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Opinion: *Midway*'s treatment of the Japanese enemy highlights the power and limits of empathy

Dr Akil N Awan | November 18, 2019

Representations of the Japanese in WW2 films have often been based on wartime caricatures of them as barbaric and subhuman – mirroring the shocking treatment the Japanese were subjected to by many Americans during the conflict. Writing for *HistoryExtra*, Dr Akil N Awan explores the choices made by new blockbuster *Midway*, and the questions the film prompts about the labels of 'hero', 'villain' and 'monster'

As an historian, the most interesting thing about the recent World War Two blockbuster, *Midway*, is director Roland Emmerich's portrayal of the Japanese enemy in a largely sympathetic light. Nowhere is this more apparent than the parting dedication onscreen: "This film is dedicated to the Americans and Japanese who fought at Midway. The sea remembers its own." A heartfelt dedication, but nevertheless one that left me conflicted, and raises a flurry of questions around historical representation and the limits of empathy.

Throughout the film, Emmerich manages to weave Japan's perspective throughout his narrative. The Japanese are depicted as courageous, professional sailors simply fulfilling their patriotic duty, and in some cases, nobly sacrificing themselves for a cause that they believed was just and honourable. Their portrayal is also surprisingly complex, highlighting internal political disagreements, with some military leaders even presented as reluctant combatants. Prior to the war, for example, Admiral Yamamoto entreats the Americans, "Don't push us into war. You must give the chance to us who are the more reasonable, to own the day". For those of us raised on one-dimensional Hollywood caricatures of wartime villains, this is a refreshing and important belated recognition of the complexity and innate humanity of even our enemies.

Challenging historical portrayals

From that perspective, Emmerich's artistic choices are also a laudable way of redressing the balance of previous depictions of the Japanese as subhuman, barbaric and based on racist stereotypes. US wartime propaganda, invoking decades of prior anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiment, characterised not just Japanese soldiers, but anyone of Japanese descent, as a potentially deadly, vermin-like threat [IMAGE 1: Tokio Kid]. In one of the more shameful episodes of US history, even Japanese-Americans were not exempt from these characterisations, with around 120,000 of them interned in US concentration camps throughout the duration of the war.

Since the Japanese were deemed to be subhuman, their bodily remains were often also treated in a manner akin to that of animal remains. US servicemen would frequently mutilate the Japanese war dead, regularly taking teeth, skulls, ears, noses and bones as grisly souvenirs and war trophies. Cooking recipes circulated amongst American troops on the best methods for de-fleshing skulls. US President Franklin Roosevelt was famously even gifted a letter-opener made from a Japanese soldier's arm bone by a US congressman in 1944. One of the better-known examples illustrating the widespread practice of dehumanising Japanese soldiers was *Life Magazine*'s 'Picture of the Week' from 22 May 1944. The image showed a young American woman gazing, seemingly unfazed, at a human skull alongside the caption: "Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you-note for the Jap skull he sent her." [IMAGE 2: Life magazine skull].

Considering this abysmal record, it is not unreasonable to attempt to restore some semblance of humanity to the utterly dehumanized Japanese soldiers. The recent discoveries of the sunken wrecks of the Japanese carriers Akagi and Kaga, which are both destroyed in the movie, is surely a humbling reminder and testament to the unforgiving Pacific as a common mass grave for casualties on both sides, that certainly did not differentiate between its victims. As Emmerich poignantly states: “The sea remembers its own.”

Representing the enemy in *Midway*

When asked the rationale for his portrayal, Emmerich replied “Well it’s maybe because I’m German. I know this from my father who was in World War Two as a 17-year-old. It’s just like, all people do their duty and do what they have to do. It’s the politicians who screw up and start wars, and not like the normal soldiers... I didn’t want a war movie that kind of reinforces old enemy images... they were as brave and noble as anybody. Their society is quite different to the American society... Nevertheless, I didn’t want to make them you know, kinda like bad guys, because they weren’t bad guys.”

Clearly, Emmerich’s own familial experiences, and position as an ‘outsider’ helped engender this perspective. However, this characterisation is sure to test the limits of empathy for many audiences, who will view the entire exercise as somehow seeking to gloss Japan’s truly reprehensible record of wartime atrocities.

I can see their point. I remember once trying to read through harrowing testimony from the Rape of Nanjing and was forced to take a break for a week, experiencing what is often described as vicarious trauma, before I could even return to the sources. The widescale atrocities carried out by the Japanese make it difficult to reconcile their wartime conduct with Emmerich’s depiction of the Japanese as “brave and noble” soldiers who “weren’t bad guys”.

The limits of empathy

Naturally, those communities directly affected by these atrocities will find it that much harder to accept such a portrayal, particularly when denial of some of these war crimes is still prevalent in parts of Japanese society. Japan’s refusal to adequately address its culpability towards ‘comfort women’, a euphemism for forced wartime prostitution of Korean, Chinese, and other occupied women by the imperial Japanese army, for example, has strained relations between Japan and its neighbours. Earlier this year, South Korea’s National Assembly Speaker demanded that Japanese Emperor Akihito, “as the son of the main culprit of war crimes”, should personally apologize to the women before he abdicated the throne in April. Japan, angered by this request, lodged protests with Seoul and demanded an apology in return. They claimed the issue had been resolved “finally and irreversibly” in 2015 when the Japanese prime minister apologised and had agreed to pay 1bn yen (£5.6m) towards a fund for victims.

Anecdotally, a few years ago I showed a class of students in China one of my favourite World War Two films, Studio Ghibli’s *Grave of the Fireflies*. The film is a Japanese anime masterpiece that centres on the survival of two young children in the aftermath of the US firebombing of Kobe [IMAGE: Film poster]. It is a very highly regarded film outside of Japan, particularly in the west where it has earned numerous accolades. Additionally, almost everyone I know who has seen the film is reduced to tears by the end. Imagine my surprise then to discover that not only was my class of Chinese students emotionally unaffected by it, but were actually angry at the film (and possibly at me too). When I asked them why, the normally quite reticent students argued that the film was emotionally manipulative and attempting to paint the Japanese as victims rather than, from their perspective, the oppressors.

On a related note, I was surprised to learn that *Midway*’s \$100million budget had been largely bankrolled by Chinese companies including Starlight Culture Entertainment, whose CEO stated his company was drawn to the war film in order to show “how the Chinese people suffered... We want to use Hollywood stories to tell the Chinese story to everyone in the world.” A note at the end of film does indeed acknowledge that some 250,000 Chinese were killed by Japanese forces in retaliation for the Doolittle Tokyo Raid. Hollywood World War Two narratives that acknowledge the Chinese experience as victim of Japanese aggression, but more importantly, show the Japanese “especially when they lose”, in the words of *Midway* writer Wes Tooke, have always been attractive to Chinese audiences. Mel Gibson’s 2016 film, *Hacksaw Ridge*, which depicted the battle for Okinawa, grossed almost the same in China as it did in the US, for precisely the same reason.

History may not be written completely by the winners, but the power of representation still lies overwhelmingly with the victors. Allied wartime atrocities in Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and elsewhere would certainly have been prosecuted as war crimes, had they been conducted by the other side. In that sense, labels of evil, inhumanity and human monstrosity are as much political designations as moral ones.

And even monsters can be recast, if they prove to be useful monsters.

The Japanese scientists who ran the notorious and truly sickening human experimentation laboratory, Unit 731, were not prosecuted by the US after the war ended. The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal heard only one charge of Japanese experimentation on Chinese civilians, which was quickly dismissed as vague and uncorroborated. Instead, the data garnered from the experimentation on living human subjects at Unit 731 was secretly handed over to the US in return for immunity from prosecution. This ethically tainted data, along with many of the Japanese scientists from the facility, were co-opted into the US biological warfare programme after the war.

Writing history is not easy. Historical representation can be fraught with all manner of dangers, particularly when memories are so contested, and when justice and reconciliation are still deemed to be partial or incomplete. The labels we apply – hero, villain, or monster - reveal far more about our own personal experiences, collective memories, and political climate we are immersed in, than representing any serious objective historical designation. Of course, any representation that eschews lazy stereotypes and naked jingoism is always to be welcomed. However, to venture even a well-meaning recognition of the common humanity of your enemy in order to 'redress' the balance of previously inhuman or racist depictions is not always as value-neutral as we might assume.

There are, it appears, limits to empathy after all.

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