

ESSAYS

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Teaching the Pacific War through Films

by Arthur Barbeau

The present generation is a visual generation. Our students have not known a time without television and the VCR. Thus, the use of films is an ideal way to present the Pacific phase of World War II. Good films can be dramatic in demonstrating the reality of that war to present day students.

Even bad films can be useful in other ways. Those dealing with the Pacific often contain the grossest stereotypes. Many of these films, though, can help a teacher deal with the production and presentation of propaganda. While the racial stereotypes presented in the worst films are sometimes offensive to people today, it is important to remember that they were part of the psyche of the period.

Occasionally, I teach a course entitled "Images and Realities: the Films of World War II." Dealing with the whole sweep of the war, the course includes sections on the European/North African theater and the Home Front. While this course is designed for college undergraduates, the segments on the Pacific War, and parts of the documentary and foreign film sections, could be used at any level from middle school through college to teach about the war in Asia.

Here, I'll discuss several films. These brief synopses will allow teachers to choose films to suit their particular needs. While some of the teachable features of the different films will be highlighted, individuals will see other purposes appropriate for any film.

There are a few important points to remember at the start. First, there was a time lag between the concept of an idea for a film and the release of that film for theaters. In a quickly made film, the gap might have been half a year; for more elaborate productions, it approached two years. Thus, some films on the initial stages of the war did not appear until the war was almost finished.

Second, most of the early films were hack jobs, filled with propaganda. Many of the "combat" scenes were heroic, but rather unrealistic. This situation improved as the war continued and Americans had seen miles of newsreels, but viewers were tiring

of the war by then and wanted escapist films rather than more combat.

Third, the war in the Pacific was a racial war. During the conflict, the basic inhumanity of the Japanese was hardly ever questioned. There was a considerable difference in treatment of the Japanese and Germans as enemies in American films. In Europe, we warred against the Nazis; in the Pacific, extermination was the goal. While films made after the war might present a more balanced picture, they are not necessarily better films.

Finally, Hollywood went to war. The production companies in California churned out an almost inexhaustible supply of pictures. Many actors and filmmakers were also part of the government war effort. Some of the top directors worked making documentaries. By agreement, most of these were never shown in theaters while the war was in progress. A number of them are excellent.

In this essay, I'll look at a few of the films which are available from a list of perhaps one hundred. These include what this writer feels are some of the best, and undoubtedly the worst. The good ones give students a feeling for what the conflict of their grandparents was like. Even the worst films have use. They were seen by large audiences; they were the "reality" of the day. In analyzing these, a teacher has an opportunity to discuss such issues as propaganda and racism.

The best American film on the Pacific War, *They Were Expendable* (135 min.) appeared in the last year of the conflict. The film focuses on the officers and men of American PT boats in the Philippines at the beginning of the war. Its cast of characters included some of the top names in Hollywood of those years.

Under John Ford's skillful direction, time is taken to develop the characters and the story line. These are Americans fighting a losing battle in hopes of delaying the enemy. The abrupt shift from peacetime to war is adequately depicted. There is frustration at losing as well as the heroics that one expects in such a film. The attack of these tiny boats against a Japanese cruiser may be among the most spectacular combat scenes ever filmed. Though it is available in a colorized version, purists may prefer *They Were Expendable* in the original black-and-white.

As a relatively long film, there is time to develop the characters as the combat scene



Film poster for *They Were Expendable*. Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; directed by John Ford; screenplay by Commander Frank Wead, from the book by William L. White. Cast: Robert Montgomery, John Wayne, Donna Reed, Jack Holt, Ward Bond, Marshall Thompson and Paul Langton.

Source: *The John Wayne Scrapbook* by Lee Pfeiffer. Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1996. Copyright © 1989 by Lee Pfeiffer

shifts from north to south. At that time, PT boats were relatively untested in combat; to the irritation of their crews, they were often used to shuttle messages and passengers from place to place. As the squadron lost vessels, the crews were transferred to other duties. We never see the Japanese enemy face-to-face.

Another useful film for classroom purposes grew out of a fireside chat in 1942, when Franklin Roosevelt told the story of a naval doctor who saved wounded American seamen on Java. Based on James Hilton's screenplay, Cecil B. De Mille directed *The Story of Dr. Wassell* (1944, 140 min.) with Gary Cooper in the lead role.

The story highlights Dr. Wassell's attempts to move seamen wounded in the naval battles off Java to a port from which they could be evacuated to Australia and safety. As with John Ford's epic, there is time to develop both story line and characters. Lauding the British and Dutch as well as the Americans, the film is filled with the stereotypes of the time, which can lead to lively classroom discussion.

There is Japanese brutality. Hospitals become a target for bombing raids; unarmed cargo ships crowded with refugees are attacked at sea. There are scenes depicting the superiority of the Japanese at jungle camouflage. Even the strong American feelings of the time against miscegenation can be found. Of course, typical of most American films, there is a strong love story interwoven with the plot.

To counteract the anti-Japanese bias of these films, it may be useful to turn to Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp* (1956, 115 min.). The story revolves around the attempt of a Japanese unit to escape from Burma into Thailand in the closing days of the war. Commanded by a music teacher, the unit practices singing to keep up their morale. In a touching scene in which they are preparing to die, they surrender to the British when their enemy sings the same song they have enjoyed. They then discover that the war officially ended a few days earlier.

A non-commissioned officer, the protagonist is sent to convince another Japanese unit to surrender. These soldiers fight to the

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death, and the hero is the only survivor. On his trek to rejoin his unit in a prisoner of war camp, he comes upon vultures feeding on unburied Japanese dead. Assuming the role of a Buddhist monk, he stays behind in Burma, determined to locate all unburied Japanese dead and perform proper Buddhist funeral rites for them.

The Burmese Harp is a beautifully made film that offers a version of the Japanese military that was not seen by Americans during the war. It is a good antidote to the usual fare of televised war films. Students with whom I have used this film find it compelling. Taking time to develop both characters and the story line, the director has filled the screen with gripping images.

If these three films deserve merit because of their quality, we should look at my choices for the worst films of the Pacific War. Easily the worst American film of the entire period appeared just as the war came to an end and wasn't released until after Japan's surrender. In *The First Yank into Tokyo* (1945, 83 min.), Tom Neal plays an American sent into Japan to rescue an important scientist from a prisoner of war camp.

The hero is ideal for the task. Having grown up in Japan, he speaks the language like a native. He's willing to undertake the mission because his fiancée disappeared as a nurse in the Philippines. In the film's first major idiocy, he submits to irreversible plastic surgery to make him look Japanese. The Korean underground assists in getting Neal into the Japanese home islands.

Assigned as an orderly to the hospital of the camp, he discovers that his fiancée is a nurse

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The Japanese protagonist, in the guise of a Buddhist monk, plays the traditional Burmese harp. The harp and its music are central features in Kon Ichikawa's compelling anti-war film, *The Burmese Harp*.

Photo courtesy of Public Media Incorporated.

there and that the sadistic camp commandant is his former college roommate. Just about every anti-Japanese stereotype found its way into this film. The enemy are sadistic, venal, corrupt, and ill-mannered. They lust after white women, mistreat prisoners, and abuse the Koreans. And, of course, they can be hoodwinked by the lone American.

The film ends as Neal gives up his place on the submarine to his fiancée. He stands on the beach holding off a Japanese attack. After all, how could his love ever accept him if he continued to bear the physical features of the brutal enemy she knew so well?

If we can excuse *The First Yank into Tokyo* its excesses as part of the wartime psychology, the same can't be said for *The Imperial Japanese Empire* (1985, 120 min.). This big-budget

epic, Japanese financed, deliberately attempts to stand history on its head and absolve Japan for any culpability for World War II. The plot follows several Japanese soldiers through the entire conflict. Despite some excellent combat scenes and spectacular scenery, the film mirrors the failure of subsequent Japanese governments to admit any responsibility for the actions of its wartime predecessor.

Historical inaccuracies and misinterpretations abound. Japan was merely attempting to liberate Asians from Western imperialism when it was "suckered" into the wider conflict by the deliberate actions of Franklin Roosevelt and his British henchmen. Flaunting international conventions, these Westerners used flags of truce to lure brave Japanese soldiers to their deaths. Backward Chinese failed to appreciate a Japan that was leading them to freedom.

As if these skewed historical interpretations were not enough, there are many jarring inconsistencies. Two will be mentioned as illustrations. In some of the combat scenes, weapons are used that were not available at the time. Even more glaring is the fifty-star American flag behind the tribunal at the trial of General Tōjō on obviously trumped-up charges.

Still, even *The First Yank into Tokyo* and *The Imperial Japanese Empire* can be profitably used in the classroom. The former is excellent for showing modern audiences the racism that pervaded films of the time. One need not go beyond this to examine the many stereotypes that were common then. The latter film raises more serious questions concerning the insistence of some Japanese that history may be rewritten to convince a later generation that even facts can be ignored. Such a film is revisionism at its worst.

There are a few final suggestions that may be beneficial to teachers who plan to use films in class. Far too many educators are reluctant to spend so much time on a film; the school year is just too short. Any of the films mentioned can add new dimensions to the class even if only the parts pertinent to the discussion are shown. I've had excellent results showing as little as thirty seconds to a minute of a two-hour film.

Although students today are visually oriented, many do not really use their eyes. On numerous occasions, I've shown relatively short segments of a film with the sound off, forcing students to describe what they are seeing. While their initial responses may be "But how do we know what we are seeing if there is no sound," they quickly begin to make their own judgements about the images. This, alone, is often a plus. ■

FILM SOURCES

The Burmese Harp
Public Media Incorporated
5547 N. Ravenswood Ave.
Chicago, IL 60640
800-826-3456

The Imperial Japanese Empire
Video City Productions
4266 Broadway
Oakland, CA 94611

The Story of Doctor Wassell
Universal Home Video
100 Universal City Plaza
Universal City, CA 91608-9955
818-777-1000

They Were Expendable *
The First Yank into Tokyo *

* **EDITOR'S NOTE:** Due to Time Warner's recent acquisition of Turner Home Entertainment, we were unable to determine the current status of these two films. However, we consulted Blockbuster Video Company and were assured that both *The First Yank into Tokyo* and *They Were Expendable* are available on video in their catalogue and may be ordered through them.