

people to write songs to promote the war, holding a contest in which "Patriot March" won first prize in December. This was one of the events for strengthening the national fighting spirit. It could be said that the authorities were attempting to dye the whole of Japan with only a wartime color.

*China Incident* was produced in this stream of events in order to stir up the fighting spirit. The atrocities in Nanking following its occupation, which the world now knows, were not reported to the Japanese public. Quite the contrary, the Japanese people celebrated the capture of Nanking with processions of flags in the daytime and lanterns at night. The first scene begins with a firm declaration of friendship between Japan and China, followed by a portrait of Japan's industrial strength and China's raw materials. It continues with an explanation on the one hand of 4,000,000 Chinese' misery under the anti-Japanese policies of the Chinese Communist Party and the China National Party, and on the other hand, how the Japanese army did their best to rid China of these powers. Looking at it today, the film dumbfounds us for its crude rationalization for a war of invasion. Beyond that, it vividly shows how cinema may be utilized to the ends of war, and in that sense it can send shivers down the spine.

— *Yamane Sadao*

#### The Battle of China

U.S.A. *Direction:* Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, *Editing:* William Hornbeck, *Screenplay:* Leonard Spigelgass, William L. Shirer, James Hilton, Robert Heller, *Music:* Dmitri Tiomkin and Alfred Newman, *Animation:* Walt Disney Productions, *Narration:* Walter Huston and Anthony Veiller, *Production:* Special Service Division, Army Service Forces, U.S. War Department, *Print:* 35mm, sd., English, b&w, 65 min., 1944.

In 1991, Frank Capra died at the age of 96, leaving behind a body of work resolutely American in character. In addition to his classic feature films, Capra will always be remembered for supervising the definitive propaganda documentary, the *Why We Fight* series. *Battle of China* was the fifth installment of the series, and in many ways the weakest. For this reason, it's also one of the most interesting, because it reveals the pressure reality exerts on the simplistic world of propaganda.

The *Why We Fight* series grew out of 15 lectures on foreign policy prepared by the Bureau of Public Relations. The idea was to use these canned speeches to ensure that American men in uniform were aware of the past 20 years of foreign affairs, but the results were a disaster. They decided that film was a better medium to capture young soldiers' attention and introduce them to the fundamental ideas underlying their war. For this job, they (literally) enlisted the help of Capra and other Hollywood talent.

Capra had joined the reserves before the war, and the day after Pearl Harbor two officers from the Signal Corps visited him on the set to recruit his help. He readily joined, despite being at the height of his career (with a string of recent hits including *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *You Can't Take it With You* (1938), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941)). Capra set up shop in the Department of Interior, and began watching and

accumulating footage for compilation. The military, Hollywood, and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) all helped the project. MOMA showed Capra their German films, including *Triumph of the Will* (1935) which had recently been translated by Siegfried Kracauer and other German ex-pats. Capra also gathered around him a powerhouse of Hollywood talent, including Anatole Litvak (for direction), Walter Huston (narration), Joris Ivens (writing), Dmitri Tiomkin (music), Irving Wallace (writing), William Hornbeck (editing), Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel (writing), Disney Studios (animation), Anthony Veiller (writing), and Eric Knight (writing).

In the summer of 1942, Capra, Knight, Litvak and Veiller worked hard on outlines and scenarios, although in truth of fact the films were written by committee, with countless advisors and government agencies checking the scripts. By November 1942 the first film, *Prelude to War*, was released, and won the Oscar for Best Documentary that year. This and the subsequent installments were seen by millions of GIs as mandatory viewing before they set out for the war. Three of the films were distributed commercially, and foreign-language versions were produced in French, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian. Studies have questioned the practical effectiveness of the series, but no one can fail to be impressed by the filmmaking. Had Japanese seen it and compared it to their own films, they might have realized they were doomed to lose.

Writer Eric Knight summed up the approach of the filmmakers, stating that "positive assertion of your beliefs and aims" was more effective than "refutation of enemy assertions."<sup>1</sup> When we consider propaganda, we often imagine a film form free from any responsibilities save asserting one's aims and beliefs. As Knight put it, cinema is "particularly adept at expressing most glibly one of the subtlest tricks of the propagandists: to state a well-known truth, and bracket it with a new truth, or a half-truth or a patent lie."<sup>2</sup> However, *The Battle of China* suggests that reality exerts pressure upon the propagandist, and that propaganda that strays too far from the truth ultimately fails.

Like other films in the *Why We Fight* series, *The Battle of China* divides the earth into two pure spheres: the free world and the slave world. China is a site of contestation between the two, and the first step for the slave world of Japan to take over the free and democratic peoples of North America and Europe. The Chinese race becomes a projection of American ideals with the help of experts like Joseph Grew (the pre-Pearl Harbor ambassador to Japan who is widely admired as a moderating force by today's Japanese). Grew characterizes the Japanese as a "closely disciplined and conformist people — a veritable human bee hive or ant hill" in contrast to the "independent and individualistic" Chinese.

The insect metaphors for the Japanese were old, worn stereotypes, but thinking of China as a bastion of freedom and democracy was relatively new. Chungking is called the capital of "Free China" or "New China" — a dubious description no matter how you look at it — but what really got the film in trouble was the fact that the filmmakers left out Mao and the Communists, disavowing the political turmoil among Chinese. Over images of Japanese atrocity, the narrator cries, "In their last bloody blow [Nanking] the Japanese had accomplished what 4,000 years had failed to bring into being...a united China, an aroused China." The discrepancy was too much, and the film was shelved. In the end, however, the film was released anyway,

and nearly 4 million soldiers saw it before the end of the war. Today, the film's hyperbole and racism (both latent and blatant) is as striking as the skill with which it was made. Like *Triumph of the Will*, the series Capra left behind has defined "good" propaganda. We need to think about the relationship of these films to today's documentaries, especially those made in times of war, for World War II films like these solidified an array of documentary conventions that are with us to this day.

NOTES

1. Culbert, David. "Why We Fight: Social Engineering for a Democratic Society at War," in K.R.M. Short, ed., *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II* (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 181. Much of the historical background here comes from Culbert's essay. See also Murphy, William T. "The Method of Why We Fight." *Journal of Popular Film I* (1972): 185-196.
2. Culbert, p. 181.

— *Abé Mark Nornes*