



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On

It is tempting to annex *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* to Shohei Imamura's filmography. Imamura suggested the project in the first place, and effected Kazuo Hara's introduction to Kenzo Okuzaki. The resulting film, moreover, has a clear family relationship with Imamura's own documentaries *In Search of Unreturned Soldiers* (*Mikikan-hei o Otte*, 1971) and *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute* (*Karayuki-san*, 1975), both of which deal with spiritual 'casualties' of the Pacific War: the soldiers and prostitutes sent into South-East Asia in the 1930s who decided to stay there after the war. On the other hand, Kazuo Hara (who met Imamura when he worked as assistant cameraman on *Vengeance Is Mine* and *Eijanaika*) made his name as an independent filmmaker with *My Intimate Eros: Love Song 1974* (*Gokushiteki Eros: Koi-Uta* 1974), which also deals with a tireless and obsessive quest: the director's own for the pregnant girlfriend who has left him. The bizarre figure of Okuzaki evidently served to reconcile Imamura's interest in unhealed wounds from the war years with Hara's interest in *cinéma vérité* as a form of assault and battery.

Okuzaki is certainly a 'fringe' figure, although whether or not he belongs in the *lunatic* fringe where British reviewers of the film have cheerfully placed him is debatable. He has no clear political alignment: he co-opts the rhetoric of the radical Right (the words 'shin-gun' – 'sacred army' or 'divine crusade' – are painted on the boot of his car), but uses it to attack the Emperor; and he forms an alliance with a left-wing anarchist like Eizaburo Oshima, but has no truck with the persons or the policies of the Marxist Left. His obsessive drive and his openly admitted propensity for violence both spring from his wartime experiences as a soldier. At one moment, haranguing the mouse-like Kichitaro Yamada, he castigates himself for wasting the immediate post-war years on visits to brothels and his first prison term for manslaughter; at the next, he congratulates himself on his own righteous indignation and moral probity. The contradictions are legion: he 'doorsteps' his interviewees at the crack of dawn to take them unawares, but conducts his actual interrogations with quintessentially Japanese courtesy – unless, of course, the interviewee is discourteous or evasive, in which case Okuzaki threatens or commits violence and pre-empts his victim by calling the police himself.

The aspect of Okuzaki's quest that brings his sanity into question emerges only as the truth begins to come out. Okuzaki is outraged that fellow soldiers were executed on trumped-up charges in September 1945, nearly a month after the formal end of the war. When it becomes clear, however, that the men's actual crimes were considerably worse than anything listed in the official record, Okuzaki's anger is in no way diminished. The dead men's

relatives withdraw from the quest as the truth becomes clear, although Rinko Sakimoto consoles herself with the speculation that her brother was shot to prevent him from testifying against other cannibals in the army, and not as punishment for eating human flesh himself. Okuzaki is interested enough in the question of cannibalism to persevere with enquiries into the distinction between 'white pork' and 'black pork' (the latter was rarer, apparently, because New Guinea natives were more adept at fleeing through the jungle), but it never occurs to him that the crime of cannibalism may have justified the punishment of execution, no matter what face-saving excuse was entered on the charge sheet. For Okuzaki, cannibalism is seemingly just one more horror of the war, for which Emperor Hirohito is ultimately responsible. The immediate object of the 'divine crusade' is to scourge those officers who carried out the executions and have been lying (to themselves and others) about them ever since.

Whether this is rational or not, Okuzaki's barnstorming style makes him an ideal subject for a *cinéma vérité* documentary. Unlike Imamura, who appears in his own investigative documentaries as an on-screen participant in the process of discovery, Hara stays behind the camera. But there is never the least risk that the film will degenerate into Wiseman-style 'fly-on-the-wall' filmmaking because Okuzaki himself so gleefully co-opts the camera crew into his own armoury of weapons against his interviewees. Okuzaki's tactics are inherently theatrical, and it seems highly unlikely that anything would have happened differently if Hara had not been there to photograph it. What is more measurable is Hara's skill in choosing vantage points to record Okuzaki's encounters, and in editing the results to lend pace and structure to Okuzaki's rambling quest. Given the contradictory and duplicitous nature of so much of the verbal evidence, Hara manages to bring the issues into focus with astonishing clarity.

Partly, as befits a documentary of this sort, this is a matter of distance. The real subject of *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* is Kenzo Okuzaki himself, not the revelations about cannibalism in 1945. Hara uses Okuzaki's enquiries as a pretext for giving his portrait a 'dramatic' shape, but it remains a portrait for all that. Okuzaki commands attention not as a freak who may or may not be deranged, but as a man whose attitudes and actions express much that is repressed in Japanese society. He stands against all the bulwarks of conservative Japan – the Emperor, patriotism, family values – but does so from the perspective of a common man concerned for the fate of his fellow common men. In his way, Okuzaki is a real-life equivalent of one of Imamura's fictional peasant characters: disrespectful of 'authority' but driven by a sense of higher laws and values. Hara's camera consistently finds the optimum distance between engagement and detachment, allowing the central portrait to take shape in more than two dimensions. Okuzaki's performance may not be expertly judged, but Hara's is.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1991

**THE EMPEROR'S NAKED ARMY MARCHES ON
(YUKI YUKITE SHINGUN)**

Director: Kazuo Hara

Production Company: Shisso Productions

In association with: Imamura Productions, Zanzou-sha

Producer: Sachiko Kobayashi

Associate Producers: Yasuko Tokunaga, Yunoshin Miyoshi

Assistant Directors: Takuji Yasuoka, Koichi Omiya

Written by: Kazuo Hara

Project Conceived by: Shohei Imamura

Director of Photography: Kazuo Hara

Assistant Photographers: Toshiaki Takamura, Satoru Hirasawa

Editor: Jun Nabeshima

Sound: Toyohiko Kuribayashi

With:

Kenzo Okuzaki

Shizumi Okuzaki

Kichitaro Yamada

Iseko Shimamoto

Minoru Takami

Yukio Seo

Toshiya Nomura

Rinko Sakimoto

Toshio Hara

Masaichi Hamaguchi

Taro Maruyama

Shichiro Kojima

Masao Koshimizu

Riichi Aikawa

Eizaburo Oshima

Japan 1987

122 mins

JAPAN 2021

100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

**The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On
(Yuki Yukite, Shingun)**

Sat 18 Dec 11:40; Mon 27 Dec 18:20

Straits of Hunger (aka A Fugitive from the Past) (Kiga kaikyô) Sat 18
Dec 14:30

Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna)

Sat 18 Dec 17:30

Moving (Ohikkoshi)

Sat 18 Dec 20:35; Wed 29 Dec 20:30

The Long Darkness (Shinobugawa)

Sun 19 Dec 12:40

The Demon (Kichiku)

Sun 19 Dec 16:00

Pale Flower (Kawaita hana)

Sun 19 Dec 18:20

Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20

Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)

Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00

Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)

Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40

In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)

Wed 22 Dec 18:20

Love Letter

Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)

Thu 23 Dec 18:30

Muddy River (Doro no kawa)

Thu 23 Dec 20:40

Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)

Mon 27 Dec 15:50

Tampopo

Tue 28 Dec 15:10

Black Rain (Kuroi ame)

Tue 28 Dec 18:15

After Life (Wandafuru raifu)

Wed 29 Dec 14:20

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