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KAMEI FUMIO

Japanese filmmaker, 1908–1987

TATAKAU HEITAI (Fighting Soldiers)

Documentary film, 1939

Fighting Soldiers is an extraordinary film. Despite being a record of the invasion of China, produced in conjunction with the Japanese military, it appears to contain a covert statement pointing to the tragedy of the war. Each scene deploys the conventions of the typical propaganda film, but they are subverted through brilliant editing, well-crafted intertitles, and ambiguous imagery. It seems that the filmmaker's pacifist sentiments were not hidden well enough, for the film was censored before reaching public view and the director was eventually imprisoned.

Fighting Soldiers was basically a *senki eiga*, or "war record film", of the battle for Wuhan. It was one of the first documentaries to be overseen by a directorial presence, which is significant to the extent that the film's subversiveness partly depended upon the prescient collection of images before the editing stage. Previously, cameramen had simply sent their images back to editors in Japan. Through his command of the amalgamation of images and sounds, Kamei undermines the codes of the propaganda film. He builds a double movement into *Fighting Soldiers*. On the surface, the film is similar to the many militaristic films being made around the same time; the effect, however, is entirely different.

A close look at the opening sequence will demonstrate this approach. The film contains no narration, only calligraphic intertitles in the manner of a silent film. The first contains a pronouncement typical of the war film: "Now the continent experiences violent pangs of labour to give birth to a new order." An old man prays before a roadside shrine, a small statue, offering flowers and bowing. We wonder what the man is praying for, and the answer seems to come in the next image: a nearby house burning out of control. The screen fills with the old man's rugged face, and the effect is shocking. This is one of the few extreme close-ups in any Japanese war documentary. This old man is not smiling; it appears as though he is looking out at the audience, begging them to look closely and think. The next shot shows a close view of the roadside shrine at which he was praying: the god's hands are brought up to its face as if it is weeping. A line of refugees walk on the dried mud of a road past devastated fields, Japanese soldiers looking on. A column of tanks and trucks pass the refugees. Attached to one tank is a Japanese flag framed by the screen. Its vigorous flapping in the wind may have stirred the fighting spirit in some spectators, but others will have looked behind it at the edges of the frame. There they will have noticed the seemingly endless ruins of Chinese homes passing by.

From this striking opening sequence, Kamei goes on to offer an encyclopedic rendering of propaganda film conventions, undercutting each one as the soldiers fight toward Wuhan. For example, in the film's most famous scene the soldiers abandon a sick horse, which we see collapsing on a lonely road and dying in an excruciating long take. In another powerful sequence, a group of soldiers sit around a small shrine for a fallen comrade; on the soundtrack we hear a letter from his wife, who is unaware of her husband's death and awaits his return. Here Kamei forcefully demonstrates the subversive potential of melodrama. Elsewhere, he relies on subtle editing, ambiguous imagery, and ironic intertitles. This strategy builds a nebulousness into the fabric of the film, and directs spectators to a reading that resists the acceptance of – or the desire for – sacrificial death and "glorious war results".

It appears that the various departments of Tōhō Studios were operating under varying assumptions regarding *Fighting Soldiers*. While some were preparing to release the film into the public arena, others were contemplating its suppression. Tōhō held a number of industry previews, circulated pamphlets, and published impressive advertisements in film magazines. The

response at the previews was favourable, but the studio staff sensed that the film would be tripped up by the censors. This was the era immediately preceding the Film Law and they realized that they had to be careful. To prevent the retributions that they imagined lay in wait, Tōhō unilaterally shelved the film. The executives wrote off the capital investment in the film in the belief that they were ensuring their own survival by doing so. The suppression sent shock waves through the documentary film industry, and "The *Fighting Soldiers* Problem" became shorthand for the care needed to avoid wartime censorship. The film was thought lost until the 1970s when a print surfaced, with a single scene of a funeral pyre mysteriously missing.

It appears that no one has asked the obvious question: how did Kamei think he could get away with *Fighting Soldiers*? Anti-war sentiment is by no means deeply hidden in the film. Anyone who stayed awake during it could tell that it was not designed to inspire the fighting spirit. From this perspective, Kamei had to be either crazy or incompetent. A more likely explanation is that the stereotypical image of Japan in the 1930s, as a "dark valley" of oppressive censorship and rabid support for the war, blinds commentators to quite different currents in Japanese society, where Hollywood cinema was still dominating popular culture up to the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Kamei may have been pushing boundaries, but he still thought that there was room for filmmaking like this without serious retribution or threats. Seen in this context, the very existence of *Fighting Soldiers* reminds us that there was far more variety in public discourse than the conventional image of the 1930s suggests.

A film that Kamei wrote in 1945 has recently surfaced in Japan and was preserved and screened at the National Film Center. Entitled *Seikū* (Security of the Skies), it was self-censored by the director from his own filmography. Postwar historians either followed suit, or more likely knew nothing of the film's existence. *Seikū* details life at a factory producing fighter planes; the competent writing of the film conforms to the most fervent propaganda from the war's end. It contains none of the subversive irony of Kamei's earlier films. How this will affect his reputation as the only Japanese director to defy the militarization of Japanese cinema remains to be seen.

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IMMANUEL KANT

German philosopher, 1724–1804

Immanuel Kant's critical treatises are central to modern European philosophy. His most famous works, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgement* (1790) made little or no impression on the Prussian censor, despite the fact that Kant attacked the standard speculative arguments for the existence of God. Kant was not an atheist; but he did demand a rational justification for belief.

The king of Prussia for most of Kant's adult life, Friedrich II ("the Great"), had no great interest in religious orthodoxy – Christianity was "an old metaphysical fiction". He had welcomed Voltaire, a believer in natural religion and a champion of religious freedom, to his court, and was an "enlightened", if absolutist, monarch. His successor, Friedrich Wilhelm II (1786–97), was the opposite in many respects, and especially in his concern for Protestant (Lutheran) orthodoxy. Johann Wöllner, appointed head of the State Department for Schools and Churches in 1788, announced that any teacher who deviated from biblical doctrine would be dismissed. Indeed it would, from now on, be necessary to receive permission from recognized censors before teaching on religious subjects. It became advisable, if a person had unconventional religious opinions, to keep them to himself.

A year later, revolutionary events in France caused regimes across Europe to clamp down on all kinds of new thinking, not only political but religious. Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1792–93), became a victim of the new, reactionary spirit.

Kant would have no truck with supernatural religion. Moral reason alone constitutes whatever truth there is in religion, he argued. The basic truth is that man is radically evil, corrupt, and in need of a "revolution" if he is to achieve inner freedom, the goal of religion. Individuals allow themselves to be imprisoned by circumstances, such as lack of material resources or poor education; but they have to rise above them. They tend to do their duty for the sake of reward, or to please God, or they use ceremony and ritual ("morally indifferent") or prayer (a "superstitious illusion") as means of grace. Kant is firm. Reason alone can achieve freedom: "Anything else, apart from the leading of a good life, which a human being thinks he can do in order to become pleasing to God, is mere religious delusion, and spurious service of God."

Interestingly enough, Kant thought that there was only one true religion, but several faiths, with Christianity among them. The censors passed the first essay of the *Religion*, which was published in Biester's *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Berlin