

Jingoism and the old lie - ‘Dulce et decorum est...’

Philip Lee

The classic anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), directed by Lewis Milestone, has been restored by the Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Centre. Based on the best-selling novel by Erich Maria Remarque, the book and film tell the story of a group of German students who volunteer to fight in the 1914-18 War. It is not a story of heroes, but of ordinary young men trapped in a terrestrial hell; a bitter critique of war that resonates as powerfully today as it did before the next ‘war to end all wars’.

All Quiet on the Western Front was not the only film inspired by the First World War. One of the most famous, Abel Gance’s *J’accuse* (whose title echoes the notorious Dreyfus affair of 1894) appeared in 1919. It was made near the end of the war with the assistance of the French army. Gance was influenced by his own front-line experiences as an official cinematographer and the deaths of his many friends in combat. The film includes a resurrection scene in which soldiers who have been killed return to confront those who are still alive. In 1916 Gance had written: ‘How I wish that all those killed in the war would rise up one night and return to their countries, their homes, to see if their sacrifice was worth anything at all’ (Brownlow, 1983: 28). The film was, of course, silent.

In the USA some twenty movies had shown life in the trenches, the sufferings of the wounded and the deadly mayhem. The most famous was King Vidor’s *Big Parade* (1925), in which the playboy ‘hero’ joins the army and woos a French girl before going into battle. In Britain, six war films were released, including two about the Western Front, ‘full of the sentimentality that makes one shudder’, presenting the war ‘entirely from a romantic boy-adventure book angle’ (Hynes, 1990).

It was only in the 1930s that anti-war films began to appear that were critical of the Great War and of the carnage and psychological trauma that all war creates. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, USA, 1930) *Westfront 1918* (G. W. Pabst, Germany, 1930), and *Les Croix de bois* (F. de R. Bernard, France, 1931) profoundly disturbed audiences. They depicted the mundane and horrific, underscoring the absurdities and deficiencies of political and military leadership. They also took the viewpoint of the common soldier instead of the officer class.

All Quiet on the Western Front was one of the first ‘talkies’ and in the year after the Wall Street crash was a ‘box office success’. It went on to receive Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director. In Europe, *All Quiet* was also a great hit. The original book, *Im Westen nichts Neues* by Erich Maria Remarque, had been published in English in 1929 in a translation by A. W. Wheen. (More correctly the title should be ‘Nothing New on the Western Front’, ironically signifying ‘more of the same’.) One year later there were 20 translations in print, including Russian and Japanese) and Braille copies had been sent free of charge to all blind veterans in Germany. As historian A. J. P. Taylor pointed out, despite hundreds of war books appearing throughout Europe from 1916 onwards (Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* was the first, winning the Prix Goncourt in 1917 and selling 300,000 copies by the end of 1918):

'By the odd sort of chance which sometimes happens with literary fashions, practically all the books on the first World war which have remained famous to the present-day... were published between 1928 and 1930. All preached the same lessons: the futility and dreariness of war, the incompetence of generals and politicians, and the ordinary men on both sides victims of this incompetence' (Taylor, 1965: 361).

Taylor cites *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden (1928), *Journey's End* by R. C. Sherriff (1928), *Death of a Hero* by Richard Aldington (1929), *All Quiet on the Western Front* by E. M. Remarque (1929), *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves (1930), and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* by Siegfried Sassoon (1930). Critical views about war held during the 1920s by a minority were becoming the accepted orthodox opinion of the new decade – at least for a while.

In Germany, before publication, Remarque's book was serialised in the newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* (every issue was sold out) and after publication sold 999,000 copies. It was the subject of more than 200 articles and essays and a pamphlet examining arguments for and against the book. But times were changing. The Nazi Party saw the book as an affront to the German people. In 1930 the Minister for Education (a Nazi) banned the book from schools and on 10 May 1933 it went on the book-burning bonfire in Berlin. Remarque's objective was made clear in a letter of 1929:

'My work... was not political, neither pacifist nor militarist, in intention, but human simply. It presents the war as seen within the small compass of the front-line soldier, pieced together out of many separate situations, out of minutes and hours, out of struggle, fear, dirt, bravery, dire necessity, death and comradeship... from which the word Patriotism is only seemingly absent, because the simple soldier never spoke of it. His patriotism lay in the deed (not in the word); it consisted simply in the fact of his presence at the front. For him that was enough. He cursed and swore at the war; but he fought on, and fought on even when already without hope' (Kelly, 1998: 48).

Remarque left Germany in 1933, but the Nazis took bitter revenge on him by executing his sister Elfriede in 1943 for defeatism and for criticising the Führer. 'The fact that she was the brother of the despised Erich Maria Remarque was not lost on the court – at one point the president said: "Your brother, unfortunately, got away. But you are not going to get away"' (Kelly, 1998: 54). She was beheaded.

Lewis Milestone's film of *All Quiet on the Western Front*

The film follows the novel faithfully. The few scenes that are repositioned or omitted, and the few minor changes of detail, do not affect the narrative. The only interpolation (the penultimate scene in which the narrator, Paul Baumer, is killed) is a poetic inspiration that serves to underline the overall theme of futility. The film portrays the senselessness of war from the sympathetic point of view of young German soldiers who learn the absurdity of blind patriotism and the necessary camaraderie of warfare. Among the many scenes and vignettes, the following stand out.

After a brief opening scene in which a military parade marches through a small German town, the camera pulls back into a classroom. Framed by the school windows, the parade can be seen outside. This is the first of many such framings (for example, when the soldiers are in their dug-

out, the war is seen to continue outside the makeshift doorway) that brings to mind Dante's famous description of the gateway to hell in Canto III of Inferno:

'Per me si va nella città dolente,
Per me si va nell'eterno dolore,
Per me si va tra la perduta gente...
Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.'

(Through me to the city of pain, / through me to eternal agony, / through me to the lost people. /
Abandon all hope you who enter.)

In the classroom, the elderly nationalistic teacher Kantorek is advocating 'glory for the Fatherland' and underhandedly encouraging the adolescent boys to enlist. His lecture is insidious:

'I know that in one of the schools, the boys have risen up in the classroom and enlisted in mass. If such a thing should happen here, you would not blame me for a feeling of pride. Perhaps some will say that you should not be allowed to go yet – that you have homes, mothers, fathers, that you should not be torn away by your fathers so forgetful of their fatherland, by your mothers so weak that they cannot send a son to defend the land which gave them birth...There will be few losses. But if losses there must be, then let us remember the Latin phrase which must have come to the lips of many a Roman when he stood in battle in a foreign land: "Sweet and fitting it is to die for the Fatherland...'

Kantorek concludes that 'Personal ambition must be thrown aside in the one great sacrifice for our country. Here is a glorious beginning to your lives. The field of honour calls you.'

This one speech sets the tone for the critique of war that follows. The bitter irony is that the 'glorious beginning' becomes an anonymous ending and the 'field of honour' a desperate and lethal field of self-preservation. The classroom scene also 'frames' the film, because Paul Baumer returns there on leave for a confrontation with his former teacher (see below). The allusion to 'the Latin phrase' is to Horace's Odes (3.2): 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Today it is probably best known as the title of a poem in English, written by Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and published in 1921. 'If in some smothering dreams' you too could see and hear what we do, the poem concludes:

'My friend you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.'

Not all of Owen's poems can be classified as anti-war, yet in English literature, Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (1890-1967) are remembered for their powerful denunciations. In Germany, the Duino Elegies of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) are among the most haunting condemnations of war, despite the fact that although he was called up, he never actually fought.

The boys in Kantorek's class join the army and undergo the rigours of training. Their first encounter with war is on the way to the front, where they hear the scream of enemy artillery shells for the first time. That same night they crawl out into no-man's land to string barbed wire and are caught in a bombardment. One of the boys is blinded by shell fragments and screams, 'My eyes! I'm blind!' He staggers about and is killed running into the path of machine-gunfire. One of the recruits goes to retrieve the body and the experienced and cynical Katczinsky asks 'Why did you risk your life bringing him in?' The answer is, 'But it's my friend!', to which Katczinsky replies: 'It's a corpse, no matter whose it is. Now don't any of ya ever do that again.'

In one of the famous battle scenes from the film, often imitated in later war films, the camera moves rapidly across and in front of a French infantry charge across no-man's land. This is intercut with images of German machine-gunfire which holds them back and cuts them down. At one point a grenade explodes in front of an advancing French soldier. When the dirt and smoke clear, only his amputated hands are left gripping the barbed wire on which he has fallen.

In an interlude, the now experienced survivors discuss who should be blamed for starting the war. One soldier asks another, 'Well, how do they start a war.' Another answers, 'Well, one country offends another.' The first says, 'How could one country offend another? You mean there's a mountain over in Germany gets mad at a field over in France?' The second soldier qualifies his answer, 'Well, stupid, one people offends another.'

The argument goes back and forth as the soldiers try to decide who is benefiting from the war. 'I think maybe the Kaiser wanted a war...he never had a war before. Every full-grown Emperor needs one war to make him famous. Why, that's history.' Another soldier comments, 'Yeah, Generals too. They need war. And manufacturers. They get rich.' It is left to the pragmatic Katczinsky to explain how wars should really be fought:

'I'll tell ya how it should all be done. Whenever there's a big war comin' on, you should rope off a big field and sell tickets. Yeah, and on the big day, you should take all the kings and their cabinets and their generals, put them in the centre dressed in their underpants and let 'em fight it out with clubs. The best country wins!'

In perhaps the bleakest scene in the film, Paul Baumer becomes trapped in a shell hole with a French soldier he has just stabbed in the throat. He gags the man to prevent him crying out, but cannot leave the crater because of machine-gunfire. He stays with the dying man throughout the night and, filled with remorse, tries to give him water. By morning he can no longer stand the dying man's groans. 'Stop that!', he shouts. 'I can't listen to that. Why do you take so long to die? You're going to die anyway.' Then, after realising what he has in common with the dying soldier, he begins to wish that the man will live. 'No, no. You won't die. They're only little wounds. You'll get home. You'll be all right. You'll get home long before I will.'

The French soldier is dead, his eyes wide open and almost smiling. Paul pleads with the corpse

for forgiveness:

'You see, when you jumped in here, you were my enemy – and I was afraid of you. But you're just a man like me, and I killed you. Forgive me comrade. Say that for me. Say you forgive me! Oh, no, you're dead! Only you're better off than I am – you're through – they can't do any more to you now. Oh, God! Why did they do this to us? We only wanted to live, you and I.'

There is a disturbing echo here of another poem by Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting*, in which a soldier dies and finds himself among groaning sleepers. 'One sprang up, and stared with piteous recognition in fixed eyes, lifting distressed hands as if to bless.' They talk about the 'truth untold, the pity of war, the pity war distilled.' Only at the end of their conversation does the soldier find out to whom he has been speaking:

'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.'

Priming the next generation

Paul Baumer is wounded and sent leave to recuperate. He returns home, where he visits his old school. The same teacher, Kantorek, is still glorifying war to the next generation of students. Seeing Paul, he urges him to address the naïve lads in the classroom: 'You must speak to them. You must tell them what it means to serve your Fatherland.' Paul is reluctant. Mistaking his reluctance for modesty, the teacher urges him 'to remember some deed of heroism, some touch of nobility'. Paul only recalls the trenches and the killing and accuses the teacher of hypocrisy:

'I heard you in here reciting that same old stuff, making more iron men, more young heroes. You still think it's beautiful and sweet to die for your country, don't you? We used to think you knew. The first bombardment taught us better. It's dirty and painful to die for your country. When it comes to dying for your country, it's better not to die at all. There are millions out there dying for their country, and what good is it?'

The boys think Paul is a coward and amid their jeers Paul decides to cut short his leave and return to the front.

In the memorable final moments of the film, just before the Armistice and with all his comrades dead, Paul is daydreaming in a trench. The day seems peaceful and through a gun-hole he sees

a butterfly land next to a discarded tin. Captivated, he leans out of the trench to try to catch it, oblivious of the ever-present danger. A French sniper sees the movement and prepares to shoot. As Paul stretches towards the butterfly, the sound of a shot is heard. The hand jerks, twitches and goes limp.

The scene does not appear in the book. Uncomfortable with the 'anonymous' ending of the book, 'He fell in October 1918...', director Lewis Milestone remembered that Paul Baumer was a butterfly collector. Earlier in the film his collection is seen in his mother's house. The symbolism of dead butterflies pinned in a box and the brief life of the living butterfly struck a poetic note. Unfortunately, both Lew Ayres (who played Paul Baumer) and Arthur Edeson (Milestone's cinematographer) had completed their work and left the studio. Karl Freund, another great cinematographer (*Metropolis*, 1926) set the scene and operated the camera, and Milestone's own hand appeared as Paul Baumer's.

In the film's grim epilogue, the ghosts of Paul and his comrades march through a sea of white crosses in fields strewn with corpses. The soldiers look back accusingly, with sadness and bitterness in their eyes. The motif of the crosses was also seen in Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919) and was reprised by Richard Attenborough in the mesmerising shot at the end of *Oh What A Lovely War* (1969). It is a sad irony that the poet Wilfred Owen, like the fictional Paul Baumer, was killed just seven days before the signing of the armistice that ended the war.

Civilisation and human dignity

Cinema and warfare have changed irrevocably since the making of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Nevertheless, the film is still revered. It pioneered a soundtrack on which the sounds of war were all too audible and it used a camera on a crane to swoop in and out of the battlefields, placing the spectator at the centre of the action. These may pale in comparison with modern cinematic techniques, but despite its limitations, the film:

'...brings together – indeed, helped establish – the classic themes of the anti-war film, book, play and poem: the enemy as comrade; the brutality of militarism; the slaughter of trench warfare; the betrayal of a nation's youth by old men revelling in glory; the incompetence of the High Command; the suffering at home, in particular by women; the dead, and the forgotten men who survived. And it did so in style, without recourse to the romanticism and glorification which marred such war films as *The Big Parade*' (Kelly, 1998: 158).

Did the film really alter people's views about war? It is a well known paradox that the great achievements of civilisation – literature, music, art, cinema, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – are not in themselves capable of civilising humanity. One mark of a civilised society would be a total ban on all war and militarism. Unfortunately, one cannot argue that more films of the calibre of *All Quiet on the Western Front* would prevent politicians from making war or ordinary people from condoning it. Yet there is still a case to be made for strengthening the role of public media (including cinema) in providing moral guidance and critical reasoning on the major issues of life and death that affect society. Cinema has always tried to do this, but perhaps it needs to be part of a larger configuration of public education for democracy.

The key question is, can we educate for a democracy that recognises the ethical imperatives of coexistence and human survival? In place of Kantorek's (read Donald Rumsfeld's) jingoism, can we provide an education that is global in its vision? That recognises that everyone shares this planet as co-travellers? That provides shared understandings of our common citizenship? As

Bernard Crick has pointed out, this would require nothing less than a transformation of the political culture of the planet, internationally, nationally and locally, so that people think of themselves as:

‘...active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service’ (Crick, 2002: 114).

Public media acting ethically and responsibly could instigate and effect such a transformation. The sad fact is that, in a world in which governments flout the United Nations system, in which military and economic interests outweigh the lives and dignity of millions of human beings, in which inequality and poverty are rampant, the simple lessons of *All Quiet on the Western Front* have still to be learnt.

References

- Brownlow, Kevin (1983). *Napoleon: Abel Gance's Classic Film*, London: Jonathan Cape. The quotation is from *Prisme*, by Abel Gance, Paris: Gallimard, 1930.
- Crick, Bernard (2002). *Democracy. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hynes, Samuel (1990). *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Pimlico. Quoted in Ferguson, 1998, p. 454.
- Kelly, Andrew (1998). *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Taylor, A. J. P. (1965). *English History 1914-1945 in the Oxford History of England series*. Oxford University Press.