

THE GREAT WAR AND THE CINEMA

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i.

Aside from documentary films of the First World War, fiction films may be categorized as period films, cinematic adaptations of classic war novels, and, much the greatest in number, fiction films made after the war. The period films are useful for their clues to public attitudes during or in the decades immediately after the conflict. For example, silent films made during the war, like D.W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918), which used actual footage, were propaganda evidently intended to induce the United States to progress from economic assistance to active military participation on the side of the Allies. The story of the young man, Ben Herron, going off to war would become typical in fiction films made thereafter, since such stories have elements that a mass audience, many of whom had fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, etc. in the military, can actually identify with. As propaganda, such movies—and this would be the case with the Second World War even more—may serve an important political end, by arguably having a much greater influence on public consciousness than official government propaganda, which usually arouses more suspicion. In fact, the US government during both world wars would make a direct appeal to Hollywood producers.

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Even after the war, when people should have known better, many films managed to romanticize it. The superb silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921) shows a frivolous Argentine playboy (Rudolf Valentino), whose success in Paris comes to seem hollow in a Europe threatened by annihilation. The film traces his transformation from fun-loving civilian to soldier who presumably achieves some kind of moral salvation through death in the war. And yet, when the film is viewed today, this theme backfires. To a critical eye, the playboy's tango-dancing and flirtations seem to make wonderfully good sense compared to what came afterward.

Perhaps the greatest Great War silent classic, *The Big Parade* (King Vidor, 1925), as its title indicates, attempts to give the big picture on the war, a Hollywood spectacle that, as a film-guide puts it, "has everything: romance, humor, love, tragedy, and suspense" (Martin & Porter 94), which may well reflect the peculiarly American viewpoint of a grand enterprise that occurred "over there," sufficiently distant to put the quantity of suffering in its proper place along with other human experiences, like the wartime romance of *A Farewell to Arms* and the general picture of war as good natured fun-and-games that one gets from later films like *Dawn Patrol* (1938) and *What Price Glory?* (1952) despite their obligatory combat scenes. But *The Big Parade* avoids the levity of these latter films, as John Gilbert learns that war is not, after all, waving crowds and marching bands. The depiction of combat is quite convincing, both in the infantry advance through the Argonne forest and the spectacular night battle. The scene in which Gilbert finds himself face-to-face in a shellhole with a dead German soldier foreshadows a similar confrontation in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). Since both films were based on novels by Erich Maria Remarque, the scene may well have recreated a traumatic experience of the German veteran author, and in any case such confrontations must not have been unknown in the crowded and pitted landscape of no-man's-land.

Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918), on the other hand, which was filmed in the same year as *Hearts of the World*, intentionally works in the opposite direction. It is a satire on life in the trenches and, given

the pervasive black humor of the troops, would doubtless have been preferred by them as more representative of their reality. In one scene, for example, Chaplin and his mates try to sleep in a dug-out full of water, water-filled trenches being the true condition of things in the British lines much of the time, especially in the northern sector of the front.

John Ford's *The Lost Patrol* (1934) deviates from the usual Great War movie of the Western Front by having its setting in the Mesopotamian desert of 1917. An ahistorical film with some unintentional comedy (a pre-Frankenstein Boris Karloff is a mad, Bible-crazed soldier who wanders into a bullet while carrying a cross), it nevertheless follows the pattern of many combat novels and films, in which a small unit (in this case, of British cavalry) sees itself being killed off one-by-one to the varied reactions, from stoically resigned to hysterical, of its helpless members, only one of whom will eventually escape. In this case, some British cavalrymen have become separated from their Brigade and lost in the desert. They hole up at an oasis, where they are systematically eliminated by Arab snipers, who also steal their horses and therefore their only hope of escape. The film's opening shot is striking: endless dunes, in the midst of which a single British soldier is dropped from his horse by a single shot. What is remarkable about his film is epitomized in this initial shot: the enemy remains unseen, invisible, mysterious, a theme that will find resonance in the World War II movies about the Japanese, and later in the fiction and films of Vietnam. One might call this phenomenon: the Enemy as the non-western Other.

ii.

Fiction films made about the Great War are invariably interesting for their ideological viewpoints, since unlike the Second World War, there is not a clear division of good and evil between one side and the other. This is especially clear in the World War I aerial combat movie, which almost constitutes a sub-genre, fairly consistent in its many examples, where one's opponents are viewed as honorable and the

real adversaries are often found among one's comrades. Certainly, one of the reasons for the large number of movies made about World War I fliers, their great appeal to audiences (even while the military importance of airplanes was relatively slight compared to the Second World War) is the individual mythos that these movies so often celebrated. Unlike the anonymity of the masses of infantry troops, air aces on both sides were known by name, and their planes were often distinguished by individual colors and markings (the most famous example was the German ace Manfred von Richthofen, known as the "The Red Baron," who shot down eighty Allied aircraft before he was killed; the aristocratic name and nickname are to the point).

The mythos of larger-than-life warriors, locked in heroic duels, and the notion of fair play, as embodied in the rules of games, is not inappropriate to the mentality of the military caste or to pre-war notions of loyalty and honor. Indeed, it is probable that the kind of action in which distinct individuals are pitted against one another is much more amenable to cinematic treatment, as opposed to movies made about infantry soldiers, for whom heroics—in a type of warfare in which individuals are notably insignificant and death usually comes from an anonymous and unseen source—must be perceptibly invented. Aerial combat, in the words of Cecil Lewis, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, was "the only sphere in modern warfare where a man saw his enemy and faced him in mortal combat, the only sphere where there was still chivalry and honor." Infantry fighting, by contrast, was "murder. Senseless, brutal, ignoble. We were spared that" (qtd. Bergonzi 159). The chivalric aspect is signified by the flyer's distinctive uniform: flaring cavalry trousers and a long white scarf.

William Wellman's *Wings* (1927), a silent film about American aviators in the war, won Hollywood's first Oscar for Best Picture. *Wings* establishes a basic plot of the Hollywood film: two young men (Buddy Rogers, Richard Arlen), who are rivals for the love of the same girl, enlist, go through ground and flight training together, are initiated into combat, and eventually become experienced veterans. This "rising"

axis, which will include the comic interlude of leave in Paris on leave, where they get drunk, carouse, and fight over their common sweetheart, will predictably have its “descent,” in which one man will get conveniently killed to leave the field free for the other. In this case, there is an ironic twist, as one man is shot down by the other (they seem to be virtually interchangeable), but the “victory” over the rival is not thereby tarnished, since the winner mistook his rival for a German (the victim was flying a stolen plane) and he is free to return home after the armistice as a hero, complete with hometown parade, and marry the girl-next-door, who was in love with him all along. And yet, despite the silly plot, the film has some interest: authentic footage of aerial “dog-fighting,” for one thing, and the (staged) infantry attack supported by the flyers is impressive, even by contemporary standards. In this and any number of war movies, death is a constant presence while it is being confronted, but it does not linger on in memory to disturb the perfect happiness of postwar life, as will happen with the more serious films.

Another aviation film, *Ace of Aces* (J. Walter Renken, 1933), illustrates less assured, more contradictory attitudes toward the war. The hero, a sculptor named Thorne (Richard Dix), pretends at first to be immune to the war hysteria of the streets outside his studio. He compares the parade of new recruits being cheered on by the patriotic crowds as “lemmings,” animals led by collective hysteria to the slaughter, which suggests one line of the pacifist rhetoric of the time and a potential critique of the war. When Thorne, for example, tells his patriotic girl-friend to stop quoting government propaganda, her response to this (correct) assessment is the familiar shift to a personal attack: “You’re yellow,” she tells him, but the unfair accusation of cowardice, instead of inviting a rebuttal, which might have included some solid reasons for repudiating the war, is sufficient to send him packing to join the Air Corps. In fact, the personal influence of women, old men, and other non-combatants on young men’s decisions to go to war—as opposed to nobler motives like patriotism—has probably been underestimated in war movies.

As a newly trained pilot, Thorne will take part in the dawn patrols of a fighter squadron, which do not seem to have any tactical purpose other than engaging in “dog-fights” with its German counterparts. Airplanes in the early part of the war were in fact mostly used for reconnaissance and observation, but with technological advances (more accurate and reliable machine-guns, synchronized to fire through propellers, for example) they became more important for combat, so that by 1917 German aircraft was making bombing raids on London, which had been done before by clumsy Zeppelins.

Although Thorne has presumably joined up to counter the humiliation of his girlfriend’s contempt, he is still concerned about killing people, but his first taste of combat, where he succeeds in shooting down a German plane, both abolishes his scruples and earns him respect from his fellow pilots. Indeed, he becomes obsessed with hunting down Germans. He strikes an enlisted man for incorrectly loading his ammunition belts (and thus depriving him of a “kill”), disobeys orders to go on patrol alone, and generally makes himself personally repugnant, but his skill as a fighter pilot brings him the honor of being the squadron’s leading ace, a veritable killing-machine. Although the transition is rather abrupt in the film, his pacifism has not after all been represented as principled so much as the result of uninformed—and unpatriotic—indifference.

His transformation causes some consternation among his fellow pilots, who berate him for not being “sporting” in his obsession with numbers. They adhere to the chivalric myth of gentlemen pilots engaging in a contest of courage and skill in the skies above France, which, as we have seen, in fact had some historical support. And yet, given the savagery of the Great War, Thorne’s quest to shoot down as many Germans as he can, represented in the film as psychopathic (he talks of the joy of snuffing out life at the touch of his fingers), seems somehow more appropriate, if rather perverse, than the familiar upper-class notion of being sporting to one’s enemies.

The contradictions of a war first as imagined, and then as actually fought, are shown in the reaction of Thorne’s old girlfriend, whom he

meets again in Paris. Although she once cheerfully sent him off to war, she has experienced its horrors in the meantime, having tended to wounded and dying men. Consequently, she is now horrified by his transformation and can hardly believe he derives pleasure from killing. The film seems to head toward the expected sentimental resolution, in which they marry and carry on a peaceful existence after the war. Thorne suddenly repents when he sees a young German cadet-pilot whom he has just shot down actually die (had he no imagination at all, or did he think he was just shooting down model-airplanes?). Yet, he reverts to his former ways when stung by his squadron mates that another pilot has topped his "record," goes solo once more and is shot down (but not killed), the film ending abruptly with him taking up his romance with the girlfriend, once more in a peaceful mood.

The film then seems to waver in its rejection of, first, his unreflecting pacifism and then his transformation to unreflecting happy warrior. The humane transformation brought about by seeing the result of his actions, however, is also rejected when he takes up the role of ace merely to maintain his high score. Any questions of guilt or repentance are erased with the abrupt ending, in which he is reunited with his girlfriend in peacetime, but the film does at least raise the question, so important to war fiction and films, of what war does to men and what kind of men actually find it congenial, a question avoided by the better-known flying film *Dawn Patrol* (Edmund Goulding, 1938), which, made on the eve of the Second World War with dashing Hollywood stars like Errol Flynn and David Niven, conveys a firmer sense of heroic purpose.

It is confirmation of some of these points that an aviation film, although made in the Sixties, *The Blue Max* (John Guillermin, 1966), still tells a very similar story, here from the German side. The officers making up the squadron of an upstart ace (George Peppard) who initially served as a corporal in the trenches are remarkably like their British counterparts in *Ace of Aces*: they live in comparative comfort, class snobbery is rife, the code of chivalry and coolness in the face of death predominates. It is now 1918, and in Berlin, food shortages cause riots, which contrasts with the champagne and plush surroundings of

the privileged ranking officers. Like Thorne, the young lieutenant just out of flight school is a different number. His mates respect his skill but deplore his ruthless, egoistic character as well as his inferior social origins. As if to prove he is their social equal, while knowing that he never can be, he, too, becomes obsessed with scoring “kills,” hoping to get the required twenty to earn the highest air medal, the Blue Max. Again, the perceived military need for efficient fighting-men conflicts with the unpleasant kind of men who are likely to be keen on war, which remains the unresolved conflict of many a war movie.

iii.

A number of fiction films on the First World War were produced during the Second World War, which suggests they were also intended to have an effect on civilian morale and perhaps give a boost to military recruiting. These movies have an unmistakable patriotic treatment. This is evidently true of *The Fighting 69th* (William Keighley, 1940), made early in the war and therefore more “gung-ho” than most movies on the war, as it seems to reverse the image of the Great War infantryman as victim, suffering passively in the trenches, by giving him the autonomy of action associated with the mobile infantryman of the later conflict—it would hardly do, as least for recruiting purposes, to show the men groveling and dying in the mud.

Perhaps the best example of the patriotic film is Howard Hawks’ biopic *Sergeant York* (1941), in which York seems to defeat the German army single-handedly. With its title in stars-and-stripes block print and the hero’s unit attacking to the tune of “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” this film is an early version of what the film-theorist Robert Burgoyne has called the “seamless national narrative” which Hollywood favors in its reputedly historical films. In this type of film narrative, American history is mythologized in such a way that inconvenient truths are suppressed or ignored in the interest of a stirring, patriotic story. This will in fact be the basic pattern of the Hollywood war movie.

Alvin C. York, a pious hillbilly from the Cumberland Mountains in Tennessee, employing the arts of deception and sharp-shooting skills learned as a backwoodsman, did manage alone to kill 28 and capture 132 German soldiers in October, 1918, a feat that made him a national hero (That he killed so many men with a .45 pistol links him to the violent heroes of Hollywood westerns). Unlike the media-fabricated heroes of today, York was averse to self-promotion, refusing to appear in a film or make a lecture tour. He did later agree to a sort of autobiography (1928), which seems to have been ghost-written by the "editor." Chapter Four, for example, begins with a sentence that could have been spoken by Huckleberry Finn: "I ain't had much of the learnin' that comes out of books," which means to assert both that this is his experience in his own words (though clearly even his words were transcribed by the editor according to certain conventions of transcribing demotic speech going back to Mark Twain) and that the "real" experience of war cannot be gleaned from the printed word.

In the film, the basic conflict might have been between Christianity and war (which goes back to the early Middle Ages, in the injunction against taking life conflicting with the need to do so in constant wars. The final reconciliation of this conflict, in any case, will be the Crusades). The film mythologizes the conflict by making religion a pious, backwoods version of Christianity whose simple tenets can be overcome by patriotic duty. It is saturated with ideological clichés: the rural innocence of the hillbillies vs. the great world's violence and godlessness, and the continuing viability of the old-fashioned virtues of honesty, patience and thrift, embodied, as it were, in the very figure and voice of the star (Gary Cooper). Like the hero of *Aces of Aces*, York is a reluctant but eventually effective warrior. Unlike the earlier film, however, *Sgt. York* attempts to give an explanation for the hero's transformation and, equally important, the hero does not become obsessed with killing, merely reconciled to it as an unpleasant aspect of patriotic duty. This, too, will become the pattern in future war films.

At first ignoring the outside world, York is concerned with working hard and saving his money to buy his piece of “bottom land” so that he can marry his sweetheart. He loses the land but “gets religion” instead, i.e. the Protestant ethic of spiritual values greater than material ones, but guaranteeing them eventually. Faith in the cause will ensure victory both at home and abroad—aided by military competence: York wins the turkey-shoot competition, skill he will bring to bear against the Germans. When he is cheated of victory and is on his way to exact revenge, his rifle is miraculously struck by lightning and he is thrown (like St. Paul) from his horse. On his way back, he hears a rousing rendition of the song “Give me that old-time religion,” which completes his conversion, he renounces drinking and carousing and undertakes to teach children the commandment against killing, requesting a religious exemption from Wilson’s draft, which is denied. The war itself is first regarded as a foreign affair, with the old debate of intervention vs. isolationism being shown in the scene where the headlines of the German attack are ignored by the cracker-barrel crowd. In the army, as a pacifist, York is suspected of being a subversive but wins respect on the rifle range. He refuses promotion to corporal until convinced by the battalion commander, who can trade Biblical quote for quote in a scriptural justification of the “just war,” which will be the first move toward taking an active part.

The history of the US includes a number of mythical figures (Daniel Boone is an example) who have employed violence in the name of “freedom.” The First World War, a struggle for dominance between the European powers, is mythically inserted by the film into this imperial enterprise as a war that is part of the cost of our “heritage” of freedom that good Americans like York must defend. The young soldier is accordingly given leave to think over these powerful “truths.” He retires alone to the hills of his home country with the two sacred texts, a Bible and a book of American history, which can presumably be reconciled. A random glance at the New Testament passage “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s...” allows him to pay his dues to

both God and country simply by placing them in the separate categories indicated by the passage.

York is sent into the Argonne Forest with the 82nd Infantry Division, where he distinguishes himself by single-handedly killing and capturing a large number of Germans. He is decorated by the US and the French, promoted to Sergeant and given a hero's welcome by Cordell Hull, managing to maintain his backwoods humility in New York, where even the Stock Exchange rises *em masse* to cheer the hero. When offered jobs and endorsements, he refuses, saying what he did was a job "not for buying and selling" – the old-fashioned integrity that scorns wealth (the real York actually said, closer to a combat infantryman, "It's over, let's forget it" (Warner 208)). The myth of America that Hollywood has always seemed determined to peddle is complete with the happy ending: York marries his sweetheart and after his useless struggle as a civilian to achieve some measure of material comfort, is rewarded for his exploits with a house and 200 acre farm given him by the people of Tennessee. War, religion, and material prosperity are all be happily reconciled.

iv.

Ernest Hemingway, an author who has written novels of the First (*A Farewell to Arms*), and Second World wars (*Across the River and into the Trees*, *Islands in the Stream*) and the Spanish Civil War (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*) has not fared well in Hollywood adaptations. Of the movies based on Great War novels, arguably the worst, at least from the viewpoint of a convincing adaptation, are the two versions of *A Farewell to Arms*. In Frank Borsage's 1932 version of the novel, the doomed quality of the wartime romance between Frederick and Catherine is lost in the film, which was turned into the familiar popular melodrama of a doomed romance (the two main actors are miscast: the irony the young American lieutenant in Italy is erased by Cooper's deadpan performance, making him merely stolid, an Alvin York out of character in more sophisticated role, and Helen Hayes is too soft for the

novel's plucky English nurse. In any case, the 1957 remake by Charles Vidor—from which John Huston wisely dropped out—is no improvement in seriousness). More damaging for Hemingway's story (the author in fact hated the film) is that certain omissions diminish the dramatic and thematic impact: Frederick makes the final escape across the windy lake to Switzerland by himself, which greatly diminishes Catherine's courage in doing so while pregnant, and his "farewell to arms" into the Tagliamento river in the confusion of the Caporetto retreat is wordless and therefore thematically meaningless: rather than an admission of the war's absurdity and his own disgust at it, it merely looks as if he is opportunely escaping from the confusion. Borzage even made two versions of the famous "pathetic" conclusion, but cunningly rejecting the "happy" ending that would have diminished the impact of his successful "tearjerker" (Roquemore 143).

Later movies, such as *Hemingway's Adventures as a Young Man* (1962), which "cannibalized" *A Farewell to Arms* and two or three of the Nick Adams stories (Hitt 97) to create a narrative that would capitalize on the writer's famous public life, have not gone much beyond the mythologizing of a life which the author himself did his best to mythologize but was later thoroughly investigated and debunked by biographers (cf. Lynn, 1978). *In Love and War* (Richard Attenborough, 1996) is a good example of such mythologizing. Supposedly based on the story of Ernest Hemingway's experiences in Italy during the war, or more precisely, a diary version of those experiences as told by Agnes Von Kurowsky, the nurse with whom the writer fell in love.

According to one of the biographers, Carlos Baker, the facts are these: eighteen-year-old Ernest disembarked at Bordeaux, France, in June 1918, but within a few days was sent to Schio, in northern Italy, where he drove an ambulance down the sharp turns of Mt. Pasubio and volunteered to run a Red Cross canteen in the Piave River Valley. After a few days at this prosaic occupation, he was wounded by an Austrian trench mortar on July 8 near Fossalta-di-Piave; in other words, after only one month in the war. He carried a badly wounded Italian soldier to the rear before he collapsed and was taken to the American Red

Cross hospital in Milan, where he spent the summer and fall, walked on crutches and rented a carriage for trips to the race-track. He fell in love with a nurse, Agnes Von Kurowsky, then in her late twenties, or nearly a decade older than he, a dedicated professional who corresponded with him and urged him to go back to the US and useful work. He left for the US in January, 1919, spent winter and spring at his parent's house, wearing his uniform round town (according to Baker, for a *year* afterward, much longer, that is, than he was actually in the war), in Oak Park, Illinois, and writing daily letters to Agnes till he received her news that she had fallen in love with someone else, at which he went through the torments of rejected love (Baker 3-5).

The facts of the author's wound and his falling in love would therefore seem to be the only biographical elements actually exploited in the novel, while the film seems to follow Baker's summary more or less closely, even though it romanticizes the author's erotic and combat experiences. It changes somewhat the nature and sequence of the jobs in Italy (working in the canteen is unheroic, so the young man insists on delivering a message to the front and is wounded). The Agnes von Kurowsky character (Sandra Bullock) is, like Miss Kurowsky by other accounts, a duly dedicated professional, a trait which Hemingway underplayed in his novel: his Catherine Barkley seems much more dedicated to Frederic Henry than to the wounded in her care. In her passivity and indeterminacy, however, Bullock's Agnes does not resemble Catherine, and Chris O'Donnell as the young Hemingway character is if anything more miscast: his fresh-faced all-american ingenuousness would seem more appropriate to what was called in the Twenties a "collegiate" type, or to bring the trait up to date, to Batman's Boy Wonder, Robin, whom the same actor played, than to Frederick Henry's laconic, self-confident young officer, or even the personage "Hemingway" whom the writer created of himself for public consumption. O'Donnell's Hemingway seems as boyishly eager to go to the front as Robin is to catch crooks in Gotham City, and, inappropriately, the film's soundtrack plays stirring martial music to

accompany scenes of trench warfare, a war that is notoriously unheroic, even in filmed representations.

Miss Kurowsky does not so much fall in love with another man, which seems to be what really happened (in the film, her turning down marriage with a wealthy Italian surgeon of an old family with a house in Venice for an affair with an inexperienced lad seven or eight years her junior, as the film would have us believe, is, rather improbable), as go passively along with the young Ernest's insistent proposals. At the end of the film, as if to be rescued from any charge of feminine flightiness, she seeks out young Ernest at his lakeside fishing retreat, who, in his masculine and artistic pride (this disappointment has evidently started him in his career of writing) refuses her, which seems to be a reversal of what historically occurred.

It comes somewhat as a surprise, too, that the affair itself may be just as fictitious as the soldier-character's participation in the war. Hemingway always insisted that his novel was not autobiographical (Millicent Bell's 1984 essay on the novel calls it a pseudo-autobiography) and, subsequently, that he should not be identified with his protagonists. This is unexceptionable from any author ("I am not I," etc.), but Hemingway's own very limited experience of combat, compared to his character's, should be enough to warn any reader, or viewer, that the story only in general outlines is his own. In an exhaustive "revisionist" work on the writing of the novel, Michael S. Reynolds, in a long interview with Miss Kurowsky, was told that she and the young Ernest had not in fact been lovers, although she admitted that the author, who was in fact always careful about historical details, had got those of the place and time just right.

v.

The best film adaptation of a Great War novel is still Lewis Milestone's version (1930) of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (superior to Delbert Mann's 1979 remake), in which Remarque's anti-war position is maintained, the film resolutely refusing to find

anything to celebrate and emphasizing, as Remarque did, the contrast between how the war was represented to civilians and how it was actually experienced by the men in the trenches. The soldiers question the origin of the war in their conversations (“How can a country offend another?” one man wants to know, “You mean a mountain in Germany offends a field in France?”) and discuss its futility and apparent endlessness (“Push on to Paris. So that’s the way they talk back there,” says one veteran to another). Although these German soldiers often sound, comically, rather like the disgruntled GIs of countless Hollywood films of later wars, that paradoxically points up the universal appeal that Remarque’s work had on readers at the time. The experience of trench warfare was similar for both sides and people from Allied countries could identify with the German infantrymen of the novel. It has also been suggested, quite plausibly, however, that the film was a success in the US (it won the Oscar for best film) because its “enemies” were not American but French troops (Roquemore 139), and the film’s questioning of patriotism may even have been allowed because the questioners were Germans, not Americans (Carnes 191). The film’s anti-war message undoubtedly got through to European audiences, as the authorities banned it in both France and Germany.

Early in the film, the schoolmaster passionately exhorts his students to enlist, to make “one great sacrifice for our country,” and even quotes, approvingly, the notorious Horatian phrase (*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*) which Wilfred Owen called “that old lie” in his famous poem about men getting gassed. The boys leap up, fired with enthusiasm, shouting “I’ll go,” a scene that effectively demonstrates the power of patriotic rhetoric (the verbal equivalent of the brass band and the parade in *Ace of Aces*) in sending young men off to die. On leave, Private Paul Baumer (Lew Ayres) turns up at the school to counteract his teacher’s propaganda and perhaps save the next group of destined victims, but when he tries to tell them what war is like they call him a coward. Similarly, the old men in the bar, with a map of the front lines spread out on a table tell him that his (real)

experience is too limited for a properly strategic understanding of the war and how to conduct it.

Scenes like those in which a man is blinded by a shell, another cracks up in a dug-out, in which the martinet sergeant Himmelstoss cringes in a shell-hole, or the soldiers defend themselves against an invasion of rats, all reflect authentic experiences of the trenches and escape the usual clichés of war movies. A fine example of how a fictional episode can be successfully adapted to the language of the screen is shown in the scene in the novel when the German soldiers discuss, at their comrade's deathbed, who will inherit his fine English boots. The author evidently wished to show the lack of sentimentalism of the infantry soldier, who may die at any moment and for whom small, practical comforts are therefore of supreme importance. The scene is repeated in the film but its impact is greatly increased by showing the boots worn successively on the feet of different marching men, as each one is killed. Even in the novel's central episode, where Baumer confronts a dead French soldier in a shell-hole, the first foe he has seen face-to-face, maintains its poignancy in the film despite the rather stilted dialogue. The famous final scene, where Baumer is killed while reaching for a butterfly is a good example of the "Arcadian" or pastoral theme in the literature of the Great War, which Paul Fussell says form an ironic contrast with the anti-pastoral reality of trench warfare (Fussell 243-245).

vi.

As with *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the most interesting fictional movies on the war made outside of Hollywood, not surprisingly, given the traumatic proximity of Europeans to the war, have an anti-war message. In the same period *All Quiet* was produced, two more anti-war adaptations from Europe appeared: a German film *Westfront 1918* (1930), adapted from a novel *Vier von der Infanterie* [Four in the Infantry] by Ernst Johanssen, and in 1932, a French film, *Les Croix de Bois* [The Wooden Crosses], adapted from the novel by Roland Dorgelès. Both these movies feature the narrative of the combat

novel, made familiar by Remarque, focusing on a small infantry unit, their relationships, deaths, and strategies of coping with loss and stress. It is perhaps a comment on both the difficulty of anti-war themes being perceived as anti-war without a dose of irony and the power of the film image to elicit emotion that these films were not always seen by audiences as being critical of the war. When *Les Croix de Bois* was shown in Paris, for example, “the terrifying charge across a Champenois no-man’s-land had Paris crowds applauding wildly” (O’Shea 137).

Stanley Kubrick’s early black and white anti-war film, however, the superbly bitter *Paths of Glory* (1957), based on a novel by Humphrey Cobb (1935), allows no ambiguous gap for nationalist fervor in his story of the French army. The brave, decent Colonel Dix (Kirk Douglas), a former lawyer, cannot defend the three men of his unit against the evil machinations of a Commanding Officer (George Macready), who demands retribution for the unsuccessful attack—the familiar suicidal infantry charge across open ground into heavy fire—and they are executed by firing-squad. The men chosen for execution ought to be selected by lot, but one is chosen for being mentally incompetent and another for being a nuisance to his platoon leader (ironically selected to deliver the *coup de grâce*).

The historical context for this episode was perhaps an incident in November, 1915, when the 3rd Battalion of the 63rd Infantry Regiment refused to go “over the top” (i.e. out of the trenches) at Vimy. The entire battalion was court-martialled and one man from every company was shot, the scapegoats of the film. The film’s portrayal of rigid military hierarchy and its stupidity, inefficient and costly frontal attacks, the gap between staff and line officers and between officers and other ranks—treated as mere cannon fodder—are all established themes in the history of the First World War that also resonate in its fiction.

Rather less convincing, morbidly strident where *Paths of Glory* is ironic, is *Johnny Got His Gun* (Dalton Trumbo, 1971) based on Trumbo’s own novel (1939), a programmatic anti-war film that is, however, powerful at moments and often excruciating to watch. An American soldier (Tomothy Bottoms) is mutilated by an exploding shell; to his

mounting horror, he learns that he is blind, deaf, dumb, legless, armless, and faceless, but, unfortunately, has a brain and nervous system that still function. Unaware at first that he is conscious, he is cruelly kept alive for purposes of medical research. With total sensory and motor deprivation, he can only think about "keeping track of time" as the only way he has of maintaining any kind of presence in the world. Flashbacks of his former life are interspersed with scenes of his present predicament in a military hospital, the flashbacks honing in on Trumbo's targets: scientific progress at the cost of human suffering, and the falsity of nationalistic ideology, organized religion, and commonplace pieties in the face of modern war, perceived in fact as elements that help to perpetuate it.

In one scene, while still a boy, the soldier is told by his father that one day he will "make the world safe for democracy" (an unlikely allusion to the notorious phrase of President Wilson). "What is democracy?" the boy asks. "I'm not real sure about that, but I think it has something to do with young men killing each other," which is even more unlikely, in its heavy-handedness. More effective is a fantasy in which his father is a carnival-barker splicing about a side-show freak, "the armless, legless wonder of the world, Joe Bonbon, basket case," a scene in which the very grotesqueness of the situation, which is after all his situation, guarantees its authenticity. The side-show proposal is actually taken up by the soldier when he learns to communicate by nodding his head in Morse code. "What do you want" the medical officers dutifully ask. "I want out so people can see what I am. Put me in a carnival show where they can look at me," and presumably see what war really does, a request which is naturally refused. "Then kill me," he nods, over and over, and when a sympathetic nurse attempts to grant this request, she is interrupted by a doctor, who then shuts him away forever in the literal and metaphorical dark. The film, although it is as angry as *Paths of Glory*, is less effective for turning into an ahistorical horror show.

vii.

The Great War still inspires film-makers, with mixed results. A very recent example merely shows how far the conflict is from contemporary consciousness. In *Frontline* (Quentin Peoples, 1999), we are put into the trenches in France in the last year of the war, where a young soldier, Robert (Jason Landon), announces: "I'm a soldier, a deserter, a coward." From this promising beginning, however, he wanders in confusion into a lost German unit behind the lines, commanded by a mad captain (John Savage), who in flashbacks is seen to have been beaten into "Prussian" discipline as a mere boy by a uniformed father. The Germans, who have rescued a downed German pilot, "occupy" a French village, and the captain, the pilot and his American prisoner lodge at the house of an old man and his attractive daughter. After some sexual competition between captain and prisoner, the former bayonets the latter in the stomach and pulls his men out of the village, evidently to search for the front and his original lost unit, though for unexplained reasons he takes the girl with them. Shortly afterward, Robert, perhaps to show he's not everything he said he was at the beginning, actually mounts a white horse and goes after them, promising the father he will bring the girl back. The captain, meanwhile, still lost, loses emotional control and starts shooting his men, who inexplicably do not just shoot him and earn a permanent reprieve from the front, since the war is now ending. Robert shows up and after a struggle reluctantly bayonets the captain with the help of the girl, who delivers the *coup de grâce*. This plot outline serves to show how preposterous the film is and how inappropriate the title.

One of the more powerful of contemporary films on the Great War, *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir 1981), evades the usual focus on the Western Front for one of the more unsuccessful "sideshows" of the Allies, the Gallipoli fiasco in the Dardenelles, 1915. Adding to Kubrick's bitter irony, Weir crafts a film of extreme pathos based on the conflict between the youthful idealism manifest in civilian responses to the war and its terrible realities. The campaign (conceived by First Lord of the

Admiralty Winston Churchill) was to force a passage through the narrow straits to Constantinople to bombard the city and convince the Turks to abandon their allies failed. In the ensuing strategy of invasion by land was too much, too late, with the element of surprise hopelessly squandered. Among the thousands of troops landed destined for useless sacrifice were Anzacs (the name given Australian and New Zealand Army Corps), who landed at the wrong place and were exposed to murderous fire for months by the strong Turkish defenses under the able command of Mustafa Kemal, later to become the father of modern Turkey (who, before he died, sent a message of condolence to the Australian people and changed the name of the battlefield to Anzac Cove in honor of the dead attackers (Carnes 185)). The British staff, however, would not give up, as they felt they could smash through for a victory that would “knock Turkey out of the war,” in the words of the officer in the film, and decided on new landings at Suvla Bay by British troops. It was to prevent the Turks from repulsing this landing, which was a surprise, that the Anzacs were ordered to attack, an explanation that is missing in the film. In any case, Kemal’s reinforcements soon brought about another stalemate. In the end, Gallipoli cost 250,000 men and was a complete failure, yet in 1918, the poet John Masefield published *Gallipoli*, portraying it as a grand heroic enterprise in the mode of epic romance, complete with quotations from *The Song of Roland*.

The film *Gallipoli* may be seen as an antidote to Masefield’s portrayal. It focuses on Archie (Mark Lee), a fresh-faced, 18-year-old cowboy in Western Australia and a promising athlete who trains with his uncle. The juxtaposition of war and games is cunning. Dreaming of taking part in the Great War, Archie is more eager to enlist than to win races, as he associates war with the adventures undertaken by bold young men like his uncle once was, roaming over the globe and doing a variety of jobs. “But war is different,” his uncle tells him, to no avail. A regional track-meet is interrupted by the arrival of a troop of the Australian Tenth Light Horse Regiment to recruit some of the young men present: “The Empire needs you. Get into the greatest game of all” is their call to the young men, an appeal connects the British Empire to

the supposedly character-building nature of sports, a necessary part of the education of future leaders, often evoked by imperialists. The game-playing notion of war will be reflected in the unit's training in the field in Egypt. The commanding officers order a "frontal attack" on the "trenches" dug in the desert. The two sides end up in a roughneck wrestling match, like a bunch of schoolboys (a significant percentage of the "men" who fought at Gallipoli were in fact under-age). The epitome of war and games can be seen in the battle of the Somme, where a football was kicked out by a British captain to signal the advance of the troops toward the German lines.

The presence of a cavalry troop in a modern, mechanized war also recalls the sort of obsolete gallantry Tennyson evoked in his poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," which was memorized and recited by generations of British and Commonwealth schoolboys. It is to the point that when the cavalymen of the Tenth Light Horse attacks, they are dismounted, the horses having been left behind in Egypt owing to the steep terrain at Gallipoli. The cavalry would never had the dashing role of breakthrough envisioned for it by the generals on the western front, but, interestingly enough, in perhaps the only time it was used successfully was in the victory of the Anzacs themselves at Beersheba in October 31, 1917—duly celebrated in Simon Wincer's 1987 film, *The Lighthorsemen*.

Frank Dunn (Mel Gibson) is one of a group of young railway workers who abandon their job to enlist as a group, he being the only one who resists, declaring that "it's not our bloody war. It's an English war." But after Frank befriends Archie, the two eventually try to enlist together in the cavalry. Frank can't ride a horse so ends up back in the infantry with his railway mates, the classic doomed infantry squad of countless war films. Frank, then, has joined not from idealism but by chance, having nothing else to do ("out of work, sold his traps," to recall the soldier in Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed"). Of Irish stock, his father asks him that if the English killed his grandfather, why should he fight for them? In fact, the British are in the Middle East not to assist their French allies, the reason why they are in the war in the first place,

but to defend their colonial empire. The useless sacrifice of colonial troops in the name of the Empire is one of Wier's main points. Later, in Egypt, the Australians recruits will make fun of a pair of British officers strutting on horseback and in turn be scorned as hopeless colonials.

The nationalism that inspired the war is shown in the film as hallow. On their trek across the outback to Perth to enlist, Archie and Frank meet an old prospector who didn't even know there was a war on. When he asks Archie whom they were fighting against, Archie tells him that it was the Germans, and though he is not sure exactly why, he feels they must be responsible (it is to the point that there are no "Germans" in the film, although the old man says he knew one, once). "If we don't stop the Germans there, they will come over here," Archie says. The old man looks at the flat, arid landscape of the outback and says: "They're welcome to it." The colonials, then, are being recruited into a conflict involving European imperial interests, and they are being pressured to do so by civilian non-combatants, like the family they have dinner with, who do their utmost to ensure that all "honorable" young men fight for King and country.

When the men finally land in Gallipoli, they find their countrymen dug in not far from the beach, ineffectually shelling heavily defended Turkish positions. The unit is ordered to attack, and the men are cut down as soon as they leave the trenches, but the slaughter continues, even when Frank, who has managed to secure the job of runner, runs back to tell him that the first waves have not been able to advance more than ten yards, for the CO has heard that the Australian banner has been spotted "among the Turkish positions," a mere rumor. He sends his men "over the top" in a suicidal attack that was to have been merely a "diversion" for a large British force to make their landing. Archie, the faster runner, prefers to "fight," a word that will become ironic in the context. He has still not lost his original idea that men are forged under fire, even after seeing the wounded and dying from the previous day's fighting.

Right before the fatal charge, Archie writes a final letter home: "There's a feeling we're involved in an adventure somehow larger

than life." The pathos of the film lies in these naive hopes, never given up even in the face of the terrible reality of the war and the incredible ineptitude of the military operation. The landing and the attack are ill coordinated, and the British are said to have been sitting on the beach drinking tea (actually, British losses at Suvla Bay and Cape Helles were equally great), while the Anzacs advance to their death in a wave-after-wave bayonet charge—the troops are actually instructed to *unload* their rifles—in which they run straight into heavy machine-gun fire. In the final, freeze-frame shot, Archie's head is thrown back from the impact of the bullets ripping into his body as he sprints into the Turkish guns. He has been repeating the words he uses before a race ("I will run like a leopard") and he has neither horse nor weapon, his final, empty gesture of sporting courage mocked by the military reality he has innocently refused to acknowledge.

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