

## REPROACHLESS HEROES OF WORLD WAR II: A CINEMATIC APPROACH THROUGH TWO AMERICAN MOVIES

CHRISTINE S. DILIGENTI-GAVRILINE

*Lycée Ozar Hatorah, Toulouse*

As a manly universe, war is above all a soldierly one, the one of fighting armies. Cinema does not derogate to the tradition of representing troops, resting or acting, clean and fresh on the eve of the battle, mud bespattered and devastated afterwards.

Looks do not interest us much, even though the circular travellings in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* for instance, let us admire or appreciate the fine presence of the uniforms: the masterful first images of the film when the entire Japanese Navy, in #1 Ceremonial, greets her new chief-commander, Admiral Yamamoto.

The army at wartime still is a particular sphere in the bosom of the State, if she doesn't purely serve as a substitute for it. The army is submitted to law and statutes (discipline), obeys to a hierarchy (ranks) that we can, why not, compare to the common social ladder, even if it is not inevitably the social origin that makes the gold braid.

The major interest of the classical war cinema is to show soldiers and the army at their best. They are the symbol of the unity of the nation against the dangerous enemy that they must fight. It is their mission to defeat him.

There are numerous movies reflecting this point of view. The American film industry has long been lavish on this subject with movies where John Wayne assumes the part of the hero. This representation, although it contains a part of fiction, looks like a continuation of documentaries such as *Why We Fight*. No doubt these oldies, in case of an eventual war, could again serve the good cause and the propaganda.

However, we have preferred other movies, still classical by their structures but more ambiguous in the way they give at the same time an image of the soldier-hero and of national, political and ethical values, definitely unclassical. This is the reason why we have deliberately chosen as subjects of analysis *The Longest Day* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*. These two movies are based on more or less autobiographical essays<sup>1</sup>. Besides, the producer and associate to battle scenes is the same in both movies: Elmo Williams.

Our methodology to study these two movies might seem strange. We could have strictly respected the historical chronology: attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec 7th 1941, D-Day, June 6th 1944. Here, cinematographically speaking, the landing has been treated long before the Japanese attack. Consequently, we will analyze these movies in a comparative way as well as in a movement of alternation.

## I. SMALL SOLDIERS AND GREAT EVENTS

What strikes us at first in these two movies is the opposition between the almost irrational importance of events and the militaries' or governments' powerlessness or even inconstance. Participants in history, they are both subjects and objects: active actors-motors like the Headquarters General from *D-Day*, or simple pawns facing the Japanese warlike tendencies in *Tora!*

The complex structure of these movies emphasizes the gap between man on one hand and overwhelming Time on the other, in so far as Time is not the attribute of man, at least not of the western man. We can easily notice this in *Tora!*. The film structure also shows in a remarkable way the rising of the tension before the Event. The waiting is exacerbated in *Tora!*. We know that there will be war. In *D-Day*, we know that the landing will take place.

But the knowing, although it may be a political or strategic certainty, depends on Time. In *D-Day*, the tension is also emphasized by the musical and sound score: the first images of the movie, and afterwards every German camp sequence is sustained by a soldier-like rhythm of drums. The same process cannot be noticed when it is time for the Allies to appear on screen. Introduced each in turn, they are rather accompanied by distinctive elements from their respective cultures: a drizzling rain, a jazz tune, the RAF pilots' mess looking like a traditional english pub. However, a few music notes join the Allies together: the first four steps from Beethoven's 5th symphony can be heard all along the movie and, even more, can be seen in morse alphabet.

*Tora!* may be more esthetic than *D-Day*, but its action is less sustained by a sound and musical score. Twice can we hear the American national anthem for the raising of the flag. The Japanese anthem is heard once. Moreover the Japanese sequences are more musical: soft notes which are supposedly taken out of Nippon musical tradition but to our ears sound like a famous TV ad for cosmetics.

However, the nature itself of the Waiting is different in the two movies. In *Tora!*, it rather is a diplomatic waiting, rhythmized by close-ups on clocks and calendars. The movie is studded with allusions to the Washington political and diplomatic spheres. If the main action seems to happen between Admiral Yamamoto's Japanese Navy and Admiral Kimmel's American Navy, in fact it is inside the governmental decision centers where the fortunes of peace or war are discussed. Representation of political personalities of this time is quite amazing: we even are shown the Iron Pact signing, i.e. the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis.

This film (*Tora!*) also seems to underline a problem proper to the American society and which could eventually be the subject of a comparison with our contemporary times. Indeed, the President's name is suppressed from the 12 Apostles who've got the right to acknowledge the decoded secrets from the Magical Operation. Can this historical fact be apprehended as the director's subtle hint at the antipathy of part of the

Army regarding Roosevelt's «socialist» policy? Nowadays however, President Reagan's «comparative» ignorance of the Irangate can in no ways be the consequence of an opposition between the Army and civilians.

In **D-Day**, the waiting is on a more psychological basis: there is no Damocles' Sword as in the first movie. War is now a fact that even has some past. What one is waiting for is the Landing. Already postponed once, it is all the more expected, wished for and feared. Alternation between Allies sequences and German sequences reveals the psychological effect on troops but also on the General Headquarters.

The division between small soldiers and great events is again emphasized by what is revealed to us of the Army's attitudes and decisions facing the possibility of the Event War, and particularly in **Tora!** Because he fears sabotage on behalf of the Japanese population living on Hawaii, the colonel in charge of the American Air Force will give an order so that the planes change place: ironically, they therefore will be an easier target to be destroyed by the Japanese on Dec 7th 1941. Another spectacular surprise: the impossibility to place a radar on a given hill because the chosen spot is a protected area: a national park. Then there is the lack of experience of those who have to use the radar: 'What must we supervise?', they ask. Besides, this «small scientific marvel» works only 3 hours per day. On the day of attack, a real bureaucratic mentality reveals itself as one of the links of the terrible chain leading to the destruction of the American Navy. Pearl Harbor Information Center is closed since 7 o'clock a.m. On Dec 7th 1941, Washington D.C. is an empty town, because it is Sunday. General Marshall goes to bed early and rides on Sunday mornings. Horrified, we discover the casualness of the military bureaucracy. The sense of duty is weaker than the call of the stomach... On the other hand, the Japanese make everything so that the surprise will be complete: lessons on the different ships anchored at Pearl Harbor; training, gymnastics. The Japanese are the only Great Soldiers of this Great Event.

**D-Day** is a lot more prolix. The military's lack of foresight is not any more the Americans' doing, but the Germans' one. Even though Rommel had a vague feeling that Normandy should be fortified at any cost, because 'behind this horizon, there's a maelstrom', the other German officers, beginning with the Führer (who sleeps and no one must wake him up) are more interested in their Kriegsspiel in Rennes, or in playing cards. The greatest soldiers aren't Headquarters officers anymore, but those who «feel» the Event: Colonel Bratton and Commander Kramer in **Tora!**, Oberst Helmut Meyer in **D-Day**?

## II. HEROISM GREAT AND SMALL: THE RANK AND THE IDEOLOGY

Generally speaking, war movies do not insist on their heroes' social background, unless it can explain their future grandeur<sup>3</sup>. More often this background can only be

guessed through eventual remarks about the heroes life as a civilians. Social and cultural differences were less sensitive during the Second World War than during the Vietnam War. The First World War already saw the end of a world<sup>4</sup>. This kind of abolition of cultural and social differences reaches such an extent that in *D-Day*, Henry Fonda as General Theodore Roosevelt does not want to be treated in a different and more privileged way than his soldiers: 'Is it not rather because my father was one of the United States Presidents that you refuse me to land? My place is there, at Utah Beach, among my men. They have the right to see me with them, be I a President's son or not.'

In the movies illustrating the 1939/1945 period it's not so much the ideologies or values peculiar to each soldier which give us information about their social class, but rather the way they were educated, the place where they were born or their religious feelings. The American working class is often characterized by their faith or, if they are not genuine believers, by their faithfulness to some religious tradition, such as in *D-Day*, the cross sent by some mother to her GI son. Social background can therefore be noticed by the religious practice. Such a criterion does not affect, or at a minor level only, the officers<sup>5</sup>.

#### A. The Officers

*As a general rule, war films give a particular importance to officers: they are individualized in comparison with the mob of soldiers<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, the necessity to respect History explains why in movies like *D-Day* every officer is introduced to us by a cardboard telling his name and rank. The historical dimension of these officers is all the more emphasized by the actors playing their parts. Thus, it seems that the officer stands out as a war hero, not only because of the actor, but also he seems to gather in himself all the military virtues<sup>7</sup>. Men respect them, and in exchange they do have a certain feeling for their men, not far away from a father's love for his son. Consequently, an officer can appear as a human being. The Boasting Heroism is not his Only Privilege.*

To be an officer, at the top of the military hierarchy, may also mean belonging to a crack regiment as Richard Burton (as David Campbell, Flight Officer RAF) underlines it: 'It's great to belong to a restricted elite, but what frightens me is the way how it gets restricted.' Indeed, he is the only heroic survivor of the 1940 RAF squadron.

This hierarchy, useful to the organization and to the good working of the army, all the more at war time, somewhat isolates the superior officer from soldiers. Therefore we must distinguish headquarters officers from other officers who are on the field-work with their men<sup>8</sup>.

In a movie, these two categories of officers are represented in the same good way, talking of the actors, but regarding the general treatment, the difference is clear: the headquarter officer Always is a hero, but he is far more distant, he knows the pangs of

loneliness at the summit when time has come to take such an important decision as the Landing. It is Ike Eisenhower's case in *D-Day*. The «historical» component also appears in such an example. Just like General De Gaulle in French pictures, Eisenhower reaches a mythical and charismatical dimension, because the way ordinary soldiers talk about him reveals his heroic position.

As we already noticed, the relationship between soldiers and officers often depends on the latter's presence on the field - work. War pictures, beyond the ordinary true historical account, do offer an idealistic vision of the officers. The officer is Always Fatherly. John Wayne is the definitive prototype of this point of view and even in *D-Day* he does not derogate to this traditional aspect of his career as a war hero. He is a leader of men: soldiers obey him up to self-sacrifice: 'We come to fight, not to swim.' In the same picture, Robert Mitchum, at Omaha Beach, has exactly the same fatherly and at the same time authoritative attitude: 'Wake up flees. We're rushing onwards. Only two kinds of men are gonna stay on this beach: the ones who've already been killed and the ones who will be killed. The 29th is not a coward.' The officer is also a resourceful man as Commander Colin Maud (British Beach Commander) in *D-Day* to whom one forgives his eccentricities (his dog's name is Winston): 'As my old granny always said: for everything mechanical, you only need to strongly strike ', he says, giving a strong hit at a tank of which the motor has sunk. Of course, the officer is patriotic and courageous, as an example to be followed by his soldiers. *D-Day* is very prolific concerning the facets of soldiers' and officers' heroism. Patriotism can be seen but also can be heard. The off commentary, every time the camera tells us about Major John Howard's mission, is full of significance (Major Howard from British Airborne Forces): 'You'll hold until the draft of reliefs'.

The interesting structure of this picture reveals each patriotic motivation of the Allies in turn. French Commander Philippe Kieffer tells his men: 'You've fought on all battle-fields for four years. This time, it's on the field of France, in our countryside, in our villages', and as an echo, Admiral Jaujard from the Free French Forces: 'We shall have to shoot on our motherland to hunt the enemy. Freedom is at this price.' On the British side, identity of tone: 'Our beautiful country has had it's share of tests. She deserves the final victory.'

American motivations are more complex. In 1942, few Americans knew the deep meaning of their fight. In their great majority, they criticized the people who had pulled them away from their homes. When still civilians, they wondered if the States should fight for the Europeans once more. As soldiers, they asked themselves why one had sent them to fight against Germany, when America's enemy was Japan, the country who had dared attack her<sup>9</sup>.

## B. The Soldier Mob

Although we developed the officer's profile as a hero, we can affirm that the ordinary soldier is also a war hero, even though in the movie- industry he is often

drowned in the mob. One can always isolate some of them, but they are never really introduced to us. In *D-Day*, no cardboard reveals the identity of soldiers, even though some of them appear quite often in the movie. The soldier is heroic not because of his inherent qualities, but rather in time of action, such as the one who succeeds in defusing the Orme bridge, or like the famous Company F, dropped -by mistake- into the very heart of Sainte-Mère-L'Eglise (Normandy) and slaughtered before they even touched the ground. Nowadays, in this same village, there is still a model hanging from the bell-tower of the church, as a symbol of the only survivor of this Company F.

We do think that what is voluntarily shown as a heroic action in what we dare call Ramboesque movies -in a high-flown style of images and sound- is less sensational than this white-and-black tribute to the Men who really made History.

We must not forget that somehow the weapon makes the hero and gives him power and prestige: 'Pilots are good for the geishas', a Japanese fisherman says in *Tora! Tora! Tora!*. Regarding *Tora!*, the heroic accent is diffuse, rather motivated by the ideology of one or the other camp. The Japanese are really snarling (Genda) and proud to belong to the Empire of The Rising Sun. The sequence which shows them flying to Pearl Harbor is full of significance: the «Rising Sun» is hidden behind a cloud and therefore reproduces the image of the Japanese flag. The pilots make the same analysis and bow to this good omen: they are all the more hypermotivated for the attack.

Pilots here do appear as the worthy inheritors of literature traditional heroes. At the same time, they represent the continuation of the martial Japanese tradition (samurais). Japanese are well known for their proudness and their shame of the shame (harakiri/seppuku), their sense of duty and of fatherland logically leads to self-sacrifice. Thus, in *Tora!* can we discover the first kamikaze: a Japanese pilot, whose plane has been hit by an American anti-aircraft battery deliberately chooses to flash his plane against a warehouse.

A sensational image reflecting this Japanese hypermotivation, the victory shout celebrating the memory of the Russian defeat in 1905, when the Russians had been totally defeated by Japanese military chief Togo.

### C. The Antiheroes

The two most heroic characters, although they do not obey the traditional criterions, are, for the Japanese, Admiral Yamamoto, and for the Americans, Admiral Kimmel. Above all, they are human beings: none of them claims to be superman. Although everything should oppose them, according to the logic of war, it seems that we can bring them together. Of course they are heroes, but they are also the powerless victims to the orders (one and the other) of uncounscious or too bellicose hierarchical superiors.

Their own ideology therefore differs from their fellow-citizens' one. Indeed, Admiral Kimmel wants to assure the defense of his motherland, but above all, the most

important duty is to protect his men. He is perceived by his colleagues as 'the only man in this Navy who's got a bit of clairvoyance'. Yamamoto is clearly pointed out by Director Richard Fleisher as the hero of the movie. He reproaches his men their will to fight at any cost. He himself preaches for a diplomatical solution. He revolts against the common Japanese opinion on Americans: 'One tells you that they've got dissolute morals, that they are bad soldiers, that their national strength is nothing but all window-dressing. This is a serious mistake. The most combative enemy really is United States. I've been student in the States for many years. I deeply observed them. To underestimate them would be a deep miscalculation.' Finally, it is the Japanese Yamamoto who makes us show regard for the Americans again. Their casualness, their lack of preparation regarding the oncoming war had set them down from their traditional pedestal.

Yamamoto as well as Kimmel symbolizes the military's loneliness at the peak of the hierarchy. Admiral Kimmel would have preferred that the lost bullet really touched him and a powerless Admiral Yamamoto attends a surprise-attack without any war declaration beforehand, which means that 'the sleeping giant will wake up'.

**Tora! Tora! Tora!!** and **The Longest Day** are war movies where heroic sequences can of course be seen. However, these are not only boasting representations of heroism, as one also discovers anonymous heroes.

#### D. Heroism As A Resultant Of Ideology

This soldier's heroism, be he American, Japanese or German, seems to be the direct consequence of a certain ideology. Justification of duty, a cause which is worth fighting for, which is worth sacrificing oneself for. Ideology is the unifying and smoothing away cement in these movies. Once the war has begun, the motivations are more obvious and the ideology is assimilated in a better way. When the landing takes place, U.S. have been at war for already two years. In **D-Day**, we can appreciate the indirect pedagogy throughout the movie. Especially when John Wayne as Colonel Benjamin Vander Voort explains the war, sums it up on the Allies' point of view. Further on, Robert Mitchum as General Norman Cota gives us all the informations about the cost of the Landing (number of troops, material).

##### D.1. Can Heroism Be Racist?

To our great surprise, we noticed that there is no black GI in **D-Day** (or in **Arnhem**). Now no one can deny the Blacks' participation in the Second World War, nor the segregation problems it raised, to such an extent that the British even revolted against this attitude. Pentagon authorities felt obliged to publish a booklet for their «white» soldiers<sup>10</sup>.

In **Tora!**, the main subject of the movie being the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, it seems «normal» that there is no black hero. It is only after this attack that

mobilization took official place, and Blacks joined the Army later on. The only Black man in this movie is Admiral Kimmel's «boy». He can be considered as a hero, in so far as he grasps a machine gun in order to destroy Japanese planes. Unfortunately, he dies some seconds later.

## D.2. A Common Ideology For Different Heroes

At first, we must distinguish between Universal values -universal because common to the Allies- and Particular values -peculiar to the individual as a human being and more particularly to our heroes. All the Second World War movies, be they American, European or Soviet, express a Common Cause: the Fight against Nazi Germany. Notwithstanding the ideological differences between the Western World and the Soviet World, it is the same message of fight. Of course, this message is motivated by each nation's point of view on patriotism, but it still keeps an international characteristic as it faces the same enemy.

To be sure, allied Soviet troops are not often shown in the Western films -and here the particular value of Western world as «Free» since Cold War has begun can be considered as the reason why Soviet troops are put aside. Italian movies generally join convinced Marxists and genuine Christians altogether. It is a noticeable exception to the rule. What we appreciated in *D-Day* is the way John Wayne claims the universal value of this war: 'It's not only one's motherland (be it American, English or French) that we must fight for, our main cause is to save Europe'.

## FINAL CONCLUSION: CAN THE ENEMY BE A HERO, TOO?

What we mean to analyze is whether it is possible for the enemy, a soldier too, to appear as a hero. The first pictures about World War II directed in the first decade after the war have notoriously pointed out the German as a cruel, filthy and at the same time ridiculous being, whose cold physical looks enhanced the fundamental wickedness. In fact, Nazism developed in the same manner as Love -talking of cinematographical evolution- as soon as the Hollywood producers asked their movie stars to wear these hated uniforms. 'The image America can get about Nazism, if one considers the Hollywood productions, is rather rough, not to say schematic to the utmost. Nazi officers are highly cultured men and at the same time unbearable cynics, eating caviar with a cup of French champagne... reading some verse from Goethe and listening to Wagner's operas, but a few minutes later, these same literate men dare torture prisoners and kill hostages'<sup>11</sup>. In the same way, sentences like this one by a drafted reporter in Guadalcanal: 'Japanese should not be allowed to live' as he discovers the latter's slaughters, are not exceptional. But such a language could give good conscience... after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

With the Easing and the integration of the Federal Republic of Germany into the European Community through the 1957 Rome Treaty, the cinematographical representation of the German evolved. In *D-Day* already, surprising sentences are put into the mouth of German officers talking about the Führer. Curt Jürgens as General Günther Blumentritt says: 'We are living a historical moment. We are going to lose the war because our glorious Führer has drunk a soporific tablet. We are the disillusioned witnesses of a fact that will seem hard to believe to future historians but it still is the truth: no one must wake up the Führer!' or further on in the same movie: 'I, phone him? Grovelling before this Bohemian Corporal? Never!' We are all the more astonished, at the end of the credit titles, when we realize what a long list of German military advisors took part in the movie: even Frau Rommel has her name included.

*D-Day* also hints at the old Kultur theme: 'All my roses are withered', a general says at the beginning of the movie. We have underlined Yamamoto and Kimmel's convergence in *Tora!* In *D-Day* the same phenomenon appears between the high German officers and their American homologues. The Germans have a concealed admiration for what they qualify as 'a crazy enterprise', talking of *D-Day*. Nazi ideology is totally left out, away from the cinematographical representation of the event, for the benefit of the German Army as an unguilting process against a regime's tenets. Besides, Germans seem to play tricks on the Americans in so far as they speak for and against the eventual Landing. The German General Erich Marcks even shows friendship towards his American colleague and enemy Eisenhower.

The same evolution touches the American point of view about the Japanese enemy. Of course, everyone knows the classical representation of the cruel Asiatic, but a movie such as *Tora!* may be seen as a justification of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That may also be the reason why it was badly perceived by the American public. Some of the Japanese in this movie still refers to the warrior attitude and bellicious feelings, in the purest traditional Japanese way. Admiral Yamamoto is really heroic, not because of his heroical deeds, but because he is undeniably human. Of course, the actor is good-looking, but he does not fit the heroic Japanese standards. The very first words of the movie let it out: 'Our chief commander is a coward', one of the Japanese officers says. We therefore understand that his policy does not agree with the bellicious tendencies of the Japanese Army: 'A bad wind is blowing from Tokyo to the German Reich. Japan will head for disaster', he says to the Navy Minister. This new vision of the enemy is a radical change. The small telegraphist who delivers the terrible but late telegram is also represented as a victim. Indeed, he is Asiatic and probably belongs to the 100,000 Japanese living on Hawaii. The glance between him -who does not understand how he deserves such a mean look- and the American getting the telegram right in the midst of the Japanese attack, is a good example that wind has blown on American film-making about the Second World War.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) The former in Cornelius RYAN's book and the latter in Gordon W. PHANGE's **Tora! Tora! Tora!**, and Ladislav FARAGO's **The Clue**. Additional scenes have been written by Romain GARY, James JONES, David PURSALL and Jack SENDON.
- (2) An excerpt from French poet VERLAINE: 'Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne...' had been chosen as announcing **D-Day**. As so on as the french resistants heard the last part of this verse: 'Bercent mon coeur d'une langueur monotone', they knew it was **D-Day**.
- (3) For instance, as is the case in such a movie as Howard HAWKS' **Sergeant York**.
- (4) As the dialogue between Boeldieu and Rauffenstein makes clear in RENOIR's **La Grande Illusion**.
- (5) Robert REDFORD, in **Arnhem: A Bridge Too Far**, crosses the river Rhine reciting an endless Ave Maria.
- (6) Few credit titles give us the names of all these ones who figured as **The Mob!**
- (7) SALAZAR, «Phenomenology of the Warrior and Military Virtues», **El Pensamiento (Philosophy of the National Revolution)**, Chapter 5: «Elegy of the Military Virtues», Buenos Aires, 1938.
- (8) Lev TOLSTOI, **War and Peace**.
- (9) According to US Army specialist, the explanation is quite simple: 'The american soldier considers himself neither as an english tommy nor as a french poilu, not even as a soldier -in terms which involve human qualities and positive values- but as a GI., that is, a Government Issue, a product of the Government. Every individual, once he's become a soldier, has rather a tendency to see himself as a standardized product to the same extent as his clothes, his food intake or any other material.' (Lieutenant Henry ELKIN, **The American Journal of Sociology**, March 1946, quoted in Marc HILLEL, **Life and Habits of the GIs in Europe, 1942-1945**", Paris: Balland, 1981, pp. 23-24).
- (10) One could read this: 'When you meet a man wearing a US uniform, no matter his colour or his race, he is your comrade in arms, facing the same dangers, fighting for the same cause.' (Marc HILLEL, *op. cit.*).
- (11) **Dictionary of Second World War**, quoted in Marc HILLEL, *cit.*