

A PROPAGANDA OF “REAL HUMAN EMOTIONS”:

The ‘Humanist’ War Films of 1938–1940

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Bathed in light, canescent, pale,
My war buddy sprawls in death —
I see by the way you grasp your gun
That you would yet defend our country.
If die we must, then let us die as one!
Always in mind, awake and in dreams:
You're the martyr to the nation's defense,
While I have yet to fall in battle.

(lyrics from “*Aa Sen'yu*”, 1937)^{1,3}

In the months following the events at Marco Polo Bridge which opened the Sino-Japanese War, the Home Ministry and its bitter rival, the Cabinet Information Division (Naikaku Johobu), set to work preparing the groundwork for a “general mobilization of the national spirit” (*kokka seishin sodoin*). In this enterprise, the press, radio and film were each expected to “inspire an enduring, untiring spirit in the mind of the public.”

In the celluloid medium, news films were the first to create a major impression on the public. As the papers reported, “death-defying” pilots braved night and the elements to rush undeveloped battle footage back to the homeland. From the fall of 1937, regular theatres nightly mounted shows for the commuter crowd. “The drawing power of these shows is terrific,” Yomiuri reported in

August. "Even as the sun sets, thundering applause and cries of 'banzai' can be heard from outside the theatres."

Not surprisingly, therefore, the representatives of the nation's news filmmakers—Asahi, Nichi-nichi, Yomiuri and Domei—were the first members of the film world to be summoned to the various ministries for *kondankai* (consultation meetings). There they would sit drinking tea and discuss the proper attitude for handling war news. As during the Manchurian Incident, they proved themselves to be will-less cogs in the propaganda machine.

In the case of the makers of dramatic films, however, the situation was far more complicated. The *kondankai* formula, according to which the government combined ego-massages with open threats, was excellent for enforcing lock-step obedience but was not notably effective for inspiring true artistic production. Therefore, the emergence of a series of aesthetically successful propaganda experiments—the "Humanist" films of Tasaka and Yoshimura—was a development which could not have been reasonably anticipated under the circumstances. This paper will treat the psychological and aesthetic roots of this sub-genre.

The "new" bureaucrats at the Home Ministry moved swiftly in the early days of the conflict to draw up an impressive list of *Don'ts* specially designed for the edification of filmmakers: 1.) Don't subject the military to ridicule ; 2.) Don't exaggerate the cruelties of war with overly realistic depictions ; 3.) Do nothing to break the the spirits of families who have men at the front ; 4.) Do nothing to stimulate pleasure-seeking or degenerate hedonism.² Although the government had already decided upon a plan to "mobilize art" as

part of the nation's total war effort, it still had little to give in the way of positive inspiration. For the edification of their spirits, the film company men were referred to *The Fundamentals of Our National Polity* (*Kokutai no Hongi*), a book the Ministry of Education had been distributing since March of that year. Steeped in the mysticism of Japan's ancient historical texts, the book was utterly opposed to individualism and liberalism, and instead glorified abject loyalty to the state.³

"No one opposed the trend of events head-on," Iwasaki Akira writes of the film world of this time. "Rather, they fled once again into their attitudes of non cooperation and non resistance. People like that could be led anywhere if only a strong enough will and the proper amount of power were wielded against them."⁴ Furthermore, he claims, "the war was welcomed as a benefit to company profits, at least in the early stages." Inevitably, the first war features turned out to be almost as dreadful as those of the early thirties. Such phrases as "The Nation Unites!" or "Defend the Home front!" were flashed on the screen at the beginning of each feature. In the heady days of September 1937, theatre marquees proclaimed a renewed spirit of bellicosity with such titles as *The Enemy Surrenders* (*Tekikoku Kofuku*, Shochiku), *Once His Imperial Majesty's Forces Get Going* (*Kogun Ichido Okitaba*, Shinko) and *Raging At China* (*Shinani Donaru*, Nikkatsu). The addition of sound did little to raise their quality.

The hero of Watanabe Kunio's *Striking At the North China Skies* (*Hokushi no Sora O Tsuku*, 1937, P. C. L.) is a journalist whose superpatriotism is not confined to the reports he files for his papers.

Soon after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, he returns home and is outraged to find his sister holding a party for her school friends. He sternly lectures them all on the impropriety of such frivolity at a time of national emergency. Later, at the front, he sets aside all pretense of journalistic neutrality and engages in an unauthorized, semi-military exploit of his own. Iwasaki Akira reviewed the film when it first came out in October, finding its expressed sentiments to be utterly vile:

In the film we see a crowd of young people on a street corner repeating the cliches of an infantile pro-war stance. One cannot help being shocked that words of such blood-thirsty barbarism should come spewing out of the mouths of people living in a great and cultured nation. Even worse is the realization that the makers of the film—the producers, the script writer and the director—have exactly the same mentality as this rabble. It may be too much to expect such cretins to engage in rigorous analysis, but surely we could hope for some slight shred of reason. It is a near miracle that films of this sort—nay, that the mentality of those who make such films—should continue to have any following in the twentieth century.⁵⁾

A number of war films of this period address themselves to the very real social contradictions which were plaguing domestic society at the time. But the issues they raise—class conflict and disharmony between workers and their capitalist managers—are certainly not developed for purpose of any such “rigorous analysis.” Rather, they are presented as mere phantoms easily exorcised through the transcendental brotherhood of comrades-in-arms. This is what happens in Sasaki Yasushi’s *Song of the Advancing Army* (*Shingun no Uta*, 1937, Shochiku). Ando (Saburi Shin) receives his draft notice while in jail for having organized a strike at the factory where he had worked. Toyama, the factory-owner’s son and one of

the factory's managers, has also been called into service. Toyama visits Ando in an attempt to achieve a reconciliation, since they will now be fellow soldiers. Ando, however, refuses the offer of friendship. Later, at the front, they find themselves in the same unit. Class antagonism quickly melts into genuine friendship. When Ando is hit by an enemy bullet, he dies in the arms of the grieving Toyama.

Although the short-term propaganda effect of such fare pleased the authorities, they had something more substantial in mind when they called for the "mobilization of art." This required the services of genuine artists, not simply the peddlers of commercial trash. Their call soon led to the "drafting" of leading artists, who were then posted to the front.

Of course, members of the film world were also sent; Kunugasa Teinosuke, for instance, was attached to the Second Army. But the most fruitful draftees in this "mobilization" were the literary figures of the so-called "Pen Detachment." When Hayashi Fumiko, the celebrated author of *Horoki*, went to the front, her every action and comment became headline news. Upon returning to Japan, she filled her book *Hokugan Detachment* with rhapsodies on the sight of the Imperial Army moving out to action.

Hino Ashihei was among the first and was by far the most successful of the "Pen Detachment" writers. Hino had once been a member of the Proletarian Literature movement, but by 1937 he had undergone *tenkō* and been reconstructed as a nationalist. Soon after the beginning of the war, he accompanied the Army as a corporal and witnessed the landings at Nanking. In 1938, he turned his field diary into the best selling "reportage" novel of the era, *Barley*

and Soldiers (Mugi to Heitai). The book is still fascinating to read. In almost microscopic detail, he describes the Chinese countryside through which the troops had to slog, the muddy creeks filled with the bloated corpses of Chinese soldiers, the shattered farmhouses with bedding drooping from their windows, the nights of comradery while the big guns boomed in the distance, and the endless, dusty barley fields stretching to the horizon. The lice, the joys of a soggy cigarette, and the orange color of the troops' feces (the result of an uninterrupted diet of pumpkins) are celebrated in long, almost lyrical passages. The total effect, however, is one of a myriad of trees rather than of a forest. The forest in this case was the war and the brutal nature in which it was being carried out. This element Hino left almost totally unreported. He does report that the Chinese prisoners he saw "resemble us as closely as one's neighbors" and that this realization gave him "an unpleasant sensation." But, aside from the beheading of three prisoners (who have made themselves seem villainous by screaming anti-Japanese slogans before they die), there is not the least hint of the atrocities which he surely must have witnessed in Nanking. The book is a peculiarly effective — indeed, a "humanistic" — affirmation of the war effort.

When Tasaka Tomotaka made his classic *Five Scouts* earlier that year, he too averted his eyes from the total picture of the war with China and patterned his work into a similar mosaic of miniscule slices of life. Tasaka's new formula was enormously popular and his sudden emergence as the leading maker of war dramas proved to be the long-awaited turning point in the field. Up to the Surrender, no other Japanese war film would be as widely

acclaimed as his *Five Scouts*. Leading critics, many of whom held the very term "military film" in contempt, tried to argue that it did not belong in that category at all. "What good does it do to call it that?" Nagamichi Seiji wrote. "It's a work of art, a poem about men and war."⁶ In *Kinema Jumbo's* "Exhibition Value of New Releases" column, the editors told theatre owners that it was "a film of substance, not to be dismissed as a mere military film."

As with Hino Ashihei's work, the apparent political void at the center of *Five Scouts* made it accessible to a wide spectrum of admirers. Even as Iwasaki Akira was praising it for its "defense of humanistic values," its depiction of "true military spirit" was winning awards at the Nazi Berlin Film Festival and from Mussolini's Ministry of Popular Culture. The void was part of Tasaka's own intellectual makeup. Tasaka, who not only directed the film but wrote its original story had not undergone Hino's *tenkō* turnabout in his ideological convictions for the simple reason that he apparently had no such convictions in the first place. "I am a passionate sort of man," he admitted in an interview in 1939, "and when it comes to war, I immediately take the affirmative position. By plunging right into the war spirit, I can get to make films like this."⁷ Yet it is also true that the warm compassion for human suffering which he exhibited in his *Look at This Mother* (*Kono Haha o Miyo*, 1930), one of finer examples from the Tendency Film era, continued unabated throughout his long film career. As one of the humanist-realist luminaries at Nikkatsu's Tamagawa Studios, he made *Stone by the Wayside* (*Robo no Ishi*, 1938), the story of a young boy's struggle to escape the social and psychological degradation of

poverty.

Stone by the Wayside took the number two spot on the 1938 *Kinema Jumpo* Best Ten list, while *Five Scouts* was rated the "Best One." Tasaka's masterful use of microscopic details to achieve psychological realism (for example, the boy's smashing of the glass lampshades in a climactic act of rebellion and individualist assertion in *Stone*) is equally apparent in *Five Scouts*. In the latter, however, details are used to blur the individuality of the soldiers. Because it became an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration for later National Policy films, in which many of Tasaka's innovations became fossilized into clichés, *Five Scouts* deserves careful attention here.

The film's first innovation is the story itself, which is remarkably simple even for a war film. A company of soldiers is resting in a deserted hamlet. Five of their number are ordered to reconnoiter nearby enemy fortifications. Four of them return from the mission and wait anxiously for the fifth, who makes his way back late that night and is welcomed with expressions of loving fellowship. The next morning, the company moves on to its next battle.

The film opens with a thrilling burst of artillery fire as the company advances across an open field. But in the next shot, the men are drawn up at attention in the hamlet they have just invested, listening to their company officer. The battle was hard, he tells them, and the original company of two hundred men has now dwindled to eighty.⁸

Later in the film, when the five scouts are on patrol, there is a brief firefight in which Chinese soldiers are shot and tumble out of

view. In the next sequence, however, one of the scouts thrusts his bayonet into a clump of tall river reeds and an instant later the current carries the body into sight. The fact that the actual killing takes place out of the audience's view only serves to stimulate the imagination. Yamamoto Akira, as a young child, found it horrifying. "It taught me that real war was not at all like in the funny pages," he recalls. "In the comic strip *Nora Kuro*, the Chinese were depicted as an army of pigs who flailed cleaver-like Blue Dragon swords and marched in the rain with their umbrellas up. But in this one short scene, I realized that the enemy was real and that war was horrible."⁹

Critic Nagamichi Seiji, who preferred to see the film as a "poem," disliked the "breach of filmic artistry" in this scene and questioned whether it should have been included at all.

Death is a periodic topic of conversation among the soldiers themselves. They speak of it in tones of hushed reverence. Hearing the shot that kills an enemy sniper, one of them raises his hand and mutters in Chinese, "*mei fa*" — "Can't be helped." The deaths of their own comrades are invariably invested with an heroic splendor:

Nakamura: And what do you think he said to me as he lay there?

Kimura: What did he say?

Nakamura: "I can see Japan — I can see Japan!" That's what. Then he started to sing *Kimi Ga Yo* [the national anthem]. But he only got out the first words.¹⁰

Lieutenant Okada, the company commander, has made writing in the company field diary a personal fetish. "After having written in it," he says, "I feel it would be all right for me to die at any time." He tries to make the war meaningful for his men by reading them

the Emperor's message explaining the reasons for the conflict with China. But the language of the message is so archaic as to be barely comprehensible to either the soldiers or the audience. It only strenghtens the impression that "reasons of state" are far above the reckoning of ordinary men. Rather, it is the field diary that gives transcendent meaning to the men's deaths. "Whenever I have time," Lieutenant Okada says to Sergeant Fujimoto, "I read over the diary. You should do that, too. No matter how difficult the circumstances, your courage comes surging back. The spirits of our dead comrades seem to gather together in your body." As soldiers, the living men already consider themselves to be dead. In the pages of the diary, at least, their deeds and their deaths are immortalized before the eyes of the nation. These men are not fighting for a cause, but for the privilege of becoming part of a legend.

This is, at any rate, the intensely romantic view of Lieutenant Okada. The men themselves seem to be oblivious of the diary. They have only each other, and they form a unit of warmth and affection surpassing that of even the most idealized family. Tasaka's richly detailed portrait of this "family" of soldiers was so successful that it became the standard method of portraying similar groups in most subsequent war films.

It was also Tasaka who solved the problems inherent in the construction of an all-male drama which avoids the usual dramatic conflicts. He did this partly by demoting the film's story to a position of secondary importance. A string of vignettes, echoing Hino's technique, move out laterally from the film's thematic center (which we might call "harmony under conditions of tension"). The narrative

flow is broken into irregular bits, which are unified not by the story but by the mood. A skillful and often an audacious experimenter with film sound, Tasaka has the soldiers hum or sing some of the more popular military songs of the era. Whether they are actually sung or not, the well-known words — of, say, "*Roei No Uta*" ("Camp Song") or "*Umi Yukaba*" ("When We Go to the Sea") — communicate the feelings or thoughts of the men at any particular time. It gives the men a universal, stereotypical quality which in turn makes them seem both harmonious and selfless.

The soldiers, therefore, are not developed as individuals, nor even "types." The sum total of their combined characteristics is a single personality, a group personality. It is, furthermore, a personality which never quite emerges from the realm of the ideal into that of the real. "These soldiers are all courteous, beautiful and high-minded," pro-government critic Sawamura notes admiringly. The ideal Japanese soldier is also a sharing creature. A single cigarette is passed from hand to hand and the very smoke entering the lungs of one is enjoyed by the others. When a soldier staggers into camp laden with watermelons, he flops down in the middle of the group and says, "Come on, eat them up!" He smiles blissfully as if were already tasting the sweet juice which will soon be filling the other men's mouths. Feelings are shared through immediate intuition. One need only say "Ah!" for the others to respond "Yes!" One cannot be sad without tears springing to the eyes of the others. Therefore, the loss of a comrade is like an amputation.

But far worse is to be separated, oneself, from the group. When corpsmen come to take a wounded man to a field hospital, he

shrieks, "No, I'm all right ! There's no need to send me back with a wound like this. Just let me stay. Please ! Please !" "The bullet's gone through your shoulder," a corpsman replies. "What would you do if you lost your arm?" "I don't care. I don't care what happens to just one arm. I can still carry out my duties just fine," insists the wounded man, trying to heft a rifle to prove his point.

Variations on this theme were replayed in a host of subsequent war films, gradually becoming one of the obligatory dramatic clichés. In later versions, however, the spirit turned toward garish displays of self-sacrifice. In *Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* (1940), for example, it becomes utterly macabre. A wounded soldier lies athwart the path of advancing Japanese tanks. "Just run over my legs!" he shouts to them.

In *Five Scouts*, the grief of the other men over the inevitable departure of their wounded friend swells into an emotion of universal proportions. After the ambulance carries the wounded man away through the darkened town gate, the men slowly disperse. One wanders out through the gate into a field, where he picks up a leaf. In the gathering dusk, he uses the leaf as a whistle, humming through it. The tune, which echoes hauntingly through the surrounding countryside, is "Aoba Shigeru Sakurai." Audiences of the time would have recognized it immediately as "the parting song of the parent and child." The painful separation of the wounded man from his group thus melts into the pain the mother who has waved her boy off to the front. Sawamura Tsutomu, who was just embarking on the formidable task of formulating an aesthetic for the National Policy Film, found this a deeply moving scene. "There

is no art," he wrote in *Nippon Eiga*, "without the essence of human emotion. War films must strive to insert genuine human emotions into the spirit and feelings of the nation as a whole. This is the only way to elevate the national spirit and to make it something pure. It is through genuineness and purity of spirit that the people will truly be able to unite."¹¹

For Private Kiguchi, the anguish of separation turns into the terror of alienation in *Five Scouts'* only extended episode. He has become separated from the other four scouts during their mission. Throughout the night, the others wait for him. They wait in oppressive silence ; even the company commander wanders, distraught, in the rain. "Ki'ichi !" one of the men shouts Kiguchi's first name into the gloom. "If you're alive, come back. If you're not — well, that's all right, too. But it's just. . . just that we want to know!" The next shot shows Kiguchi's feet slogging through a morass of raindrenched mud. His desperation is communicated to us through his panting sobs. Finally, he limps into camp and the entire company turns out to welcome him with a chorus of sobs. After drawing himself up into a rigid present-arms salute, during his report to Lieutenant Okada, he melts into the loving arms of his fellows. They joyfully load him with food and cigarettes. Kimura is almost speechless with emotion. His body quivers as the others begin to weep along with him.

Kiguchi: Thank you. Thank you.

Nakamura: Oh, Kiguchi! We're so happy.

Kiguchi: Thank you. Thank you.

The scene is a celebration not only of fellowship but of life, of survival. One of Tasaka's most important innovations in this film is

his break with the anti-life, thanatopic message of such earlier war films as the *Sanyushi* films. Even Sawamura approved of this affirmation of life at the front. This, too, was part of his aesthetics of "true" emotion:

One life escapes the dangers of the battlefield. In this sequence, Tasaka affirms the nobility of that single life, its preciousness, even amid the carnage of warfare which seeks to swallow up all life. He grasps here something vast. Or, if you will, he puts the nobility of life under the microscope and magnifies it.¹²⁾

The mood of the group of soldiers is now so intense that it must be discharged in some direction. Pfc. Toyama raises his eyes heavenward and intones the first words of the national anthem: "*Ki-mi-ga-yo-o-wa. . .*" The others pick up the refrain, punctuating it with sobs. We cut to the company commander's room where he is surrounded by other officers. They are all standing at attention, listening to the men sing. In this climactic scene, we again have the "insertion of genuine human emotions into the spirit and feelings of the nation."

But the film has not yet come to an end. A reveille rouses the men in the predawn darkness. They are about to march out to a new battle. Lieutenant Okada stands before them, his ceremoniously drawn sword resting on his shoulder. His speech to the men shows how the "family circle" of the men in the company overlaps with two other spheres, family and country:

The company is about to move out into action. There is nothing I can say to you at this time, since I am sure each of you has prepared himself for all eventualities. You and I know that this is the hour in which we might be asked to give ourselves in gratitude for His Majesty's great benevolence to us, to our families and to our nation. The eyes of

our parents at home, our brothers and sisters, our wives and children, look eagerly upon us and what we do here today. Let us cherish that trust with which His Majesty honors us. From now on, I want you to entrust your lives to me as you would to your fathers. Let us all join together in the glorious death of the warrior hero! *Tenno Heikei Banzai!*¹³

Lieutenant Okada thus presents himself as the father of the soldierly family. The military at the time actually did prescribe this notion of one's commanding officer and in some tracts went so far as to detail which rank of men should play the role of elder or younger brother. More importantly, however, the image of the commanding officer as the benign father figure for the fighting unit becomes another of the ubiquitous cliches of later war films. Sawamura, meanwhile, further commented on the culminating speech of Lieutenant Okada:

The speech's emphasis on the unsuitability of life under wartime conditions counterbalances the earlier scene affirming its noble preciousness. The soldiers respond to his call for them to place their lives in his keeping with a subtle smile. Realization of the nobility of life and of its insubstantiality come together in this smile. From this union is born the exquisite beauty of a national emotion based upon real human feelings. Arising out of itself, this beauty, along with its emotion, strikes deep chords in every viewer.¹⁴

Strictly speaking, Sawamura is mistaken about the smile in this case. As the men listen, there are no smiles. Their faces are tense — and intense — as befits men about to commit their lives to some perilous action. In the National Policy war films of a slightly later period, however, the smile takes on major ideological significance. There, it becomes the insignia of those films which, in the words of Sato Tadao, "portray the battlefield as the training ground of the

spirit, and war itself as a spiritual exercise."¹⁵) Writing in 1938, Sawamura was already anticipating this development.

Critics and fans of almost every political stripe joined Sawamura in hailing the emergence of this "war film with a human countenance." But the homage was not quite universal. *Five Scouts* was subjected to particularly intense scrutiny by the Foreign Ministry, which sent Japanese embassies abroad a secret circular detailing the film's demerits as a "tool of propaganda":

The overall impression of the film is depressing. . . . It plays into the hands of the Chinese propaganda machine, which likes to portray us as losing the war. More seriously, it confirms the impression among the English and the French that their aid to Chang Kai-shek's resistance effort is bearing some fruit.

According to the circular, the film:

- 1) fails to develop the atmosphere of a victorious Japanese Army, by playing up the pathos of war ;
- 2) gives the impression of a war carried out by guerrilla methods rather than those of modern military science ; and
- 3) implies to foreigners that our forces face defeat, since it portrays the unit as having been reduced from two hundred men to less than a hundred.¹⁶

That which binds the "humanist" films together into a recognizable little genre is their tendency to promote emotion, especially affection, over any form of conceptual thought. Unlike "love," which under certain circumstances can become universal in its embrace (as it does in Christian and Tolstoyan love), affection is a localized emotion. The affections of Japanese soldiers in the "humanist" films, for example, are confined to the world of fellow-Japanese (although animals or very young children may be beneficiaries of it when

they wander into that little world). Filmmakers often avoided the necessity of drawing members of the "foreign" (Chinese) population into the circle of affection by simply not presenting them on film. The towns where the Japanese troops lodge are usually utterly deserted, and the surrounding countryside is a hollow of silence.

One of the tenderest of the "humanist" films is Sato Takeshi's *Chocolate and Soldiers* (Chokoreto to Heitai, 1938, Tôho). In it, a hard-working father has been drafted and sent to the front. Through the medium of a stream of letters, his affections and concerns remain firmly anchored to home. The doings of his wife and child are more real to him than the new world around him. He spends his free time writing letters and gathering chocolate wrappers for his son's collection. It is the very smallness of this man's world of affections which makes him comprehensible and appealing even to foreign film viewers.

Although the demerits counted against *Five Scouts* may have flawed its foreign propaganda values, this was not necessarily the case with domestic audiences, and the several "humanist" war films produced in this period all performed superbly the role of "steeling the national will for a prolonged conflict on the continent." The newspapers continued to portray the invincible sweep of the Japanese army across China in the form of aggressive arrows loosed against various points on a map. But, the nation could not help observing the endless stream of war dead returning to the homeland. Their cremated remains, neatly wrapped in immaculate white cloths, were paraded *en masse* through the streets in ever-lengthening funeral processions. In April 1939, the first of many gigantic

funeral ceremonies was held at Tokyo's Yasukuni Jinja, the national shrine for war heroes. The most popular song of the time was a dirgelike ballad, "The Mother at Kudan Station (*Kudan no Haha*"). A country woman, the old mother is all alone as she alights at the station closest to the Yasukuni shrine where her dead son is to be honored. But this is her first time in the big city and she wanders the streets, fretful and confused. What does the news of her son's glorious end in battle on the mainland mean to her?

The audiences viewing *Five Scouts*, *Mud and Soldiers* and *Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* needed a different kind of message. They needed instruction in how to endure unendurable losses, and how to carry on without giving in to despair. The "humanist" films, with their "infusion of genuine human sentiment," confronted the spiritual problems of an era of seemingly "perpetual" war. Both *Five Scouts* and *Mud and Soldiers* abound in metaphysical images of it as a gruelling road that winds ever onward. In the 1940 *Legend*, Tank Commander Nishizumi makes it clear to his men that there will be no early conclusion to it:

The war's just started. At the shortest, it'll continue for another three, four years. Our enemy's not just China; but all those countries opposing the construction of the New Asia. So tighten your belts, men."¹⁷⁾

Nishizumi himself harbors no illusions about returning home. "Sooner or later," he says, "I'm going to become part of the earth of this land."

Tasaka's *Mud and Soldiers* (*Tsuchi to Heitai*, 1939), based on a Hino Ashihei novel about the first days of the China Incident, preaches a doctrine of resignation to the impersonal "rhythm" of

events. He largely abandons the image of the comradely unit of soldiers as a single, synaesthetic organism. Instead, the men become percussion instruments in a vast orchestra, beating a varied rhythm across the continent. The rhythm changes according to the terrain, beating fast as feet cross a dry, dusty field, then faster still as they break into a charge. But it always resolves into the lugubrious slog of feet squelching through mud. A soldier falls asleep as he walks and marches straight into the mire of a paddy. His laughing buddies pull him back into the rhythm and they all march on into the night. The conductor of the orchestra is nowhere to be seen. (Kosugi Isamu, who had played the paternal Lieutenant Okada in *Five Scouts*, is reduced in rank here to a mere sergeant who marches alongside of his men.)

The film opens with troop ships plowing toward China. There is no mention of who or what set them in motion. Cut to a stateroom where generals are reporting the objective mission to lower ranking officers. In a sequence of shots, we follow the orders as they are communicated down the chain of command to lower-ranking groups. Finally, we see Sergeant Tamai (Kosugi) reporting them to his small group of men. Our first impression, then, is of men united, objectively and vertically, into a hierarchy, rather than subjectively and horizontally into a community. Even in the dramatic sequences, the camera usually maintains an impersonal, voyeuristic distance. When a young soldier lies dying on the battlefield, surrounded by his companions, we view his death from a distance, as would a documentary cameraman who has happened upon the scene. "I die for the Emperor," he gasps in a callow voice, adding both pathos

and a certain striking realism to the scene.

The prevailing documentary tone allows the machines of war to become the protagonists of some of the longest sequences in the film. The slow destruction of an enemy-held farmhouse is minutely detailed in near-real time: Heavy machineguns shatter the roof tiles, filling the air with pulverized debris. The heavy thud of field artillery joins the chatter of the automatic weapons opening gaping holes in the walls. Again, the motif is music, horrible and hypnotic, but a kind of music all the same.

In *Thundering Roar* (*Bakuon*, 1939), made the same year as *Mud and Soldiers*, Tasaka uses the prolonged roar (15 minutes' worth) of an airplane engine to reduce his main characters, along with all the dwellers in their small town, to helplessly awestruck gawkers. They had started by cheering and waving frantically, because the pilot buzzing the town is the widely admired son of the mayor. But they never do catch sight of the lad himself. In the end, they find themselves haplessly vibrating, body and soul, to the rhythm of the engine. Each in his own way is overcome by the incomprehensible profundity of an epiphany. The airplane is both the medium and the message of a revelation; that this is the dawn of an era in which the machine will displace man from his own subjectivity. The only way to respond to this revelation is, as the little boy does in the very last scene, to surrender in speechless, sobbing wonder.

The men in *Mud and Soldiers* capitulate in a similar manner before the incomprehensible majesty of machines, machine-like organizations and perpetual war. One of the striking differences between *Mud and Soldiers* and the earlier *Five Scouts* is their in-

articulateness. When a young soldier tries to make a statement about "all this marching," word is shouted back by one of his superiors to "hush up and stop troubling the Sergeant !" Since they are mere humans and, as such, no longer the subjects even of their own personal fates, what can any of them say? The result, of course, is something like nihilism. A squad of soldiers lies huddled, utterly exhausted, in a trench. The inevitable cigarette is being passed from hand to hand. Then one of the men breaks the silence and, in tones of mock solemnity, intones, "Where in the world are we? What in the world are we doing here?" "What a bunch of impertinent rubbish !" comes the response. A round of grim laughter and a string of farts ensues. One gets the impression that this is a skit that they have reenacted many times. At the end of the film, when they have finally taken their objective, the men sit in a circle, drinking sake and singing military songs. They appear to be reaffirming the fellowship of the earlier Tasaka film. But this time the camera hovers at a distance from group and then begins to track to the left along an endless vista of ruins. Stopping at a ruined courtyard, the camera slowly tilts up at a singed tree that still has a few leaves fluttering in the wind. Several birds are perched there, chirping and ruffling their feathers. The scene is reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's description in *Slaughterhouse Five* of the aftermath of the Dresden fire-bombing :

... there is nothing to say about a massacre Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?"

A bugle blast breaks this last calm in *Mud and Soldiers*, calling

the men to assembly. Soon there is the rhythmic sound of treading feet again as the men march off to a new assignment.

One of the startling features of the film at that time must have been its long closeup of the face of a very young Chinese soldier. Much like the appearance of his countrymen in Hino's novel, he seems "no different from one's next door neighbor." He and Sergeant Tamai stand gazing at each other inside the pill-box the Japanese have just stormed. Then the camera tilts down from the boy's face until we see his ankle. He has been shackled to his position. Like his Japanese enemies, he is but a cog in a machine too vast to comprehend.

Another Chinese character, this time a woman, makes a similar brief appearance in Yoshimura Kozaburo's *Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* (*Nishizumi Senshacho Den*, 1940). But in this case, she is there to demonstrate the cowardly, undependable nature of the Chinese people. Nishizumi's men have found her in the throes of childbirth. From the beginning it is clear that she exists only as a ploy in a cynically propagandist set-piece. Through her, the film can claim that Japanese soldiers are altruistic humanitarians: "Whether they be Chinese or Japanese, babies're babies!" Nishizumi then succeeds in comforting the terrified woman with the words, "Have no fear. We Japanese soldiers would never harm you peasants. We are all your friends." Once the baby is born, the men decide that it is "not at all different-looking from a Japanese baby." It soon becomes apparent that the woman's husband has run off to save his own skin after the two of them had been set upon and robbed by Chinese soldiers. In the end, the woman repays Nishizumi and men

by slipping away in the night, leaving behind the corpse of her baby. The men decide to build a little tomb for the child. On its grave-marker, they inscribe "Little Abandoned One."

Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi, scripted by Noda Kogo, the coauthor of most of Ozu's great postwar films, is so freighted with propaganda messages of this sort that its "humanism" becomes suspect. In this case, the term seems to have been used to approve the novelty of a war film centering on the portrayal of a single human individual. The problem with considering this to be an example of humanism is that the individual is actually superhuman. "The script copies the format of a documentary biography," Shigeno Tatsuhiko complained in the January 1941 issue of *Eiga Hyoron*, "but the concept underlying its construction fails to get away from the stylization of the old drama films."¹⁹ Like the heroes of the old *bidan* films, Nishizumi is a mythologized figure derived from contemporary newspaper accounts. But rather than focusing on a single climactic act of bravery, the film attempts to give objective bulk to his personality through the conversations of the men around him. Under different circumstances, the technique might have worked. But the "concept underlying its construction," as Shigeno put it, is that of a flawless hero, uncomplicated by selfdoubt.

In addition to being among the last of the "humanist" dramas, *Nishizumi* is the first of a small series of "contemporary hero" films, which eventually included *Kato's Falcon Fighters* (*Kato Hayabusa Sento-tai*, 1944) and *To Believe That It Shall Continue* (*Nochi ni Tsuzuku to Shinzu*, 1945).

Nishizumi is the embodiment of the old-fashioned martial

virtues: He is brave in battle, modest, severe with himself yet kindly toward his men. He believes in the war effort, at least as an opportunity to purify his own spirit and those of his men. Then he finds several of them arguing about whose turn it is to stand guard duty, he wins their admiration by lecturing them that "it's not a matter of doing things according to one's turn, but a matter of each person's developing his spirit of self-sacrifice." Played by the winsome, enormously popular matinee idol Uehara Ken, Nishizumi's stodgy spiritism comes across onscreen as deceptively modern. He is an enterprising inventor, as he proves by rigging up a water-strainer for the cook. The smile of which Sawamura had written a few years earlier, the smile of the man who both reveres life and lightly casts it aside in the line of duty, plays handsomely across Nishizumi's face. After he dies in the end his smiling face returns to hover onscreen like a spectre as the credits come up. Nishizumi's "modern" quality comes from his willingness to break the stern veneer of the Japanese officer and actually play with his men. He engages in arm wrestling, and loses. His "penalty" is that he must sing a song. One of his last acts for his men is a serio-comic dance which he performs in Keatonesque deadpan.

In addition to portraying in detail the grim and sometimes macabre acts of Japanese soldiers at war, the film pokes galumphing fun at some of the characters. Matsuo, a new recruit, comes back from his first battle with a hair-raising tale for the cooks: "Those Chinese didn't put up much resistance. I just turned the machine gun on them and went, 'da-da-da-da' and they dropped in bunches of twenty or thirty. I bet that's a feeling you stay-at-

homes can't understand." When the cooks call his bluff, it comes out that he had appropriated the story from someone else. Sequences like this represented a new touch in war films.

But the ulterior motives of the film show through the surface all too often. In addition to the racial slurs against the Chinese and the warnings against even more evil-willed powers lurking behind them, the film is made to carry messages of a more practical sort. One of these is a boost for the *imon bukuro* ("care-package") program for soldiers at the front. In one scene, soldiers huddle "like eager school boys" around a sack of such parcels from unknown patriots back at home. One parcel contains a pair of straw sandals sent by a poor farmer, the only thing he could afford to send. The men burst into tears when his letter is read aloud. Here, once again, we see the powerful emotions which course through the closed-circuit, all-Japanese world of "humanist" war films.

A year before directing *Nishizumi*, Yoshimura made *Warm Currents*, one of the most spectacularly successful Shochiku love melodramas of the era. Some critics at the time complained that it "reeked of butter" (i. e. was overly steeped in Westernisms), because of the characters' extraordinary cosmopolitanism. The film's highly Westernized fashions and decors are matched by an equally Western quality with in the main characters: their highly assertive individualism. We see a similar self-expressiveness in the figure of Nishizumi. There is something intellectual and dandyish about the tank commander's way of speaking and dressing, even in his way of holding a cigarette. This kind of individualism had to be strongly contained within the confines of a eulogistic Kokusaku film;

therefore, the commander's peculiarities are the kind which could appear "lovable" to his men. Since the film's portrait of the "real" Nishizumi emerges through the men's conversation, and since their categories of perception are limited, Nishizumi's peculiarities become the attributes of a stereotypical hero.

In the last couple of years before the Pacific War, even constrained depictions of individualism among soldiers came under attack. The new Nazi war films had been adopted as the standards of excellence for the genre by film critics even farther to the right than Sawamura Tsutomu. They led a concerted attack on the portrayals of individual emotions in humanist films. "The loyalism of the soldiers in these films is not loyalism toward the state and its people," complained Nakatani Takeshi in *Nippon Eiga*, "but merely a form of personal respect for the warmth and kindness of their immediate superiors." To Nakatani, such films "went astray" when they depicted war as a set of personal circumstances. The viewer did not want to see the blisters on Sergeant Tamai's feet; he wanted to see the state and the people "writ large" in the portrayal of each individual soldier. According to Nakatani's frigid definition, the successful war film must translate itself out of the realm "humane feelings" (*ninjo*) into that of the nonhumane (*hininjo*):

The essence of war is not simply the travail, the pain, the strength, the bravery or the nobility of the individuals who fight it. It is something far more complex, yet surprisingly easy to epitomize. It is, as all the world knows, the conflict of one nation with another, the conflict to affirm forcefully one's own country and to ensure the prestige of its national essence. It has nothing to do with the relationship of individual to individual, nor, even, of the individual to the state. . . . Rather, in his capacity as soldier, each fighting man is a microcosm of the state he serves. When the viewer

of a war film sheds tears at the spectacle of loyalty and bravery, he is actually experiencing the climactic excitement that arises when he first perceives, in the single soldier on the screen, the state in its entirety and the people in their entirety.²⁰

Bizarre, antiaesthetic formulas of this sort could appeal only to the national socialist ideologues rising to preeminence in the various government ministries. Their dictates on art and film were often couched in such impenetrable bureaucratese as to be completely incomprehensible to actual filmmakers.

In any case, the tide had turned strongly against "humanism" and individualized depictions in war film by 1940—*Nishizumi* being the anomaly of the year. Abe Yutaka's *Burning Sky* (*Moyuru Ozora*, Toho), made the same year, was an eye-popping example of the shape of things to come. The new era would feature vast, pseudodocumentary action spectacles with the submotif of precision-built war machines skillfully operated by warrior technicians. Yamamoto Kajiro's *Sea War From Hawaii to Malaya* (*Hawai-Marei Oki Kaisen*, 1942, Toho), which marked the aesthetic acme of this sort of film in Japan (at least until the late sixties), took another motif already apparent in *Burning Sky*—that of training in the 'spiritism' of the military—and launched it as one of the hallmarks of the Pacific War era war film. Gone is the familylike cameraderie and small-group loyalty of the Tasaka and Yoshimura firms. Now the loyalty of the individual soldiers (or cadets) changes from the comradely horizontal dimension to the impersonal, vertical dimension. The old *ninjo* is replaced, not by *giri* exactly, but by the new ethos of the *seishinshugi*-programmed robot. The verticality of loyalty and command dominates Taguchi Tetsu's *Staff, General and*

Soldiers (*Sambo, Shogun to Hei*, 1942, Nikkatsu), in which even the stereotyped depictions of the soldiers in the first third of the film are dissolved in the rush of efficiently executed battle which dominates the last two thirds.

1944, the year that saw the collapse of the Tojo government after the fall of Saipan, also marked the reemergence of “real emotions” in war film. This was the year when Kinoshita’s *Army* (*Rikugun*, Shochiku) accomplished the deconstruction of the image of the Militarist Mother (*gunkoku no haha*) which had held sway over “homefront” pictures since the early thirties. As she waves her only son off to war, Tanaka Kinuyo’s patriotic stoicism dissolves into the tears of the universal suffering mother.

This was also the year of Yamamoto Kajiro’s *Kato’s Falcon Fighters* (*Kato Hayabusa Sentotai*, Toho, 1944), a film which abandons the formula of spiritist training and military impersonalism and seems to return toward the individualized portrayals of *Nishizumi*. While maintaining his crisp, documentary-like format, Yamamoto infuses a degree of Tasaka humanism into many of his scenes with the pilots. Although *Kato* recounts the daring exploits of one of Japan’s ace fighter squadrons during the early days of victory, Yamamoto inserts scenes of anxiety and bereavement which bring the film closer to the spirit of the year in which it was made.

That Yamamoto was patterning himself after Tasaka in his depictions of the group of pilots becomes abundantly apparent in the waiting-for-the-missing-pilot scene in the latter half of the film. The situation represents a virtual “quote” from *Five Scouts*

(although Yamamoto etches his version with more humor than the original). The lonely vigil of the pilots resurrects the anguish-of-separation theme invented by Tasaka. In fact, although the film is supposed to be recounting a series of successful aerial campaigns, it is the scenes of pathos on the ground which are most memorable. After heavy fighting over Rangoon, the squadron returns, having suffered serious casualties. The fact is poignantly detailed by the empty places at the two dinner tables in the squad room. The men droop in postures of obvious grief. Then Kato bustles in with a forced smile and armloads of melons. He urges them to gather around and eat. But the men are so numbed by sadness for their lost comrades, they can hardly move. Kato must call them to his table one by one.

In its own way, *Kato's Falcon Fighters* reaffirms human worth and fellowship as essential values. This is remarkable because at precisely this time a new ethos was on the rise in the nation which called for the "honorable death" of the entire populace. The first kamikaze were already appearing in the skies. In the fine arts, the horrific paintings of Fujita Tsuguharu were memorializing the *gyokusai* (mass suicide) of troops on Attu and Saipan. In film, the only wartime features made subsequent to *Kato* participated in the hysteria of the hour, calling for ever greater efforts and fanatical self-sacrifice.

Although the "humanist" films served a clear wartime propaganda function, they at least provided an alternative to such fanaticism and hysteria.

Footnotes

- 1) This song by Fukuda Setsu is anthologized in *Kata Koji, Uta no Showa Shi*, Tokyo, 1974. p. 82-83.
- 2) Chamoto Shigemasa, *Senso to Janarizumu*, Tokyo, 1984, p. 319.
- 3) Richard Minear remarks significantly that "the only thing new (in this work) was the idea that Japan must not only serve herself but the rest of the world too." Richard Minear, *Japanese Tradition and Western Law*, Cambridge, Mass., 1977, p. 185.
- 4) Iwasaki Akira, *Gendai Eiga no Kiten*. Tohyo, 1981, p. 135.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) "Kogyo Kachi", *Kinema Jumpo*, 1938, n. 11, p. 123.
- 7) Iwasaki, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
- 8) Unlike Hino's novel which, impressionistically at least, details the punishment inflicted on Japanese troops in battle, *Five Scouts* carefully avoids scenes of battlefield slaughter. The viewing public did not in go for that sort of thing and the Home Ministry specifically forbade it.
- 9) Yamamoto Akira, "Ju Go Nen Senso-ka: Nihon no Senso Eiga", *Senso to Nihon Eiga*, Tokyo, 1986, p. 69.
- 10) Aramaki Yoshiro, "Gonin no Sekkohei" (script), *Kinema Jumpo Bessatsu Shinario Koten Zenshu*, Tokyo, 1967, p. 88.
- 11) Sawamura Tsutomu, *Gendai Eigaron*, Tokyo, 1939, p. 196.
- 12) *Ibid.* p. 199.
- 13) Aramaki, *op. cit.* p. 111.
- 14) Sawamura, *op. cit.* p. 199.
- 15) Sato Tadao, *Nihon Eiga Rironshi*, Tokyo, 1970, p. 245.
- 16) Quoted in Iwasaki, *op. cit.* p. 169.
- 17) Noda Kogo, "Nishizumi Sershacho-den" (script), *Kinema Jumpo Bessatsu Shinario Koten Zenshu*, Tokyo, 1968, p. 165.
- 18) Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, New York, 1969, p. 17.

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- 19) Shigeno Tatsuhiko, "Nishizumi Senshacho-den o Mite", *Eiga Hyoron*, 1941, n.l, p. 61.
- 20) Nakatani Takeshi, "Tokushu: Chikai no Kyuka," *Nippon Eiga*, 1941, n. p. 38-39.