis” or “neuropsychosis” by physicians, and it was under the working title of *The Returning Psychoneurotics* that the assignment was given in June 1945 to Huston, then a major in the Army's Signal Corps. He later described how he went about the project:

I visited a number of Army hospitals during the research phase, and finally settled on Mason General Hospital on Long Island as the best place to make the picture. It was the biggest in the East, and the officers and doctors there were the most sympathetic and willing.... The hospital admitted two groups of 75 patients each week, and the goal was to restore these men physically, mentally and emotionally within six to eight weeks, to the point where they could be returned to civilian life in as good condition—or almost as good—as when they came into the Army.... I decided that the best way to make the film was to follow one group through from the day of their arrival until their discharge.... When the patients arrived, they were in various conditions of emotional distress. Some had tics; some were paralyzed; one in ten was psychotic. Most of them fell into the general designation of ‘anxiety neurosis.’.... [Charles] Kaufman and I wrote the script as the picture was shot, which, I think, is the ideal way to make a documentary.... [The purpose] was to show how men who suffered mental damage in the service should not be written off but could be helped by psychiatric treatment.... The original idea was that the film be shown to those

who would be able to give employment in industry, to reassure them that the men discharged under this section were not insane, but were employable, as trustworthy as anyone.

What was almost unprecedented in *Let There Be Light* was its reliance on unscripted interviews, something common in documentaries only after the mid-1950s with Direct Cinema, cinema vérité, and the British Free Cinema movements. When the film was finally released in 1980, however, the prints—reportedly 16mm reductions from the 35mm original—were so poor that the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer could describe “lighting as flat and nasty as the inside of a phone booth.” The soundtrack was also garbled, and thus the film’s most innovative and affecting side—its live dialogue—was frustratingly incomprehensible. It’s only now that the soundtrack restoration fully conveys these moving interviews, with men who often initially can only mumble or whisper their stories.

To catch key moments in these doctor-patient interactions, Huston’s team of cameramen shot an astonishing 375,000 feet of film—or close to 70 hours for a final cut that would run less than an hour. “The cameras ran continually, one on the patient, one on the doctor,” said Huston of the multi-camera set-ups. “We shot thousands of feet of film—most of which couldn’t be used in the picture—just to be sure of getting the extraordinary and completely unpredictable exchanges that sometimes occurred.”

With the film’s picture restoration, its visual qualities too are more evident. Indeed, it is crafted and lit like a polished Hollywood feature—unsurprisingly, with Stanley Cortez as lead cinematographer, fresh from shooting evocatively dark domestic interiors for *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Since You Went Away*. Although *Let There Be Light* takes its title from the King James Bible (Genesis 1:3), that title also suggests the visual representation of the film’s narrative arc: away from shadowy, noir-inflected shots of gangplanks and hospital corridors and toward sunlit baseball diamonds and grassy fields.

Huston knew something of these visuals from his first feature as a director, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). He enlisted after Pearl Harbor and was forced to hand off his third feature, *Across the Pacific*, which built its melodrama around a Japanese surprise attack. Of celebrated Hollywood directors who served as military filmmakers (notably John Ford, William Wyler, George Stevens, and Frank Capra), Huston was most junior, in years and experience. But there is something to James Agee’s claim (writing in *The Nation* in January 1948): “Several of the best people in Hollywood grew, noticeably, during their years away at war; the man who grew most impressively, I thought, as an artist, as a man, in intelligence, in intransigence, in an ability to put through fine work against difficult odds, was John Huston.”

*Let There Be Light* was Huston’s third and final war documentary, after *Report from the Aleutians* (1943; viewable through the Internet Archive at [this link](#)) and the harrowing combat

film *Battle of San Pietro* (1945; featured in the NFPF's first *Treasures* DVD anthology and viewable [here](#)). John Huston narrated the first two himself, but called upon his father, the actor Walter Huston, for *Let There Be Light*. The noir touches at the opening of this documentary may look out of place, but it's worth remembering that Hollywood's film noirs often center on the traumas of veterans returning home. Huston's second film after the war, *Key Largo*, with Bogart as the returning veteran, worked with the pattern.

Alongside the unscripted interviews, the other most surprising aspect of *Let There Be Light* is its confident and casual mix of races. The U.S. military would remain largely segregated until President Truman's executive order of 1948, but a few Army hospitals had begun integrating in 1943. The prominence of African American soldiers in the film is more than just socially progressive—although it is that also. (Huston's last film fully completed before the war, *In This Our Life*, includes an unusually complex black character for the classic Hollywood era: an aspiring law student—played by Ernest Anderson—who is framed for murder.) The racial mix in *Let There Be Light* also helps structure the film. A unifying theme is introduced through the first interview with a black soldier, a man named "Griffith," we can now hear. (It's one of several slips—the intention was not to reveal patients' names—but the doctor uses his name to call him back after he breaks down.) Griffith movingly describes how his "sweetheart...has been the one person that gave me a sense of importance." It's understandable enough that an African American private in the segregated wartime Army might well find himself lacking any "sense of importance"—but the need to recover this sense turns out to be a bond across all the troubled men. Walter Huston's voiceover later asks philosophically, "What is the mysterious ingredient that gives joy and meaning to living?" At the final group-therapy session, the doctor concludes with advice "to find someone that you esteem,...where you can get a feeling that you're worthwhile and that you're important," while the camera tracks across the mixed-race group. Indeed, as represented in the film, psychotherapy involves overcoming senses of both "inferiority" and "superiority" (as another group-therapy doctor responds to a later comment by Griffith) in order to discover that "you are like other people." The (white) soldier who earlier couldn't walk says in group session, "All I want is that they give us a chance to prove our equality." Could the suppression of *Let There Be Light* have also had anything to do with this subcurrent? The Army's 1947 remake (discussed below) would suggest that it did.

Alternating with the interviews and treatment sequences are more conventionally narrated montages of progress toward recovery. The psychiatric methods are, of course, those of the 1940s. Electroshock treatments were given to the severely psychotic, but nothing so disturbing appears in the final cut. The film follows milder cases, of relatively recent onset, for which there was hope of a therapeutic cure. Even so, the cures, as edited, can look strangely easy. "The things one saw happen were seemingly miraculous," Huston acknowledged. "Men who couldn't walk

were given back the use of their legs, and men who couldn't talk were given back their voices. Of course, these disabilities were hysterical symptoms; and it was necessary to monitor their relief carefully." The film's narration also makes this qualification: "The fact that he can walk now does not mean that his neurosis has been cured. That will require time. But the way has been opened for the therapy to follow."

Other effects also conspire to make the cures more rapid. One is acknowledgement of the filming itself—something again uncharacteristic for a documentary of the era—in the first words of direct sound: "There is no need to be alarmed by the presence of these cameras," the welcoming officer tells the glum group of arriving men, "as they are making a photographic record of your progress at this hospital from the date of admission to the date of discharge." Filming itself changes the events filmed, of course, and may push them more rapidly to crises (as captured famously in the PBS documentary series *An American Family* in the 1970s). Huston observed, "As the men began to recover, they accepted the cameras as an integral part of their treatment. The doctors even noticed that the cameras seemed to have a stimulating effect, and that the patients being filmed showed greater progress than those in the other groups." The presence of the cameras, that is, reinforced what is known as the "Hawthorne effect": The phenomenon that human test subjects tend to improve under *any* study, regardless of the procedure tried. Paying attention to a problem turns out to be the first step in treating it.

However, the goal of *Let There Be Light*—to educate viewers about psychological wounds—failed with its initial audience: the Army brass who watched it and then forbade its release. The film itself had tried to prevent such a response by including one doctor's warning to a group-therapy session: "Undoubtedly there will be people on the outside who won't have any understanding of the condition, who may think of it as being a rather shameful condition. That's why we're having an educational program, trying to educate the public into understanding." Huston handcarried a print to Washington in February 1946 and got the impression that release was greenlighted for later that month. But an Army public relations group convinced the War Department to issue an order in March 1946 restricting screenings to a handful of Army hospitals and a few overseas military venues. As Huston remembered,

The reason given was that it violated the privacy of the patients involved. I don't think that was the real reason. The men who were in the picture—the patients whose recoveries we had witnessed—were proud of what they saw of themselves on the screen. As a matter of form, we had asked them to sign releases, and they were happy to do so. We pointed this out to the War Department, but when asked to produce these releases, we discovered that they had mysteriously disappeared. One day they were in the files at Astoria, and the next day they were gone. We then pointed out that, though the film

indeed represented a deeply personal investigation into the innermost lives of these men, nothing was disclosed which might cause them to be ashamed. We proposed asking them individually to write letters of clearance, but the War Department said no. The authorities had made up their minds.

In June 1946, New York's Museum of Modern Art thought it had permission for a screening, but, Huston recalled, on "the afternoon of the showing—a few minutes before it was to go on the screen—two military policemen arrived and demanded the print. Of course it was given up." Still, a few New York critics managed to see the film that year. Archer Winsten, writing in the *New York Post*, took the forward-looking view: "There is consolation in the fact that the picture will not be lost, that officials all retire or die sooner or later, and that waivers eventually become unnecessary. Some future audience is guaranteed not only a beautiful film experience, but also the certainty that their generation has better sense than ours." James Agee in *The Nation* was less sanguine: "*Let There Be Light*, John Huston's intelligent, noble, fiercely moving short film about combat neurosis and some of the more spectacular kinds of therapy, will probably never be seen by the civilian public for whose need, and on whose money, it was made. The War Department has mumbled a number of reasons why it has been withheld; the glaring obvious reason has not been mentioned: that any sane human being who saw the film would join the armed services, if at all, with a straight face and a painfully maturing mind.... I don't know what is necessary to reverse this disgraceful decision, but if dynamite is required, then dynamite is indicated."

The Army was evidently feeling some pressure throughout 1946 and responded in a revealing way—more revealing indeed than the mere suppression of Huston's documentary. In early 1947 it commissioned essentially a remake, a film that would copy many of the situations, scenes, and even camera movements of *Let There Be Light* but this time with actors impersonating the returning soldiers. The assignment went to journeyman director Joseph Henabery (who had assisted D.W. Griffith—and played Lincoln—in *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915). His instructions were to produce *The Neuro-Psychiatric Problem in the Army*, which was retitled *Shades of Gray* when it was released in January 1948. Notwithstanding an Army spokesman who announced that the new film was "definitely not connected in any way with *Let There Be Light*," Henabery and his producers seem to have seldom taken their eyes off the original. The actors clearly used the interviews in *Let There Be Light* as models—and few impersonations are more ludicrous than their versions of the verbal tics and physical symptoms of the real soldiers. Copied closely too are the scenes of hypnotism and of hysterical paralysis.

However, *Shades of Gray* turns out to be less a remake of *Let There Be Light* than an argument against it. "Medical statistics indicate," *Shades of Gray* informs us, "that in the United States...one out of every eighteen people, or more than seven and a half million, will

at some time be treated in a mental hospital.... From this population, the American people, the personnel of the Army is selected." The Army, by this argument, has little responsibility for its cases of neuroses and psychoses: "An army is no stronger than the population from which it is drawn." The Army is pictured doing its best at induction centers, but it can't weed out all the nation's weaknesses. Still, "the men who finally go into battle are the cream of our young manhood. The weak have been eliminated." What has also been eliminated this time is any significant African American presence. *Shades of Gray* is, notwithstanding its title, the lily-white version of *Let There Be Light*. To add final irony, most of the combat shots in *Shades of Gray* are lifted from Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*.

Ultimately, *Shades of Gray*—with its frightening emphasis on "eliminating" the "weak"—only buttresses the argument that Huston made about the deeper reasons that the War Department may have suppressed *Let There Be Light*: "I think it boils down to the fact that they wanted to maintain the 'warrior' myth, which said that our American soldiers went to war and came back all the stronger for the experience, standing tall and proud for having served their country well. Only a few weaklings fell by the wayside. Everyone was a hero, and had medals and ribbons to prove it. They might die, or they might be wounded, but their spirits remained unbroken."

The year 1980 was a time to look back at John Huston's career (although he still had major films ahead). A retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art coincided with the publication of his compelling autobiography, *An Open Book*. Curator Ronald Haver added a surreptitious but advertised screening of *Let There Be Light* to the LACMA retrospective on November 8, 1980, and the film was reviewed in *Daily Variety* by Joseph McBride two days later. Calls for the film's release grew, notably from Ray Stark (producer of several Huston films in the 1960s and 1970s) and a growing chorus of Hollywood figures. They were joined by Vice President Walter Mondale and Jack Valenti, President of the Motion Picture Association of America. ("I flew 51 combat missions," Valenti said, "and I know something about fear. This film is something I would want my son to see.") In late December, Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander authorized the release, and within a month the National Archives was selling copies in the new VHS videocassette format and on 16mm film. The first commercial run opened in Manhattan at the Thalia Theater on January 16, 1981. It may not have been entirely a coincidence that this flurry of activity came just as the White House changed hands. Ronald Reagan was inaugurated the following week.

In the 1980s, critics and academics were quick to condescend to what struck many as *Let There Be Light's* sadly old-fashioned documentary form. But such critiques may have dated more rapidly than Huston's film. In that decade, authenticity in documentary was still judged by resemblance to the gritty, handheld look of cinema vérité. Now that more elegant interview

styles have returned to documentary—most inventively those from Errol Morris—Huston’s work can be judged by broader standards. The Hollywood gloss of *Let There Be Light* honors the service of psychologically wounded soldiers of World War II by giving their life stories all the careful attention of a studio production. Has a U.S. government film ever conveyed more emotion? John Huston’s own verdict, looking back over his career, was that *Let There Be Light* was “the most hopeful and optimistic and even joyous thing I ever had a hand in.”

### More Information

The complete 66-minute version of *Shades of Gray* can be seen through the Internet Archive, as eight separate reels; the first reel is at [this link](#).

John Huston’s discussion of *Let There Be Light* comes primarily from his autobiography, *An Open Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), and interviews in Gerald Pratley’s *The Cinema of John Huston* (Cranbury, N.J.: A.S. Barnes, 1977).

### About the Restoration

The soundtrack of *Let There Be Light* was restored by [Chace Audio by Deluxe](#). Chace’s services were donated through the [National Film Preservation Foundation](#)’s grant program and awarded to the [National Archives and Records Administration](#) in 2006. For the picture restoration, the National Archives created a new wet-gate-printed negative from an acetate fine grain master, the best surviving source.

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