# All Quiet on the Western Front

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WHICH are the greatest anti-war films? Clearly, it is a matter of subjective judgment, and we might even agree with the French director François Truffaut that there is really no such thing because to show something is to ennoble it. "Every film about war ends up being pro-war", he said in an interview – in which case the anti-war war film is a contradiction in terms.

It probably depends partly on the person viewing. For many, war is exciting and glamorous, at least on the screen. As Thomas Hardy put it in a more literary era, "war makes rattling good history, but peace is poor reading". For the military mind, images of death and carnage are indeed a form of addictive pornography. On the other hand, many others will be completely turned off by the violence. Steven Spielberg stated in an interview with *Newsweek* magazine that "every war movie, good or bad, is an anti-war movie".

It also depends on the actual film itself. Stanley Kubrick made three acclaimed anti-war films: *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Dr Strangelove* (1964) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). In my view, the first two are humane and effective anti-war movies, the first set in the trenches of World War One and the second a black comedy on the Cold War nuclear strategy of 'mutually assured destruction'. In *Full Metal Jacket*, on the other hand, the action is riveting and addictive and it could easily be taken as a recruiting video for wartime combat – it seems to glorify the gore.

Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) is another case in point. The opening 25 minutes on the Omaha Beach D-Day landings brilliantly depict war as hell, but by the end of the film war has been validated and America presented as the great saviour of humanity. The work as a whole seems to say: yes, war is hell and in it people do awful things and suffer awful things, but it may be a necessary evil to achieve a greater good.

Consider also three celebrated Vietnam war films. *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986) are critical of American involvement and depict the madness of war, but again there is an element of fascination with the subject. Perhaps this is because the whole American cinema culture wallows in violence and even the best directors are sucked into this Hollywood tradition.
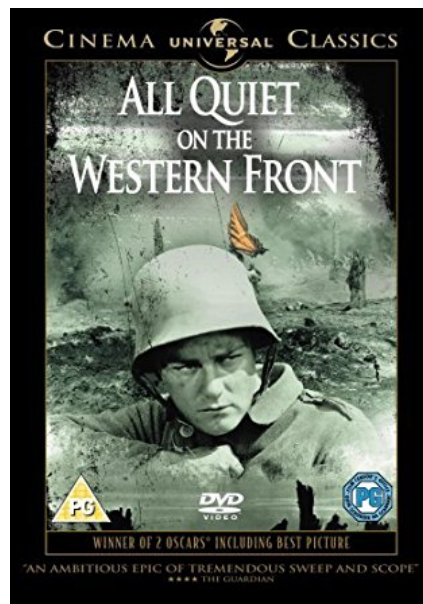
Francis Ford Coppola said that his aim in *Apocalypse Now* "was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam war… And yet I wanted it to go further, to the moral issues that are behind all wars". Yet the helicopter assault, where the Air Cavalry attack a Vietnamese position like angels of death while blasting Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* out of the speakers, is ambiguous. Coppola intends irony, but the majestic music gives the assault a heightened seductiveness and enhances the heroism of the attackers. The immersive effect of the spectacle overwhelms the anti-war message. Some American soldiers watched the film before going to Iraq in 1990 in order to get in the mood for killing.

To find an unequivocal anti-war film we have to look to non-American directors. One of the most bleak is Stalingrad-born Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985), a title taken from the *Book of Revelation* that describes the coming of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Set during the German occupation of Belarus in World War Two, it taps into the escalating madness that Coppola depicted in *Apocalypse Now*, but it leaves no doubt in the mind that war is an unbearable nightmare. There are no heroes here.

A successful anti-war film should convey at least some of the following: the senselessness of the conflict; the abject terror it unleashes; the randomness of violent deaths; cruelty as a norm of behaviour; and the traumatic effects on combatants and civilians. One film that manages to achieve most, if not all, of these criteria is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), adapted from Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 bestselling novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (literally, 'nothing new in the west'), drawing on his experiences as a German soldier in World War One. Remarque prefaced the work by saying it is an account of 'a generation that was destroyed by the war – even those of it who survived the shelling'. The novel was given its familiar English title by the first translator, A.W. Wheen.

The film was directed by Lewis Milestone (born Leib Milstein in what was then the Russian Empire) and produced by Carl Laemmle Jr, son of the German-born co-founder and President of Universal Pictures. It is perhaps significant that the prime movers of both novel and film

were connected to the two main countries that suffered defeat and heavy losses. The American critic Pauline Kael rightly pointed out that war always seems a tragic waste when told from the point of view of the losers, and that "pacifism always flourishes between wars". It would be an altogether different matter to present the death of, say, R.A.F. pilots in the Second World War as tragic waste.

Moreover, Lewis Milestone didn't make pacifist films during that war. Indeed, in 1942 he directed the blatantly propagandist melodrama *Edge of Darkness* about the Norwegian resistance. He said: "It is twelve years now since I made *All Quiet on the Western Front*. That film embodied the retrospective disillusionment toward another war. In *Edge of Darkness* we are making a picture that has done away with disillusionment. We know the enemy we are fighting and we are facing the stern realities of the present war. The moral in *Edge of Darkness* is that 'united we stand, divided we fall'. That is the keystone for victory in all the democracies".

Lew Ayres, who played Paul Bäumer in *All Quiet,* felt differently. He was greatly affected by its anti-war message, and when in 1942 he was drafted, he was a conscientious objector. There was outrage in America, cinemas vowed never to show his films again, and he was sent to a labour camp for two months; but he eventually achieved the Medical Corps status he had requested, serving as a medic under fire in the South Pacific. Ayres played Dr Kildare in nine films from 1938-42 and in a 1950s radio series and was offered the role in a TV series in 1953 but declined when they refused his request to ban cigarette sponsorship.

> ## "Me and the Kaiser; we are both fighting, with the only difference the Kaiser isn't here"

Of course, Milestone's support for the Allies in World War Two should not detract from the immense power of his 1930 drama, which won the Oscar for Best Film and he himself won the Best Director prize. Its portrayal of the horrors of war is so harrowing and realistic that for decades it was routinely banned in several countries. Within a week of its Berlin opening in December 1930, it was banned in the city for its 'unrestrained pacifist tendency' and damage to 'German prestige'. It was banned throughout the country when the Nazis came to power. It was also banned in Poland for being pro-German, and in Austria, New Zealand and France.

The film packs a lot into two and a half hours. On a physical level, it is a graphic and technically brilliant portrayal of trench warfare. Endless bombardment, machine gunfire, mud and dirt, infestations of rats, hunger, boredom, amputated limbs, death. The battle scenes are powerful and credible. Yet these physical dimensions also serve other purposes.

The film begins in a German town where the troops are marching off to the battlefield, cheered on by the locals. We pan backwards into a classroom where the military parade can be seen through the windows. The teacher is telling his pupils that they are the 'iron men' of Germany, and 'dulce et decorum est' – how sweet and fitting it is to die for the fatherland. Inspired by the rhetoric of glory and adventure, the boys rise from their seats, promising to volunteer and, in a mad moment of euphoria, throw their books and papers in the air, march joyously out of the room, and head off to enlist.

The rest of the work brilliantly demonstrates how this youthful idealism is shattered by the terrifying reality. Initial elation is transformed into disgust, anger, cruelty, shell shock, madness, and cynicism. No one emerges unscathed, if at all. *All Quiet* is relentless in displaying the inhumanity, degradation and psychological damage that war brings. When Paul returns home on leave, he is invited by the teacher to address the class. He tells them: "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 countries, and what good is it?"

In the film Paul and his 'band of brothers' discuss the morality of the war. They realise that their enemies are fighting for the same ideals but that these ideals are just propaganda tools by power-hungry leaders who want to be in history books. Tjaden (Slim Summerville) says: "Me and the Kaiser; we are both fighting, with the only difference the Kaiser isn't here". Kat (Louis Wolheim) tells them: "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. 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".

All Quiet also has moments of humour and black comedy, and the symbolism of loss and longing is everywhere. Boots are passed from one dead man to a friend, and hands reach for safety or lost innocence. In one scene, a man is blown up in an artillery strike and he vanishes apart from the hands left dangling on barbed wire. In the final scene, a hand reaches to touch a butterfly, and we know who it is because he collected butterflies. They signify the beauty and innocence of nature and also its vulnerability.

Life is fragile, and war makes it much more so. A*ll Quiet on the Western Front* is a timeless reminder of this truth and of the fact that war is humanity's ultimate shame. ❏

A Word on…Terror

Terrorism is usually defined as the use of intentionally indiscriminate violence as a means to create terror, or fear, to achieve a financial, political, religious or ideological aim. But there is more than one kind of terror. More children in the world die each day from hunger and disease than could ever be killed in a terrorist attack. Mark Twain, writing about the 'terror' following the French Revolution, noted that there was another, more widespread terror that brought "life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heartbreak". The first, he said, we had been "diligently taught to shiver and mourn over", while the other we had never learned to see "in its vastness or pity as it deserves".