

TORA! TORA! TORA!

Directed by Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukasaku, and Toshio Masuda

Produced by Elmo Williams

Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox

Released in 1970

Despite its important subject matter and commendable attention to detail, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is a terrible film. The sets look cheap, the acting is dull, the lighting makes no allowances for differing locations or times of day. The dialogue is laden with audience-insulting exposition, the editing is hopeless. It has no protagonist, no climax, and no insight. The film splits into two halves, in turns preceding, then documenting, the famous attack on Pearl Harbor. If the film is about the uncertainty and groping indecision of the Americans pondering Japanese intent or the Japanese hope for a glory raid to end the war before it starts, then details of the raid are not important; the Empire's intentions weren't realized and the Americans did not frustrate their attack. And as far as the carriers go, that class of ships Japan deemed most important to sink, they knew these were gone before launching the Zeros for Hawaii. So that plot detail provides no suspense either. And showing the fight from both sides, though a fresh approach, kills tension, scuttles suspense, and hamstring momentum.

The second half of the film is so much better than the ponderous first half, all of the build-up to the attack could have been scrapped. Half the characters in the first half are scrapped anyway—the bureaucrats and code breakers are never granted moments of closure. Another quarter of the characters aren't necessary to start with. If the second half was all that *Tora! Tora! Tora!* was constructed of, it would clearly be Entertainment masquerading as a Learning Experience. E/LE is what it should be. The budget for the attack, already enormous, could then afford the re-writes necessary to make sense of what all the characters are doing standing around staring at explosions or sitting at desks. A film like this would hearken back to early cinema, to the French *actualités reconstituées* (reconstructed newsreels) of Georges Méliès, updating the concept by seventy years. But creativity seemed to be routinely dismissed on this project, either as a result of the seriousness of the subject matter, the difficulty of launching a joint American-Japanese production, or the general indifference of the creative team. Nothing seems defined, sculpted, or developed to create a memorable film, let alone an epic. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is too long, and it neither works as a documentary or a drama.