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The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen
Years' War, 1931-1945 (review)

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Peter B. High.
***The Imperial Screen: Japanese
 Film Culture in the Fifteen
 Years' War, 1931-1945.***

The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003
 586 pgs; \$60.00

Victimized Nation?

The Imperial Screen is the first scholarly work in English to systematically analyze Japanese wartime cinema. As the full title indicates, High's book not only covers the relevant films released throughout the entire period of aggressive mid 20th century Japanese militarism, but also the political-cultural influences of this period upon the artistic responses of Japan's filmmaking establishment. Furthermore, this comprehensive study provides close readings of virtually all the key pertinent fictional full-length films, as well as investigating the documentary and animated genres—usually based upon the author's screenings, but also incorporating reconstructions of important lost films.

The scope of this engaging text is beyond impressive, as it skillfully interweaves general contextual information, the dynamics of Japan's film industry (including intellectual debates), and the growing regulatory intrusion of official government agencies upon the political content of wartime films.

The book's introduction does an excellent job of contextualizing recent Japanese scholarship in the field—much stimulated by the first edition of *The Imperial Screen*, published in Japan in 1995. In addition, there is an informative discussion about the continuing propensity of the Japanese to avoid frankly engaging their responsibilities as wartime aggressors, preferring in most instances to cast themselves in the more comfortable collective role of a victimized nation.

A compact prologue provides important information on Japan's cinematic precursors to the 1931-1945 period, most particularly their response to the 1904-05 war with Tsarist Russia. In light of what would later occur during the horrific “war without mercy” with America between 1941 and 1945, it is interesting to note how the white Russian enemy was not demonized on Japanese movie screens.

A great deal of space in the book is devoted to examining how most of the generally liberal filmmaking establishment (prior to Japan's July 1937 full scale invasion of China) was inexorably and



with little open resistance converted—the so-called tenko, or “re-orientation” concept—to actively supporting the ideology of the pro-militarist government. Spearheaded by the formal constraints of a Film Law, there was also the gradual regulatory removal of the “menacing” influences of foreign films—both aesthetic and political—leading to the creation of a pure Japanese cinema that portrayed the new national “spirit.”

This new Japanese film “reality” was enhanced by the industry's belated conversion to sound and the emergence of a war drama genre reflecting government policy regarding the officially designated “China Incident.” This national spirit was most evident in combat films, portraying the loyal familial group, invariably a small military unit, engaging a usually faceless Chinese enemy, in which one or more heroic types make the ultimate self sacrifice—represented by such classics as *Five Scouts* (1938) and *Mud and Soldiers* (1939), but reaching their zenith in the “Human Bomb” patriotic films. And in just a few years one is led to conclude that these cinematic representations would considerably contribute to the nationwide self-destructive (1944-45) spirit of the Kamikaze.

Surprisingly, the notorious December 1937 Panay Incident, in which a U.S. Navy gunboat on China river patrol was attacked and sunk by Japanese aircraft, is not mentioned by High. A major turning point in Japanese-American relations, Japan's formal apology was well documented at the time—and even recorded on newsreels released in the United States. Was this entire incident treated as a domestic non-topic by the Japanese government and film industry?

The expanded “Pacific War” following Japan's near simultaneous December 1941 assault upon the U.S. Fleet at Pearl Harbor and western colonial possessions in south Asia and the Pacific radically altered the wartime film dynamics—from the pathetic Chinese enemy to the inclusion of hateful barbaric white spies, or decadent and cowardly imperialists, as the preferred cinematic Other. These devilish Others were literalized in many film cartoons as the one-horned “oni” demons, such as the hysterical American naval officers who appear in Japan's full length animated recreation of their triumphant raid upon the “Demon Island” (Pearl Harbor), *Momotaro, Eagle of the Sea* (1943).

It would have been helpful for the readers' ability to fully conceptualize the extent of topicality in wartime Japanese cinema had there been included figures on the overall yearly number of Japanese films released during the period, statistically matched with those films identified as containing overt war content. It would also have been useful to indicate whether distinct rhetorical patterns regarding the national spirit were detected by the author. Likewise, although briefly alluded to by High, this reviewer would have preferred a more extended discussion concerning the insertion onto film soundtracks of such ubiquitous wartime martial tunes as the “Battleship March.”

Although there is some discussion by the author about patriotic activities at movie theatres, and often detailed analyses of

why and how certain films were censored or banned from distribution, the reviewer would have wished to have been able to read more about spectatorship, particularly the popular response to the political content of specific wartime films. Nevertheless, it cannot be overemphasized that High's *The Imperial Screen* is a paragon of current historical film scholarship.

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**Peter C. Rollins and
John E. O'Connor, editors.**
***Hollywood's White House,
the American Presidency in
Film and History.***

University Press Kentucky, 2003
441 pages; \$32.00 hardcover

**Peter C. Rollins and
John E. O'Connor, editors.**
***The West Wing,
the American Presidency
as Television Drama.***

Syracuse University Press, 2003
272 pages; \$45.00 hardcover;
\$19.95 paperback

Timely Works

Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor's newest collaborative works are an excellent addition to film and television studies. In *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* and *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama* the editors have painstakingly assembled the work of scholars and journalists who examine Hollywood and television's portrayals of the American Presidency.

Over the years, the editors have worked on numerous projects including *Hollywood's*



World War I: Motion Picture Images (1999); *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (2nd ed, 2003) and the thirty-three-year-old journal *Film & History, An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film & Television Studies*. Rollins' interest in historical film analysis began with a presentation at the first Popular Culture Association meeting in 1971 analyzing the television series *Victory at Sea*. (Later published as chapter 5 of *Television Histories*, Eds. Peter C. Rollins and Gary Edgerton, 2001.) Within a year of the popular culture gathering, Rollins met John E. O'Connor, editor of the fledgling *Film & History* journal, forging a lifetime of collaboration and friendship. (See "About Us" on the journal's web site, www.filmandhistory.org).

Hollywood's White House, declares the editors, "is dedicated to the American Presidents and the glorious office of the presidency." Their contributors begin by examining the film presidencies of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, "Rough Rider" Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. Part two examines fictional presidential heroes, presidential imagery found in the films of Frank Capra, and Hollywood's creation of an "action" hero president in *Air Force One* (1997). Concluding chapters discuss presidential character, a "hot button" political issue emerging with Oliver Stone's film *Nixon* (1995), and reaching a crescendo during the presidency of Bill Clinton (1992-2000). More recently the issue of character consumes 24/7 cable news media outlets which daily dissect every action and word of George W. Bush. The supporting bibliographic essay written by Myron A. Levine examines the literature surrounding the changing functions of the presidency as the office has evolved over time. John Shelton Lawrence's "A Filmography for Images of American Presidents in Film" provides a comprehensive start for future studies of the presidency in media.

Many of the essays are compelling, especially Deborah Carmichael's "*Gabriel Over the White House* (1933): William Randolph Hearst's Fascist Solution for the Great Depression" and Loren P. Quiring's "A Man of His Word: Aaron Sorkin's American Presidents." Carmichael examines the dark themes generated by *Gabriel*...and how a mild-mannered, even-tempered president became "transformed after a car accident and subsequent coma" into a human dynamo of governmental (often unconstitutional) activism, vanquishing America's foreign enemies and restoring economic and social justice to a country ravaged by the Great Depression. In relation to more recent productions, Quiring describes the art of "passionate" presidential vocabulary used by writer Aaron Sorkin as a metaphor for presidential values/action. Quiring writes that Sorkin "wants a president who can embody the rational discourse governing our society, faithful not to the random seductions of image but to oaths that the Constitution represents." Sorkin's presidents, Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas, *The American President*) and

