

Banned Classics

Let There Be Light

U.S.A. *Direction:* John Huston, *Script:* John Huston and Charles Kaufman, *Photography:* Stanley Cortez, George Smith, Lloyd Fromm, John Doran, and Joseph Jackman, *Editing:* Gene Fowler, Jr., *Music:* Dmitri Tiomkin, *Narration:* Walter Huston, *Production:* Signal Corps, *Print:* 35mm, sd., English, b&w, 58 min., 1946.

Because WWII has the unfortunate moniker "The Good War," we've come to associate wartime psychological dysfunction with only Vietnam. *Let There Be Light* is John Huston's famous documentary about a hospital treating shell-shocked soldiers. Of all the films Americans produced during the war, only *Let There Be Light* (and Huston's *Battle of San Pietro* (1945)) have endured as something more than an exercise in propaganda and thought policing. Huston's other wartime documentaries were basically combat films, but *Let There Be Light* stands above all other war films for a simple reason. It treats human beings as something other than killing machines or vermin. The men here are vulnerable; they show the human face of war, which has more to do with stress and suffering than battlefield heroics.

When Huston entered the Signal Corps, he was riding high on the success of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and his highly praised screenplays for *Sergeant York* (1941) and *High Sierra* (1941). Many of Huston's best films, from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) to *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), are infused with an irony that undercuts what would be macho heroics in another director's films. Considering Huston's wartime work, this irony takes on a more serious weight because of documentary's real events and real people. *The Battle of San Pietro* ends with liberated Italians, but much more memorable are the violent battle scenes and Huston's grim narration. In the ending of *Let There Be Light*, the dysfunctional soldiers all appear to be cured and play a game of baseball before jumping on a bus for the real world. But this ending seems almost surreal after watching soldiers who can barely function because of their horrifying experiences at the front. These endings seem tacked on...as if appended to fit into the wartime documentary mold or to please someone higher up.

What Huston himself thought is unclear, however, the releases of both films were held up, *The Battle of San Pietro* for a year, and *Let There Be Light* for several decades. The government's justification for withholding *Let There Be Light* was to protect the identity of the film's subjects. When the film was finally released, all the names were changed. Most people have assumed that the devastating effects of wartime horrors on fragile GI minds was not an image the military wanted to make public. However, according to Bill Murphy, the film's files suggest no reason other than the identity problem.

Despite the upbeat tone of the title, *Let There Be Light* is all shades of grey. Propaganda depends on black and white, on polarization, on sure divisions between us and them, good and evil, kill or be killed. It tries hard to leave no room for doubt, and this requires the imposition of this yes/no structure upon the world. Sometimes the maddening chaos of reality defies the propagandist's efforts at categorization, as we see in *The Battle of China*. Huston on the other hand, gave voice to the middle ground. Though he brings his material into a structure bearing both narrative and argument, his approach remains self-effacing. He allows the pain of war's reality to overpower the happy endings that attempt to keep the tragedy at bay. These two approaches, between films that reify the world and those that leave room for wonder and doubt, suggest the difference between propaganda and the finest kind of documentary.

— Abé Mark Nornes

Soldiers at the Front

(*Tatakau heitai*, also *Fighting Soldiers*)

Japan *Production*: Culture Films Section, Tōhō, *Sponsor*: Intelligence Dept., Ministry of War, *Producer*: Matsuzaki Keiji, *Director*: Kamei Fumio, *Photography*: Miki Shigeru, *Sound*: Fujii Shin'ichi, *Music*: Koseki Yūji, *Print*: 16mm, sd., Japanese, English subtitles, 60 min., 1939.

Soldiers at the Front is the feature length documentary film produced by filmmakers participating in the Bukan operation for four months in the summer of 1938. Completed in March 1939 and due for release in April, the official comment from the headquarters of the Army General Staff was, "This film is not likely to be open to the public in consideration of the present situation," preventing the film from being released.

In point of fact, the film was suppressed. Such measures reveal the tightening control over movies by authorities. Soon after this episode, more decisive measures were taken through the "Motion Picture Law" (*Eigahō*) in October of the same year.



Fig. 28. A lifeless face from *Soldiers at the Front*.
(Credit: Japan Film Library Council)

Kamei Fumio, in his autobiography titled *Tatakau eiga — dokyumentarisuto no Shōwa-shi* (*Fighting Movies — A Documentarist's Shōwa History*, Iwanami Shinsho, 1989), wrote that, "I did not necessarily have any intention of making anti-war film. However, my film, not being favorable to the military, probably gave them an unusual impression. I myself didn't expect the suppression. A little while ago, an audience watching the film at a Tōhō preview room shook hands with me expressing their sympathy...I anticipated a sooner cease-fire