

**See St. Louis and Die:  
Wartime and the Morbid Child Psychology of *Meet Me in St. Louis***  
by Vincent Casaregola

At one point in Carl Foreman's 1963 film *The Victors*, a bitterly critical representation of the U.S. Army in World War II, we witness the execution of an American soldier. The scene is based on actual historical events involving U.S. Army Private Eddie Slovik, who had been convicted of desertion during the fall of 1944. The harsh fighting during that fall had led the court martial to make an example of the soldier and impose the death penalty, a decision then confirmed by higher commanders all the way up to Eisenhower himself (Kimmelman). Slovik was therefore executed at the end of January 1945, the first soldier to be executed for desertion since the Civil War (Kimmelman).<sup>1</sup> To heighten the irony of the execution scene, which is set in a snowy winter landscape and shot mostly at a distance, Foreman undercuts the action with his selection of music, a popular song from that same winter of 1944/45, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," originally sung by Judy Garland in the 1944 musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*, produced by Arthur Freed and directed by Vincente Minnelli. Foreman's use of the song provides an obvious, even heavy-handed ironic contrast. The song's gentle melancholy and longing, along with its brave expression of delayed gratification, suggest the desire for a more innocent past represented in that musical. Foreman uses the song to demonstrate the difference between the war itself and the nation's nostalgic self-representation during that war.

Foreman had already established his bone fides as an anti-war screenwriter with *The Men* (1950), which starred a very youthful Marlon Brando as a paraplegic war veteran struggling with the physical and emotional consequences of his injury. More importantly, Foreman was co-writer of the Academy-Awarding winning script for *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), based on the novel by Pierre Boulle. However, as a result of his being blacklisted during the McCarthy era, Foreman was not given any screen credit and so did not actually receive the award at the time. On the other hand, after the blacklist was abandoned, he also openly wrote and produced the very popular war film, *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), so rather than demonstrating a general pacifism, Foreman represented complex views of war and rejected simplistic narratives of the World War II experience, especially as they might reflect and support Cold War attitudes.<sup>2</sup> *The Victors* represented his one directing effort, and its dark view of the traditional "good war" narrative likely reflected his concerns about war but even more his bitter experiences with McCarthy-era American politics. His use of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" as the ironic counterpoint to Private Slovik's execution was Foreman's way of commenting ironically on two mythic American narratives so popular in mid century film—the "good war" narrative and the complementary narrative of the "good old days" as revealed in stories about turn-of -the-century America. Given both his politics and his personal experience, neither mythic narrative would have appealed to Foreman, and given his skill and insight as a screenwriter, it was clear that the best way to undermine and critique such simplistic narratives was to use their inherent contradictions in high contrast. The scene mentioned above does just this, reminding us

that, during the winter of 1944-45, as Americans at home lulled themselves to sleep with the lullaby-like “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” across the world the brutality of war continued, and continued with a special intensity during the Battle of the Bulge. Some of the men at the front that winter may have comforted themselves with fantasies drawn from such classic Hollywood images as Judy Garland singing from an old-fashioned front porch, but most just tried to find some way to stay alive and keep warm, hoping that someday they would make it home from the war. Garland’s voice could, indeed, stimulate their desire for home, but their own home experience was far from the mythic vision of Americana evoked by Hollywood. Also, in many cases, as Foreman recognized, such men would return home far too changed in body and/or mind ever to fit into such a gentile fantasy again.

While Foreman’s scene is largely successful in making his point, a further, perhaps unintentional irony emerges from his use of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” one that points back to the song’s original context in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, inadvertently drawing our attention to some less-than-innocent qualities in the original film, where that song leads directly into the climactic sequence. Garland, playing Esther Smith, sings the song to comfort her little sister “Tootie” (Margaret O’Brien). It is Christmas Eve, and the Smith family is about to move from St. Louis to New York because of the father’s job. Other than the father, Alonzo (Leon Ames), the whole family is upset by this move, fearing the loss of contact with friends and familiar places in St. Louis, especially just as the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair is about to open the following spring. Being the youngest, Tootie experiences perhaps the strongest reaction and is least able to control her emotional response. Despite Esther’s wistfully bittersweet song, Tootie refuses comfort and instead runs outside the house in her nightshirt and begins to attack the group of snow people that the whole family had made earlier that day. It is an extreme act, and certainly the most disturbing moment of the film, so disturbing that it convinces the father to change his mind about the move and keep the family in St. Louis, a decision that provides them with the only Christmas present they really wanted.

For Tootie, however, this incident is hardly aberrant behavior. Indeed, throughout the film she fantasizes about death and enacts numerous morbid rituals related to death and dying—everything from a symbolic killing of the “Braukoffs” on Halloween night, to the burial of her dolls after they succumb to supposedly fatal illnesses. In the aggregate, Tootie’s behavior has all along suggested an unhealthy fascination with death and destruction. It seems that Foreman may have unconsciously sensed this quality in the musical when selecting “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” as his version of an “executioner’s song.” Perhaps he picked up on the general feeling of dis-ease that pervades the whole of Minnelli’s film, with its supposedly innocent depiction of a simpler and more joyful past. In the end, despite its attempt to provide escape from the stress and horror of wartime, *Meet Me in St. Louis* has been imbued all the more with the unmistakable odor of decay and death. Though trying to suppress the fear, violence, and suffering of war, *Meet Me in St. Louis* still resonates that much more powerfully with these qualities. It is as if the film cannot escape the war from which it was to provide release for its audiences. No matter how hard Minnelli tries to depict innocence, the wartime experience remains embedded in the psychology of characters and relationships

to such an extent that it somewhat subverts the intended theme and content of the film, and this morbidity is witnessed most dramatically in the behavior of the apparently charming child Tootie.

In 1944, when MGM producer Freed and director Minnelli began work on *Meet Me in St. Louis*, America had been at war over two years. During that year, the United States would finally deploy armies of the massive scale that would allow the major offensives of the Western Allies to go forward. In the process, American forces would suffer unprecedented casualties. In fact, the vast majority of America's World War II losses occurred during the final fourteen months of the war—from the Normandy landings to the end of the Okinawa campaign—because this is when it had committed truly vast numbers of soldiers to combat across the globe. Even as the country was clearly winning the war, the costs became more and more prohibitive, and the destruction and brutality of the fighting unavoidably obvious. For some time, the Office of War Information—the government agency that monitored everything from journalism and advertising to Hollywood productions—had even begun allowing newspapers to print photographs of dead American servicemen, and allowing advertisers to depict similar scenes in their appeals for war bonds (Casaregola, 85, 98).<sup>3</sup> The war, its demands, and its costs, especially its human costs, were on everyone's minds.

At the same time, that war had also made the U.S. economy viable again after over a decade of Depression. Factories had expanded beyond the wildest dreams of economic forecasters only a few years before. People had gone back to work, had money in their pockets, and because of rationing and the curtailing of production of consumer durable goods, they could easily buy war bonds and at the same time still have money for discretionary spending on one of the few things that had not been rationed—films. Indeed, Hollywood was undergoing a boom of interest in films, some of which provided support for the war while even more offered escape from its stark realities. This latter venue of escapist fare gave generalized reinforcement to the fundamentally positive myths of American culture, particularly in the idealized iconography of the family, the small town, and the earlier periods of American history viewed as sites of innocence and purity.

It was this venue that Freed and Minnelli chose for the presentation of a major MGM musical that could satisfy the tastes of a public increasingly conscious of and concerned about the growing casualty counts from the war. They also picked the popular “Kennington Avenue” stories of *New Yorker* writer Sally Smith Benson that recalled her youth in turn-of-the-century St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>4</sup> Bringing to the package the supreme innocence represented by Judy Garland seemed to guarantee that this film would offer a powerful image of normal American life as an antidote to the terror of war, as well as an image of the peaceful environment that all Americans hoped would soon return. Also, while using the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair as the backdrop, the film actually begins in 1903, as the Fair is under development, and so the film can emphasize both anticipation of a better future (a positive wartime theme) and yet still end with the Fair’s opening, a dutiful celebration of the American way (a second, positive wartime theme). Thus, the film attempts to provide an escape from the war while it still reinforces the

underlying propaganda efforts in support of war aims—patience while waiting for a better tomorrow and confidence that America has the will and means to make a happy future possible.

Despite these well-planned efforts at escapism, it is inevitable that the realities of the most destructive war in human history still lingered in the minds of both the film's audience and its makers. As 1944 grew to a close, more and more "Blue Star" banners on American homes changed to "Gold Star," ironically turning the golden image associated with the top of Christmas trees into a sign of death and mourning.<sup>5</sup> Every day, headlines and news stories, film newsreels and radio broadcasts provided more detailed coverage of a war growing ever more violent and deadly as it moved towards its conclusion. The Allies' call for unconditional surrender of the Axis powers made total war even more complete, though it is unlikely that Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan would have fought less fiercely without that motivation. Of course, the processes of total war produce horrific casualties, even for the victors, and these human costs of war were evident to the whole American public, even if the news was sanitized through various layers of censorship. Indeed, in the very theaters that showed *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the film may have been preceded by newsreel images of the savage fighting in the Philippines or on the Belgian-German border during the fall of 1944. As a result, the film reveals deep anxieties about the violent conditions of the world through the images of violence in everyday life, albeit images that come in the form of childhood fantasies and games. Though they remain the fanciful acts of children, these actions and images still carry significant symbolic and emotional weight in the film, creating an underlying quality of instability and fear in this otherwise upbeat story of family relations and youthful romance.

Structurally, *Meet Me in St. Louis* focuses on the developing romances of the two oldest sisters of the Smith family—Esther (Garland) and her elder sister Rose (Lucille Bremer). Rose is already in a long-distance relationship with a local youth who has gone to college in the East. But the central romance involves Esther's love for the proverbial "boy next door," a recent arrival named John Truett (Tom Drake). Esther carries much of the major action, and she provides the vast majority of the musical entertainment, with some of the most popular songs of the era. These include "The Boy Next Door," "The Trolley Song," and, as noted earlier, the still beloved "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Clearly, Esther is the film's overt emotional center, a role amplified by Garland's growing relationship with director Minnelli (they were married shortly after the film). He photographs and directs her lovingly, carefully blending her traditional image of juvenile innocence with her new potential as a romantic lead.

The structural counterplot involves the career opportunities of the father, Alonzo, well placed in a respected St. Louis law firm. Midway through the film, Smith is offered the opportunity to transfer to New York City to take charge of the firm's office there. His announcement of this opportunity, and of his decision to accept it, comes close upon the comically but still disturbing Halloween sequence. As might be supposed, the father's accepting the appointment without first consulting with the family puts him at odds with the others and introduces an element of genuine instability into the otherwise happy

lifestyle. Still, this is a father-run family despite their habit of joking at his expense, and the decision will stand unless he decides to change it. His wife Anna (Mary Astor) serves as a peacemaker, even though she is equally disappointed at the prospect of moving. Under her influence, the family agrees to “soldier on,” sadly recognizing that they are in their last few months in their home town (they will move shortly after Christmas).

While these structural components predictably control the film’s actions and relationships on the surface, the film’s real emotional power seems to grow more from another source, and that is the youngest child, Tootie. Doted upon and spoiled by the whole family, including by her sometimes stern father, Tootie proves to be a free spirit who introduces her own brand of imaginative and subversive instability into the family and the plot. Her outburst in the early hours of Christmas day ultimately provokes the father to reject the New York offer and keep the family in St. Louis, where they obviously prefer to stay. But Tootie carries darker emotions into the film than those associated with a mere spritely, innocent child. She is also a strangely morbid child, even if rendered in a comic fashion, and she seems far more like Wednesday Adams (of the Adams Family) than like a Shirley Temple figure. Indeed, it is through the character of Tootie that the emotional consequences of the ongoing war seem to surface unbidden into the milder environment of a nostalgic, period musical. Tootie’s emotional condition is the key to the underlying power of the film, and that power comes from her ability to undercut the very hope and cheer that the film’s surface seeks to evoke.

When we first meet Tootie, she is riding on a local delivery wagon, amusing the deadpan driver (Chill Wills) with her stories of her current doll’s many illnesses. She tells him that the doll has at least four fatal illnesses, to which he quips, “And it only takes one.” Tootie does not expect the doll to live through the night, and she obviously relishes the prospect of holding the funeral and subsequent burial. This comic incident is merely the first of many in which Tootie reveals her oddly morbid imagination. Somewhat later, she sneaks into Esther’s party, offering a song about drunkenness that opens with the line, “I was drunk last night, dear mother. . . .” Here, she again introduces a very negative image that is mitigated by its coming through the appealing voice of this adorable child. No matter the image offered in the song, the motive must be assumed innocent because it comes through the voice of Tootie—these are the assumptions of the family and of the film itself.

Such instances also suggest a particular kind of morbid fascination exhibited by Tootie, one she has likely picked up from long-standing cultural traditions. It is the morbid sentimentality that inspired much vernacular and popular art throughout the mid and late nineteenth centuries, often associated with a particular kind of middle-class, middle-brow sensibility. This is the very kind of sentimentality that Mark Twain goes out of his way to satirize in parts of the Grangerford episode in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where he focuses on the deceased teenager Emmeline Grangerford who, as Huck explains, “could write about anything . . . just so it was sadful.” He goes on to elaborate:

Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand

with her “tribute” before he was cold. She called them tributes. The neighbors said it was the doctor first, then Emmeline, then the undertaker—the undertaker never got in ahead of Emmeline but once, and then she hung fire on a rhyme for the dead person’s name, which was Whistler. She warn’t ever the same, after that; she never complained, but she kind of pined away and did not live long.

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The ultimate fate of the overly sentimental artist is, in Twain’s satirical universe, to die from her own excessive sentimentality. Of course, to make sure that we know just how deserving Emmeline is of this fate, Twain allows Huck to go into some detail about her sentimental odes to the local dead, as well as her crayon drawings of heart-broken women expressing their grief at the loss of loved ones (112-113). The drawings, which decorate the Grangerford parlor, come with titles such as “Shall I Never See Thee More Alas” (112). Twain goes so far as to include a complete example of Emmeline’s poetry, “Ode to Stephen Dowling Botts, Dec’d,” a young man whose death, in her words, made “sad hearts thicken” (113-114). Such obvious sentimentality is an easy target of satire but, for Twain, a necessary one, since it undercuts genuine human sympathy and engagement, replacing it with mere superficial, emotional self-indulgence.

In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Tootie has obviously picked up on this sentimental tradition in art and narrative, and thus her dolls become opportunities for her to construct fanciful stories of disease and death. Likewise, she has carefully memorized and learned to perform sentimental songs about dissolution and redemption (“I was drunk last night, dear mother”). Original writer Sally Smith Benson and, subsequently, the filmmakers realized that, by the turn of the century, this kind of sentimentality was already self-parodic, and so they could easily lodge it in the character of a young child whose very earnest delivery of the sentimental mini-narratives provides delightfully ironic effects. But beyond this apparently light comic touch lurks something that takes us back to elements in Twain’s satire in *Huckleberry Finn*, the connection between this naïve, morbid sentimentality and a hyperbolically violent culture. Recall that the Grangerford episode is one of the most violent in the book because it deals with the very serious consequences of the ongoing feud between that family and the rival Shepherdsons. Huck, who is awestruck at what he sees as the sumptuous lifestyle of the Grangerfords, is equally astounded by their needless and terribly destructive feud, one that leaves several characters dead and convinces Huck that he must flee the place. Twain’s more important point, far beyond satirizing sentimentalized art, is to show that such sentimentality is merely one aspect of a culture suffering from broad-based, self-destructive emotional extremism. The same emotional hyperbole that propels the violence also indulges in the sentimental grieving, and for Twain, both deserve critique. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the filmmakers wanted to use the character of Tootie to create an innocent but vivacious comedy, and these qualities come out in the morbid tales that seem so at odds with a young child’s imagination. Unintentionally, however, the filmmakers also evoke a sense of the hidden experience of extreme violence that is so much a part of 1944. Tootie may seem innocent herself, but her character on film is constructed in and projected through a world that is itself losing more innocence day by day. As Twain recognized, what seems innocent on the surface is often quite a bit more complicated, and darker, beneath.

Subsequently, however, the film's Halloween sequence begins to raise questions about even Tootie's supposed innocence when she engages in two acts of symbolic murder, the latter of which causes genuine danger to real people. On Halloween all the younger neighborhood children dress up as ghostly hoboes, some of them also cross-dressing (girls with charcoal beards and boys in skirts). But these hobo costumes actually represent demons whose charge is to play tricks on the neighborhood residents, acts such as throwing flour in people's faces when they answer the door (symbolizing killing them). As the smallest of the demon crew, Tootie has little choice of assignments, but she bravely decides to take on the feared Braukoff household. Old Mr. Braukoff is described as having committed all forms of horrid offences, including killing cats (acts true only in the children's imaginations). In a mock-suspense sequence, Tootie slowly approaches the house and, at the appropriate moment, "kills" Braukoff by throwing flour in his face. She runs away, narrates her tale, and is proclaimed the fiercest demon of all.

This symbolic murder seems a harmless enough Halloween prank, but if we probe more deeply, we may find something very disturbing in the scene. Unlike the other residents of the neighborhood, the Braukoffs have a foreign-sounding name, and so the children look at them as strangers and therefore as more dangerous. Given the wartime background, this sounds disconcertingly like the kind of xenophobia that leads to violations of civil rights (as in the extreme case of the internment of Japanese Americans). The name can possibly imply a German heritage, and in that case, the "killing" of the dangerous Braukoffs may stand in for the literal bombing campaign against Germany, also killing allegedly guilty civilians in their homes. In contrast, an even more disturbing interpretation emerges if we consider the possibility that the name Braukoff sounds Jewish. In that case, targeting them as the subjects of false narratives of heinous acts, and then engaging in their symbolic murder, offers a set of actions that echo those that went on in early thirties Germany, when the Nazis were engaged in just this kind of attack on German Jews (not to mention the extension of this type of murder into the systematic genocide of the Holocaust, though Hollywood would not really know about, much less represent the Holocaust until later). But does this scene really reveal some unconscious form of anti-Semitism in the film? That is unlikely; rather, the scene seems to be an unbidden echo of the massive persecutions and genocide at large in the world in 1944. In "innocent" Tootie's Halloween masquerade, we glimpse shadows of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and of so many others, along with shadows of the terrible violence of the war as a whole, where tens of millions died, mostly civilians.

The Halloween sequence continues with a second phase, one which is literally if not figuratively worse than the Braukoff incident. This second phase comes as narration from Tootie after the event itself, followed by further narrative by her slightly older sister Agnes (Joan Carroll) and subsequent explanations by neighbor John Truett. As the family begins gathering for cake and ice cream, Tootie is heard to scream somewhere outside in the distance. After her older sisters find her, they discover that she is crying and has suffered a cut lip. She claims to have been struck by John Truett from next door. At first, Esther refuses to believe this, but after a doctor arrives and confirms that she has hair from someone else clenched in her fist, Esther changes her mind. She runs next

door, attacks John without explanation, and runs back home. There she finds that Agnes has returned and is telling the true story. She and Tootie had thrown a Halloween dummy onto the streetcar tracks, causing the conductor to think it was a real body and thus break so hard as to jump the track. Fortunately, though perhaps to Tootie's disappointment, no real injuries occurred. Seeing their actions, however, John had rushed the girls away so that they would not be caught and get into trouble, but Tootie had struggled away from him because she wanted to relish the aftermath of her morbid stunt. Esther is at first enraged at her youngest sister, but then she forgives her, as do the other family members. Embarrassed by her own behavior, Esther runs next door again so she can apologize to John, who has not taken the matter seriously. He tells Esther that her awkward beating of him was not as bad as the blows he suffers at football practice, but that "it's more fun with a girl" (an oddly sado-masochistic comment). While the whole event is treated as one more of Tootie's imaginative pranks, it could have had serious, real-world consequences, including possible injuries to her or others from the street-car's derailment. None of this matters to Tootie, who is thrilled at the performance coup she has pulled off. Once more she has transformed her morbid fantasy world into a dramatic event that has made her the center of family attention.

The habit of imagining sensationalistic, gothic, and morbid fantasies is again consistent with a number of nineteenth-century cultural traditions. Much popular fiction of the era appeared in periodicals in serial form, and amongst the most popular forms were those that engaged in extensive use of overly sensationalistic conflict, sometimes involving elements of the gothic or the macabre. These could provide the emotional excitement necessary to keep readers' attention as they awaited the next installment. Certainly some of these elements could emerge in the most artful literary fictions, from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. Rendered with skill and insight, such qualities could enhance a novel's revelation of characters' inner emotional lives and conflicts, but these elements frequently invited the poor imitators and self-parodic extremes evident in so much of the popular fiction of the time. They also couple with an overly romanticized sense of sensationalized and sometimes exoticized conflict. Twain himself recognized these qualities in the culture of the antebellum South, and much of the ironic wit of *Huckleberry Finn* is directed against their extremes. Indeed, the novel's ending, with the intricately dramatic but ultimately unnecessary "rescue" of Jim is the best example. Here, Huck's friend Tom Sawyer must orchestrate the events, creating in the process a kind of novella-within-the-novel that goes on for a number of chapters so that he can obtain full emotional satisfaction from the effort (even though Jim is, as we later find out, already freed). Another nineteenth-century novelist, Louisa May Alcott, points a mild satiric finger at her own youthful self for trying to write and/or perform such fantasy narratives/dramas. In *Little Women*, the analog for Alcott, Jo March, spends her young years writing hyperbolic, fantastic stories of adventure and conflict, before she finally learns to write in a more realistic (if still somewhat sentimental) fashion that portrays with authenticity the world she truly knows.

These episodes in Twain and Alcott are but two satirical critiques of what was a common narrative pattern during the nineteenth century, and it is evident that this pattern has shaped Tootie's imagination. Like the young Jo March, Tootie imagines elaborate

stories of adventure and danger, but she also transforms these into her own kind of “guerilla theater,” especially with the street-car incident. Also, like Tom Sawyer, Tootie must amplify and extend the sensationalistic possibilities of any event, imagined or real. Tootie lives in an imaginative universe that echoes with the tropes and forms of nineteenth-century popular literature, along with the highly stylized, melodramatic forms of nineteenth-century stagecraft and acting. Thus, in Tootie, we find a character who, by virtue of her young age, becomes a vehicle for comically critiquing the prior century’s artistic excesses of morbid sentimentality and sensationalistic narrative.

Of course, Freed and Minnelli, along with Sally Smith Benson, were aware of many of these features of Tootie’s character, and they used them to create a combination of subtle pathos and comedy that makes the film emotionally appealing on many levels. It is true that, in the context of 1944, these qualities evoke darker associations than those suggested by the connections with earlier sentimental art, darker than those conceived by the filmmakers. What the filmmakers seemed even less conscious of, however, is how the character of Tootie gradually grows beyond this simplistic form of morbid sentimentality, which reflects nineteenth-century tastes in popular fiction and drama, into a character who reveals a starker and grimmer form of morbid fascination that is expressed in the scene with the snow people, the scene preceded by the singing of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

To examine Tootie’s dark transformation, we must consider the cultural icon that child actor Margaret O’Brien had become even before the making of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. O’Brien had come to wide public attention when she played an orphaned British girl in the 1942 film *A Journey for Margaret*, the story of American journalist Jesse Davis (Robert Young), reporting from Britain during the Blitz. His wife Nora (Laraine Day) is injured in the bombing, and as a result of her injuries, she suffers a miscarriage and also can no longer have children. This plunges the couple into near despair, but subsequently, while writing a story about the traumatized orphans from the bombing, Jesse meets Margaret and Peter, whose vulnerability and tenderness reawaken his feelings. Of course, the couple finds a new understanding of family by taking the orphans into their hearts and home, ultimately adopting them. O’Brien created such a compelling image of the effects of wartime trauma that she made whole audiences want to adopt her as well (she changed her name to Margaret—it had been Angela—as a result of this film). Thus, for the American public, the sad face of Margaret O’Brien had already become a compelling icon of a child traumatized by the violence of war prior to her role as Tootie.<sup>6</sup>

Minnelli and Freed obviously felt that they could use O’Brien’s ability to express pathos, if handled lightly, to produce the necessary comic effects. By and large, they were correct in this assumption. However, the iconography of Tootie’s sad-eyed stare called forth a great deal of what O’Brien had already conveyed in *A Journey for Margaret*. While audiences could easily accept the comic situation and its innocently ironic references to earlier sentimental forms, they also sensed a deeper connection to contemporary horrors that were all too real in the daily imagery of the war. On the surface, Tootie becomes a comic figure parodying older morbid sentimentality, both

charming and heart-warming at once. In contrast, and less intentionally, she becomes a reminder of all the children, everywhere, who have been traumatized physically and/or emotionally by the war. It is this more contemporary and darker sense of the morbid that pervades the penultimate scene with the snow people.

The Halloween sequence concludes with Mr. Smith's arrival home from the office and his announcement of the move to New York. This incident sobers the family, leading Tootie to mention how she will now have to dig up the graves of her many dolls, but this innocent remark belies the process of actual emotional trauma she has begun to undergo at the thought of leaving behind all that is familiar to her. Since most of the subsequent sequences deal with the developing romances of both Esther and Rose, we see less of Tootie until late in the film. The problems of the forthcoming move create the necessary plot conflicts that structure the remaining action, most of which is concentrated during the Christmas holiday. Close to the film's end, the family members all seem sadly resigned to their fates. Late on Christmas Eve and early into Christmas morning, Tootie sits mournfully at the window seat of her bedroom, waiting to see a Santa Claus who, she worries, may not be able to find them in New York on next Christmas. This concern covers more unspecified but evident anxiety about the loss of any sense of place, a condition shared to some extent with orphans. Of course, one cannot see Tootie's experiences as being anywhere near those of wartime trauma, but they can serve, in this context, as an unintended analog.

Just prior to this scene, Esther has confirmed her love of John and is now even more saddened at the prospect of leaving. Having returned from talking with him after the Christmas Eve dance, she comes to check on Tootie. To allay the young girl's fears and sadness, Esther sings "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," a song that emphasizes patience in adversity while longing for a possible reunion with loved ones in some future Christmas (as the song states, "if the fates allow"). The sentiment must have struck a deep cord with so many in the audience whose husbands, fathers, and/or sons were still off at the war. Tootie's reaction, however, is completely opposite to that expected by Esther. The young girl collapses into sobbing and then runs from the room and downstairs. Propelled by a kind of manic rage, Tootie darts outside, grabs a shovel, and begins hitting the snow figure people that she and her siblings had constructed earlier in the day. Savagely she chops at them, cutting off arms, heads, and other body parts. Esther rushes out to stop her and bring her back in, but she doesn't reach her before Tootie has once again committed a series of symbolic murders.

There is nothing comic in this scene, and Minnelli clearly means for it to be the saddest moment in the film, when even the seemingly innocent Tootie loses complete control. As noted above, the intensity of Tootie's desperate anger leads her father to change his mind and keep himself and the family in St. Louis. The young girl's emotional outburst and symbolic violence are clearly intended to shock the father (and the audience) into seeing what a mistake it would be for them to move away, even if the act is not premeditated by Tootie. But the energy of the scene carries it beyond this limited scope. In one sense, Tootie is behaving almost psychotically, lashing out with violence at whatever targets are available--not unlike those soldiers who, in a near-psychotic state

brought on by the extremes of combat, go on a sudden battlefield killing spree involving even disarmed prisoners and civilians. Indeed, in attacking this snow family, Tootie symbolically, though unintentionally, seems to re-enact all the senseless violence unleashed against noncombatants and civilians throughout World War II. In this emotional and structural climax of the film, Tootie achieves her ultimate impact on her real-world circumstances, as her symbolic violence carries sufficient shock value to change the course of the family's life.

In one sense, this scene's action follows the logic of a terrorist attack or terror bombing—shock your adversary into changing his mind, and preferably into complete surrender. The British had been pursuing this logic for years with their nighttime saturation bombing of German cities, while within months of the film's release (and even as O'Brien was receiving a special Academy Award for being the best child actor of 1944), American bombers would be pursuing a similar strategy against Japanese cities, culminating in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the following August. The Germans and Japanese had done likewise, the former across Europe and the latter throughout Asia, especially in China. As we can see, and as the filmmakers and audience knew intuitively, outside of the fantasy realm of this musical, the war is still raging, raging with a violence that intensified with each passing week. Such violence cannot be kept completely outside of any cultural construction at this point in the war, and so the innocent conflicts of *Meet Me in St. Louis* necessarily take on all the war's powerful energy and terror. Focusing the emotional energy of the film through Tootie, with her childish version of morbid sentimentality, allows these darker cultural forces to emerge in an unexpected and therefore more troubling way. Even in this innocent icon of childhood, and throughout an elaborate effort to escape from and even deny, at least momentarily, the ugly violence of the world at war, Minnelli and Freed have unintentionally unleashed the very horror they sought to hide from their audiences. With the character of Tootie, the filmmakers begin with a collection of comically ironic references to excessive forms of morbid sentimentality in the popular culture of the prior century. But in the course of the film, they allow Tootie to evolve into a new kind of character, one connected more with the traumas that the actor O'Brien had represented in *A Journey for Margaret*. Additionally, they touched on something even more painful and frightening, the change in the character of children for whom the violence of war and the comprehensive insensitivity to the effects of that violence have become cultural commonplaces. Such children will live in a darker world, and the artists, writers, and filmmakers who portray the post-war experience will have an opportunity to explore just how frightening those children and their world can become.<sup>7</sup> This is not usually the stuff of MGM musicals, yet for this brief scene in an otherwise sentimental comedy, the combination of factors brought together by filmmakers, actors, audience, and circumstances managed to evoke a “sneak preview” of the darker world emerging from the war. It was a world in which childhood itself would have been inevitably altered.

The film ends with a brief coda that depicts the Smith family and their friends attending the Fair's opening the next spring. They express awe and pleasure at the magnificence of the Fair's entertainments and the beauty of its environment, though Tootie cannot resist mentioning some of its more morbid recreations of destruction. The

family watches the lights come on and then moves off for dinner at one of the Fair's restaurants. But Esther and John linger together at the railing by the reflecting pool, watching the dazzling lights. They marvel that all of this is still "right here in St. Louis," where the family has obviously chosen to stay--a faint echo of Garland, as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, proclaiming that "There's no place like home." Innocence seems to have been re-established and now triumphs, and the hoped for glorious future has been attained. Yet oddly enough, the reflecting pool over which they gaze in this closing scene was also the site at which the Fair re-enacted old naval battles, with model ships burning and sinking during the recreation of old wars. Sometimes, even in a Hollywood fantasy of innocence, there is just no escape from a dark and deadly world.

<sup>1</sup> This court martial, and particularly this execution, came under much scrutiny in later years. It was publicized in the 1954 book by William Bradford Huie, *The Execution of Private Slovik*. In 1974, Martin Sheen stared in a made-for-television version of the work. Benedict Kimmelman was an army medical officer in the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, assigned to serve on the court martial. He later changed his mind about his decision to impose the death penalty. Once he had seen combat and then been captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, Kimmelman found much more sympathy for Slovik. Upon Kimmelman's release at the war's end, he was surprised to learn that army had actually gone through with the execution.

<sup>2</sup> In *Theaters of War: America's Perceptions of World War II*, I discuss at length the ways in which American World War II films of the period from 1949 to the mid 1960s usually offered a World War II story in service of a Cold War ideology. Some film makers--like Foreman in *The Victors*, Robert Aldrich in *Attack* (1956), or Arthur Hiller and Paddy Chayevsky in *The Americanization of Emily* (1964)--ran counter to this overall trend. See my discussion especially in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War II*, George Roeder provides a detailed account of how the Office of War Information gradually shifted from censoring all images of dead American servicemen to allowing some images of American dead, though always within specific limits.

<sup>4</sup> Specific information about the making of *Meet Me in St. Louis* comes from a documentary, *Meet Me in St. Louis: The Making of an American Classic*, which accompanies some of the commercial VHS and DVD releases of the musical.

<sup>5</sup> The "blue star" banner could be displayed by a household with a family member serving in the military, while the "gold star" was the icon for a household member who had died in the war.

<sup>6</sup> In 1943, O'Brien played James Cagney's daughter in the patriotic short film, *You, John Jones*. Here, Cagney plays an air raid warden in America who must leave home to make his rounds at night. He muses on his safety in America, where he does not really expect to be bombed as have his allies across the world. His prayerful thanks are answered by a divine voice that asks him to imagine his own home and child suffering what others do, so that he might develop greater empathy for those victims. We see him imagining his daughter, O'Brien, in a series of brief vignettes depicting the horrors suffered by allied children from Great Britain to China. The film, while only a short, underlined again the youthful O'Brien's appeal as a child victim of war.

<sup>7</sup> Here, one thinks of numerous representations of such postwar, traumatized children who have grown as violent as the war they have survived. One example is Trevor in Graham Greene's 1954 story "The Destroyors," an architect's son who leads a gang of fellow children to destroy an eighteenth-century house that is the only building in its area to have survived the bombing of London (the story and its plot figure prominently in the 2001 film, *Donnie Darko*). Another example comes in W.H. Auden's poem "The Shield of Achilles," which mocks the elegant imagery of the Homeric original with references to the new barbarism of post-war culture, with particular reference to acts of children. Of course, the main character Alex in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) represents perhaps the apogee of this kind of amoral passion for violence in post-war culture.

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