

From Court-Martial to Carnival: Film's Recreation of the Great War Fifty Years On

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As the centenary of the First World War draws to its conclusion (it has been protracted because there have been so many landmarks to recall and commemorate in the period 1914-18), it might be profitable to look back at some of its events and antecedents. In Britain, the commemorations were largely orchestrated by the Imperial War Museum.¹ Academia has not been far behind in organizing conferences and lectures to cast light on every aspect of the Great War. Commercial enterprises have also noticed the occasion, but awareness of the catastrophe of 1914-18 is so much a part of the DNA of the twentieth century that one could argue that interest in the warfare has been general over the entire century rather than concentrated around its centenary.

This article is concerned with the nature of representation of the Great War. Historically, this has entailed studying certain evolving ideas about responsibilities but within the context of a very stable iconography about the conflict itself. As enumerated by Pierre Sorlin, the prevailing images are those of the trench, the night patrol through barbed wire and the “disfigured landscape, with broken trunks, ruins, shell-holes and craters filled with water (...). And above all, there was the omnipresent mud”. These are stock images, neither true nor false, but necessarily partial and

¹ Itself a product of the First World War, the National War Museum was proposed to Lloyd George in a letter by the financier Sir Alfred Mond and founded in 1917. Renamed the Imperial War Museum in 1921 and subsequently rebranded IWM in 2012, it was responsible for archiving and curating all relevant material associated with British military history post-1914. The IWM has been, to use its own formulation “leading the First World War Centenary Cultural Partnership and Programme” (“First World War”) with a full array of commemorative activities (exhibitions, readings, seminars, screenings, concerts, etc.).

limited (Sorlin 20-21). Ian Becket argues that “[i]n the public mind, the memory of modern war is now largely encapsulated in a series of visual references. A campaign, even an entire war, can be summed up in a single image” (Beckett 87).

For him, the images of the First World War are those largely derived from Geoffrey Malins and J. B. McDowell’s *The Battle of the Somme*, a documentary widely seen after its release on 10 August 1916, supplemented by a rich array of still pictures in circulation. While these images are undeniably grounded in material reality, it is possible to argue that narratives of the war have also been constructed around social conceptions which have changed over time. Along with the idea of generalized senseless slaughter has grown the picture of working-class Tommies going over the top to certain death, junior officers brainwashed by public school educations into blindly following orders and senior officers (invariably of another generation) remaining safely out of danger issuing those orders. This article will argue that the rigidity of this picture was the product of a certain historical moment and of a certain ideological context, roughly corresponding to the high-water mark of leftist ascendancy in the west (broadly-speaking between 1955 and 1975). This period is also the time around the fiftieth anniversary of the First World War, which saw a surge in interest in the subject both for the usual commemorative reasons but also because witnesses to the war were elderly and this was one of the last opportunities to obtain their oral testimony. The combination of new currents in historical revisionism (some have argued that Alan Clark’s book about the generals *The Donkeys* (1961) was part of a new taste for *popular* histories) and the urgency of obtaining fresh first-hand information created the conditions for a reappraisal of the Great War.

My argument would be that earlier reactions to, and representations of, the war, were more “neutralist”. Two foundational texts about experience of the war were Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928, first translated into English in 1929) and R. C. Sheriff’s stage play² *Journey’s End* (1928). As popular successes, both were made into major

² *Journey’s End* had an unbroken two-year run at the Apollo Theatre in London, starring a young Laurence Olivier.

motion pictures in 1930. Both have a common theme in the horror of war and the death of ideals and consist of narratives in which their *dramatis personae* are progressively eliminated by the attrition of combat. Remarque's characters are common German soldiers and Sheriff's are junior officers, but in both cases there is strangely little blame ascribed to anyone. In Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet* (1930) and James Whale's *Journey's End* (1930), the theme is still the Universalist "pity of war", the idea of "never again" that had informed the formation of the League of Nations in 1920. For this reason, Remarque's book was one of the very first that Hitler banned and then sought to burn. Nowhere in these texts were there ageing generals back at the chateau quaffing champagne.

Another major historical consequence of the Great War was its incidental function as a catalyst for the Russian Revolution in 1917. Following the establishment of the Soviet Union, there was then a haven for alternative explanations for the causes and consequences of the war. Class-based analyses of the war were actively promoted in the cause of fomenting international socialism; the sacrifices made unequally during the war were a ready instance of social injustice and the evils of capitalism, usually in the form of imperialist greed. These positions remained present but largely recessive in the 1930s as the international situation deteriorated and national defensive interests took priority. The war of 1939-45 changed the perspective once again. Here was a war where right and wrong seemed more clearly delineated, especially following the exposure of the Nazi death camps. This was a defensive people's war where combatants and non-combatants alike had a better idea of what they were fighting against, even though political allegiances remained muddy. Also gone was the sense of irrational stalemate – this was a war full of mobility, of contrasting theatres of operations. The determination felt during the war and elation felt when it was over gave rise to a plethora of novels and films evoking excitement as well as danger, from the River Plate to the River Kwai. In the aftermath of 1945, the Cold War set in, bringing with it censorship and a sense of fear about interpreting geopolitical affairs too liberally. As McCarthyite persecution began to abate and as the 1939-45 war established itself as providing adventurous derring-do and uplift, so there was a return to the Great War as the place where the west's iniquitous behaviour could be laid bare. The oral history movement sought to register the past not in terms

of grand narratives but rather as a corrective to those narratives. Towards the end of the 1980s, another generation of revisionist historians would notice that things were not so black-and-white.³

The examples chosen for a leftist representation of the Great War in film culture are four works made over a 14-year period: Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1964), Richard Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) and Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971)—two American and two British films. To put these films in context, 1960s television documentary treatments show that the neutralist position on the Great War was still official discourse.⁴

Paths of Glory, released before Christmas 1957 in the USA and UK, is an important opening salvo in the fight to claim the First World War

³ Some 87 British generals were killed on active service in the First World War, even though they were under order to stay out of danger. Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of British forces and something of a hate-figure of popular WWI mythology, worked 18 hours a day, drank only water and lived simply. He spent much of his time in forward positions and in 1918 kept his headquarters on a train so he could move around his active service units. In contrast, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of allied forces in the Second World War, made his headquarters in the Palace of Versailles yet no one would think of calling him a champagne general.

⁴ As represented by the BBC documentary *The Great War* (broadcast in 26 episodes from 30 May to 22 November 1964). Made as a co-production with the Canadian and the Australian Broadcasting Corporations, this was a kind of validation of the British Commonwealth as a vital entity with a shared history, just at the moment that Britain was renouncing its imperial claim on all its former colonies. The BBC advertised for war participants and interviewed widely for the series. The other important organization involved was the Imperial War Museum, which made available to the series much of its archival material never before seen. Eight million people regularly tuned in to this documentary in Great Britain, and one episode (the fourth) commanded an audience of eleven million (or 17 per cent of the population). In emulation of this series, CBS in America also made a 26-episode documentary entitled *World War One* using US archival resources, and this was broadcast between 22 September 1964 and 18 April 1965. The BBC series is also reputed to have influenced the making of the classic ITV documentary series about the 1939-45 conflict, *World at War* (1974), produced by Jeremy Isaacs. In view of the impressive viewing figures achieved by these series, it is reasonable to suggest that the conventional establishment view of the Great War, centring on generalized misadventure, was still more dominant than the rival leftist view.

for conspiracy and class conflict. Because the film addresses issues in the French army, and France was in the throes of a painful decolonization process, the film could not be released in France until 1975. Mutinies and the disobeying of orders had been a feature of the war, but neither they, nor the way they had been dealt with, was widely advertised, and would certainly not have been the welcome subject of a film. Kubrick's film was based on the 1935 novel *Paths of Glory* by Humphrey Cobb, who had served in the Canadian army during the war, and who had written his book picking up on 1934 posthumous exonerations of four French soldiers executed for disobeying orders in 1915. Shifting the focus of the war from conflict between enemy combatants to conflict between members of the same national and military force was the common element in subsequent anti-war treatments. Your own side bombing you is the trope of both Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, written at the beginning and the end of the 1960s respectively. Kubrick recalled having read Cobb's novel and acquired the rights from his widow, in the form of a screenplay worked on by Jim Thompson. Thompson's script was further adapted by Calder Willingham and Kubrick himself; these three men, together with their star Kirk Douglas, were all variously targets of McCarthyite suspicion and enemies of the blacklist. Dore Scharf of MGM, who had originally backed the project, was fired when the studio refused to back another anti-war film, following its losses on *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951). Made by Douglas's production company, Byrna, the film subsequently received the backing of United Artists and went into production with a budget of a million dollars. It was shot almost entirely in Bavaria using German locations and German extras from a local academy.

Cobb's novel focuses on the war experiences of his three sacrificed common soldiers, starting and finishing with them. Colonel Dax (the Kirk Douglas protagonist) is a minor figure, and the generals are also recessive. In this way, the pity of war shares the frame with a narrative of victimization. The screenplay brings the generals to the front of the story making hierarchy and careerism its driving force. The war itself is wonderfully contextualized by sublime tracking shots of the trenches and action sequences of great complexity. The enemy is made abstract by deploying an impregnable military objective bizarrely called "the anthill" and by the

total absence of any German soldiers. Sending men to take the anthill at any cost is what each member of the chain of command must relay to his incredulous subordinates and this is duly dramatized. Kagan argues that the story is also symptomatic of the Eisenhower-McCarthy years, being “full of pointless brutalization, absurd and arbitrary power, and smothering conformity” (65). When Dax demurs, he is threatened with removal, which he declines out of loyalty to his men. Generals Broulard⁵ (the politician and strategist) and Mireau (the disciplinarian careerist) are marked as class enemies in their love of power and riches (Kubrick makes extensive use of opulent Bavarian palaces for his scenes of military politicking). Mireau is destroyed by his readiness to fire on his own men, but Dax is no less destroyed by his making clear what he thinks of his superior officers. And, in any event, the surviving members of Dax’s company are being sent back to carry on a deadly and unwinnable campaign.

The central event of the film is a court-martial, the outcome of which is determined by *realpolitik* and the closed-door declarations of the generals. The French army has contemplated the Roman practice of “decimation” when a tenth of a fighting force is ritually executed for poor military performance to motivate the remaining nine-tenths. Dax is able to negotiate this number down to three symbolic victims. In a subsequent sequence, we see a brave soldier selected for execution by an army superior whose cowardice he has witnessed. The victims are really only introduced in the latter part of the film and they are not given the usual sentimental treatment. Even the brave man cracks up under the arbitrariness of it all. Visually, the trial is characterized by the grandiosity of its palatial setting and by the empty formalism of military procedure. Any attempt to contextualize, relativize or humanize the soldiers’ conduct is brushed aside and the verdict delivered without reflection. Naremore (81) claims that *Paths of Glory* reflects Kubrick’s “interest in the underlying irrationality of order”. The execution in the palace grounds also emphasizes the distance between the generals’ and the soldiers’ experiences of war. The film ends

⁵ The despicable Broulard is played by Adolf Menjou, an actor who had agreed to testify in the HUAC hearings. Bertolt Brecht, who along with Dalton Trumbo had refused, is a major influence on the radical stylizations of film treatments of the Great War.

with the surviving soldiers carousing in a tavern, as we learn of their imminent return to the front lines. There they listen sentimentally to the folk song of a German barmaid—the only enemy national in the film and herself nervously afraid. The film suggests that their fate will be that of the French regulars who appeared in Abel Gance's film *J'accuse* (1919), made a few months before the end of the war. When the (film) shooting stopped, many of them were sent back up the line and were killed before the film could be released.

Unjust death by firing squad contrasted with unjust death by military incompetence and mismanagement in the field is one of the themes of Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1964). Like *Paths of Glory*, *King and Country* is aware of the difficulty of affirming the value of individual lives in the face of indiscriminating mass slaughter. But while Kubrick's film deals with the manoeuvring of the power-hungry, Losey's is much more concerned with the operations of justice. It invests much more intensively in an individuated victim. *Paths of Glory* equivocates on whether cowardice on any significant scale has taken place at all. *King and Country* seeks to rationalize and justify cowardice in the given context of the Great War. In order to do this, the trial must be more than perfunctory, even if its outcome is just as pre-determined. As the posthumous pardons granted to WWI mutineers show, the military was prepared to concede the rationality of fear when the conflict was over; just not while the military outcome was still at issue. As Broulard says to Dax, "You're an idealist and I pity you, as I would the village idiot, for fighting in a war that we've got to win. Those men didn't fight, so they were shot".

King and Country is based on an episode from a novel, *Return to the Woods* (1955) by J. L. Hodson, in which a man, Hargreaves, returns to Passchendaele after the passage of both world wars and recalls an event from 1917, when he was the defender of a deserter. From this 1950s perspective, Hargreaves can see the point of military valour, of military virtues in general. The deserter episode was selected from the novel's range of war reminiscences by playwright John Wilson for his pacifist stage drama *Hamp* (1964). Losey's regular collaborator Evan Jones then reinforced the anti-war theme in his adapted screenplay. It was budgeted at 86,000 pounds and shot at Shepperton Studios in three weeks (Rahm 163). The title *King and Country* was affixed in post-production to complement

the opening pan around the Royal Artillery War Memorial in Hyde Park, London, with its stark representation of sacrifice. Patriotic commitment performs the same function in this film that literary citation from Gray's "Elegy" does for *Paths of Glory*—they are both smokescreens for the highroad to meaningless death. Although the characters are trapped in their war-assigned roles in *Paths*, the film is open and expansive, cutting from the battlefield to airy châteaux; the micro-budgeted *King and Country*, on the other hand, is claustrophobic and tautly dramatic. The trenches are a muddy stage set under constant rain; this later mutates into a muddy improvised prison and courtroom. The film begins with Hamp already a captive. The war is represented by the hellish conditions and by the noises off.

Once again, common soldiers have been asked to show extraordinary endurance and courage. But Hamp has experienced a kind of breakdown and simply walked away from the front line. He is easily caught and returned to his unit for punishment. Much of the film concerns the nature of his mental state, with the regimental medical officer particularly indicted for failing to diagnose shell-shock. But everyone is aware that these are general, not specific conditions; no one can find much specific extenuation for Hamp's behaviour.

What differentiates *King and Country* from *Paths of Glory* thematically is the extent to which the film invests in legal procedure. Without being unduly sympathetic to Hamp, the army organises a proper field court-martial. Neither the defence (Dirk Bogarde as Hargreaves) nor the prosecution is perfunctory—witnesses are duly produced and no one seems bent on either convicting or exonerating Hamp. The scale of the film is intimist since everyone seems to know each other on a personal level. Hamp is not a very compelling witness on his own behalf—conceding the facts of the case and not offering much commitment to soldiering, despite being a volunteer from 1914. The verdict of guilty, but with a recommendation of mercy, is actually a fair one on the evidence. It is only when the telegraph comes from HQ saying that the company is to be sent back up to the front and that an example needs to be set that we sense the generals back in the chateau. The ordered execution is carried out with compassion rather than cynicism. His unit commander administers an injection of morphine, and the firing squad to a man aim to miss him.

Hargreaves, his defender, puts an end to proceedings by shooting him in the head with a pistol.

Tonally, there are decisive Brechtian elements in *King and Country*. The film uses documentary stills throughout to evoke the wider context of the war, presumably those supplied by the Imperial War Museum.⁶ These cutaways provide a political context to the micro-action. Secondly, there is a plangent harmonica soundtrack to the film by Larry Adler, suggesting music made by the common soldiers themselves. And lastly, the Tommies provide a kind of ironic chorus to the main action. We hear them commenting around the fringes of the trial; we see them challenging the few privileges of their officers; catching and trying a rat (in open mockery of the legal proceedings) and formally executing it. On the night before Hamp's execution, they break into his cell and carouse with him till morning, ensuring that he is drunk throughout his greatest period of suffering. This trench *bacchanalia* ensures that when the officer padre comes to offer him communion, Hamp vomits violently. These elements of farce are carrying the film away from realistic drama towards parody and burlesque. These features were relatively common on the English stage at the time.⁷

These features contrast with the more Socratic arguments of the field officers. Together with the associative play of still images, there is a game of literary citation, reminding audiences that the Great War has been perceived as a poet's war. The film opens with a voiceover from Hamp (Tom Courtney) reciting A. E. Housman's "Here Dead We Lie":⁸ This is the expected pity of war declaration, which calls us to sympathise with

⁶ As well as the stills provided by the Museum, there is a certain amount of artful morphing between these photographs and the fictional scene.

⁷ We find them for example in John Arden's anti-imperial, anti-military *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), which its author describes as "a realistic, but not a naturalistic play".

⁸ Here dead we lie because we did not choose

To live and shame the land from which we sprung.

Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;

But young men think it is, and we were young.

Hamp. At the end of the film, the commanding officer cites the nihilistic opening lines of Masefield's poem "Biography".⁹ Hargreaves, however, has the soundest grasp of the general situation. He quotes Lewis Carroll's "The Lobster Quadrille": "There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail". The absurdity of the war requires the explanatory resources of nonsense verse, and this is the direction that treatments of the Great War would progressively take.

The working-class insouciance of *King and Country's* supporting cast provides the main satirical attack of both the stage musical (first performed 19 March 1963) and the film musical (1969) versions of *Oh What a Lovely War!* The idea for the stage play came from research¹⁰ into the popular songs of the Great War, identified as authentic proletarian culture and a form of political resistance. This work was taken up and adapted for the stage by Joan Littlewood and Gerry Raffles of Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in London. Both Littlewood and Raffles had been under official surveillance in this period for their known communist sympathies. Theatre Workshop was built around the actors' own research and performing improvisation. Even after a script had been prepared, it was torn up and reconstructed around the songs and skits. Essentially it was to be the common soldier's view of the war, as represented by the working-class Smith family—no strategy, no greater good, just a sense of what it was like to be cannon fodder. The production refused to dignify the military with uniforms. The cast wore Pierrot clown costumes, and the aesthetic was that of an end-of-the-pier entertainment. The didactic element was provided by projected images and "an electronic newspaper" above and behind the performers, relating war statistics,

⁹ When I am buried, all my thoughts and acts
Will be reduced to lists of dates and facts,
And long before this wandering flesh is rotten
The dates which made me will be all forgotten.

¹⁰ The fruit of this research was a radio play entitled *The Long, Long Trail* by Charles Chilton, first broadcast in December 1961. Chilton had found much of his material in a 1917 book called *Tommy's Tunes* which recorded the soldiers' propensity for adapting popular songs with contemporary bawdy and insubordinate lyrics.

particularly levels of casualties.¹¹ However, censorship of a kind was waiting in attendance on the play's commercial success. It transferred to the West End later in 1963 and thence to Broadway in 1964, each shift moving it further away from its early radicalism. It is relatively easy for a musical to shed the values of protest and take on the celebratory tone of performance. By the time it was in movie production in the summer of 1968, it had lost the anger of its conception and become a creation of the theatrical establishment.

The film was the directorial debut of distinguished thespian Richard Attenborough, future President of RADA and BAFTA. Attenborough gathered together the royalty of British film and theatre (Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson, Redgrave, Hawkins, Mills, More) to play the historic figures in the run up to the outbreak and conduct of the war, overwhelming the film with star turns. The exclamation mark was moved for the film title. *Oh What a Lovely War!* became *Oh! What a Lovely War*, hinting at the possibility that the war could be rendered lovely. The clownish mockery was further undermined by restoring the war-time uniforms and going for exact period detail. Literalism and symbolism jostle unevenly in the film. The tonal quality of end-of-pier frivolity is replaced by a real end-of-pier scenario, as many sequences are shot on Brighton's west pier. The use of colour is also very discordant in the film, as it carries the narrative away from those IWM pictures towards something more festive. The film has trace elements of its Brechtian original, in the everyman character of Joe Melia, who talks and sings directly to camera and who hands out symbolic poppies. Attenborough was very definite that there should be no blood in the film, which would be fine if he had not opened out half the film to greater realism. The banner headlines of the cost of war-time sacrifice and suffering, which made the Theatre Workshop production so indignant, are more muted in the film. Additionally, the film attempts to deliver a history lesson, offering dramatized exchanges between its famous *personae*. There are heavy-handed pastiches of upper-class indifference to suffering (a

¹¹ The famous pacifist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote to say that he was surprised that it was allowed on the London stage. The leftist Oxford Historian A. J. P. Taylor was an historical advisor to the production and when he came to publish *The First World War: An Illustrated History* in 1963, he dedicated it to Joan Littlewood.

gratuitous scene between Dirk Bogarde and Susanna York comes to mind) and a great deal of waltzing, dining and drinking from the generals. Sir Douglas Haig (John Mills), for example, is seen taking tickets for the pier, intriguing with other generals at a ball and directing the war from a helter-skelter on the pier.

The film's exuberance is in sharp contrast to the control and focus of *King and Country*. Adler's stark harmonica music is replaced by a tendency to drop into song and dance in a manner associated with the highly professional film musical rather than the artisanal energy of an East End sing-along. Frequently, when not going for show-stoppers, it descends into arrant sentimentality. The production values are those of Paramount Pictures, who financed the film. Perhaps some of its waywardness can be put down to the historical moment of its making, that tempestuous summer of 1968. It was shot in Brighton and in the South Downs in Sussex. Students from the newly opened University of Sussex¹² were used as extras on the film.

This was indeed the age of the contemporary anti-war artwork, not focused on historical reconstruction as such but very much addressing the issues¹³ of the day. Although two of the three films here discussed were American-financed, they were mostly careful to keep US troops out of the picture. US soldiers burst onto the pier in *Lovely War* in an aggressive march-past (to the tune of "Over There") and jostles the startled British officers but otherwise Americans play no part in the representation of the war.

The shift to the carnivalesque in anti-war plays and films of the 60s is the result of the failure of reason to explain what had happened.

¹² The University of Sussex was to gain a reputation as a hot-bed of student radicalism in the late 60s and 70s. Its students were particularly active in their opposition to the Vietnam War.

¹³ Robert Murphy cites a number of anti-war films from the second half of the 1960s (7): *The Blue Max* (1966), *The Night of the Generals* (1967), *How I Won the War* (1967), *The Long Day's Dying* (1968) and Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968)—this last being the one that most closely resembles *Lovely War* in tone. Paramount also released the film version of Heller's *Catch-22* exactly a year after *Lovely War* came out and there could be little doubt that the film was directly confronting the war in Vietnam in the shape of the iniquities of the American army.

The court-room dramas of the earlier period attempt to understand the military's treatment of their own personnel in conventional rationalist terms but collapse before the overwhelming irrationality of the historical context—generals shelling their own troops, rats having a longer life-expectancy than men, soldiers asked to charge positions known to be impregnable, daily casualties too large to fit on scoreboards, women willing their menfolk to the slaughter. Savage indignation, the supposed motivation for satire, is somewhat mitigated by the conventions of song and dance. Theatre Workshop's choice of popular song, undercut by the troops' own scatological lyrics, was a way of channeling that anger, but there are always risks in any entertainment form. For example, towards the film's climax, we see a church service at which hymns are sung. The more respectable part of the congregation sing "Onward Christian soldiers" while the rank and file sing "We are the rag-time Infantry"; subsequently, the choir sing "What a friend we have in Jesus" while the soloist sings "When this lousy war is over". These polished musical performances cancel each other out, creating thematic dissonance. Wandering through the scene is the typical English rose Elizabeth May Smith (Angela Thorne), now a battle hospital nurse. All pretence of a working-class identity is dropped as she speaks in voice-over in the clipped vowels of the British patrician classes. Attenborough confessed that his film lacked the "virulence" of the class conflict of the stage original—he mentions for example that Joan Littlewood wanted nothing to do with the film, believing that commercial cinema simply could not do the job.

If the challenge in all these representations of the Great War was to convey the extent of its madness, realism was proving to be ineffective and song and dance only of mixed value. What was required was a descent into the madness. In the madness was to be found the indignation and the politics. In 1964, Dalton Trumbo adapted his own novel *Johnny Got his Gun* (1939) for the cinema. Trumbo had formed a friendship with the Spanish director Luis Buñuel while they were both in exile in Mexico and he collaborated on the script and it was intended Buñuel should be its director. He was an acknowledged master of screen surrealism for political ends, and *Johnny* was a book that had been written largely for a political purpose. Trumbo was a committed communist for most of the 1930s. He wrote his pacifist novel about the First World War in 1939 mainly to

keep America out of a European conflict. The book was successful precisely because America at the time was deeply wary of engagement. In 1941, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, Trumbo turned around and suppressed his novel in order to get the USA into the war. The consequence of this was a blacklisting for Trumbo, and a life lived on the move until he could reemerge in the 1960s as the screenwriter of *Spartacus* (1960)—Kubrick and Douglas's follow-up film to *Paths of Glory*— and Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960).¹⁴

The stimulus for the movie adaptation of *Johnny* was clearly the Vietnam War—the pacifist cause was once again running high and in the case of Vietnam the conduct of the war was nightly being shown and debated on US television. The other element of the *zeitgeist* that made a movie version propitious was the emergence of a drug culture. The peace movement and drug culture were almost synonymous in America. The sorts of access to a higher reality which were claimed by drug users were, at least amongst the young, laying siege to the mainstream in the mid-1960s and so it was possible to return to the First World War as a phantasmagoria *par excellence*. The main character of *Johnny* is a veteran so pumped with medically-administered drugs that he can range freely over his war-time experience as a kind of hallucination. It is a pity that Buñuel did not remain with the project; it took so long to raise the finance through small independent investors¹⁵ that it had in the end to be directed by Trumbo himself, a first-time director at 66.

Johnny has two connections with *Lovely War*. The first is its opening credits containing stills of the crowned heads of Europe consorting together. The second is its musical reference. The song playing over the arrival of the Yankees in *Lovely War* is George M. Cohan's "Over There",¹⁶

¹⁴ Trumbo is thought to have been a script doctor on Preminger's *The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell* (1955), about an airman veteran of the First World War who dares to question the wisdom of US generals in respect of the future of air power and who is hounded out of the military for challenging army and navy entrenched interests. This film is a harbinger of the anti-militarist films to come.

¹⁵ See Cook for the film's problematic financing and release (305-9).

¹⁶ There is a third if one remembers that the actor James Cagney, who played George M. Cohan in the successful film musical *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) dir. Michael

a rousing recruiting song penned in 1917 during the first days of American entry into the war. Despite the intervening three years of carnage, the song manages to maintain the patriotic tone¹⁷ of summer 1914. So *Johnny Got his Gun*, both book 1939 and film 1971, are about what happened next to its protagonist Joe Bonham. Given the novel's political history, it could only have been filmed in a climate of rampant protest. When the novel was republished in 1970 to accompany the preparation of the film, Trumbo added an addendum to his 1959 introduction relating the book's anti-war theme to the situation in Vietnam. This laments the discontinuation of the practice of issuing official figures on war disfigurement.¹⁸

Trumbo's strategy for addressing the horror of war is to concentrate on disability as a state of being. There is precisely one scene in the trenches (presented in flashback and then reprised in a fuller version) in this film. Joe is ordered to bury the corpse of a Bavarian caught on the wire. He and his unit are shelled as they flee the burial, he dives into a water-filled crater, there is flash and the screen goes black. Thereafter, the real time of the film is taken up with medical treatments, the behaviour of medical personnel

Curtiz, had also played Joe Bonham in the radio play made from *Johnny Got his Gun*, broadcast on 9 March 1940.

¹⁷ Johnnie, get your gun
 Get your gun, get your gun
 Take it on the run
 On the run, on the run
 Hear them calling, you and me
 Every son of liberty
 Hurry right away
 No delay, go today
 Make your daddy glad
 To have had such a lad
 Tell your sweetheart not to pine
 To be proud her boy's in line.

¹⁸ "If there are no concrete figures, at least we are beginning to get comparative ones. Proportionately, Vietnam has given us eight times as many paralytics as World War II, three times as many totally disabled, 35 per cent more amputees (...).

But exactly how many hundreds or thousands of the dead-while-living does that give us?" (Trumbo xx-xxi)

and Joe's speculations about what has happened and what is happening to him, his memories and his hallucinatory experiences. The book *Johnny* can deal with these matters straightforwardly but the inwardness of the narrative is a problem for the film. Trumbo adopts a technical as well as an imaginative approach. The hospital sequences are in black and white, the memory sequences are in a rich saturated colour and the fantasy sequences are in a gauzy washed-out colour. Joe is mentally dealing with his feelings about his past life and how it has been abruptly cut off. Secondly, he is dealing with his (and Trumbo's) feeling about war in general. The horror-of-war sequences take a specifically carnivalesque direction, a struggle between Joe's desire to make himself an exemplar of war and the army's desire to hide him away. Joe's fondest wish is to be a sideshow freak in a travelling circus, "a piece of meat that keeps on living". In fantasy sequence, we see his father and his mother, as fairground people, proceeding through the desert inviting others to pay 15 cents to see "Joe Bonham the self-supporting basket case".

In the black and white sequences, Joe's struggle is to show that he is sentient, given that his doctors have declared him brain-dead, only capable of maintaining heart and lung functions. Having no arms, legs or face, he cannot communicate and is only capable of head movements declared to be merely reflexes. His limited triumph comes when he manages to communicate through Morse code nods—but when the military learns that he wishes to be presented in public, they resolve to continue hiding him away. He then begs to be killed, which they also refuse to do. It appears that the military respect neither the sanctity of life nor of death. Remember that Joe was blown apart performing a burial that made no sense in that context. This form of naked conspiracy against the interest and wishes of soldiers is what underpins the anti-war movements of 1914-75. The fact that Trumbo's WWI generals are also doctors in this tale is most telling. The film ends with Joe leaving to live out his days in an ever-darkening room without human contact or understanding, enacting a particularly savage realization of Conrad's dictum that "we live, like we dream, alone". The film's concluding caption is:

WAR DEAD SINCE 1914: over 80,000,000
 MISSING OR MUTILATED: over 150,000,000
Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

The memory sequences are designed to give us a sense of the potential for life lost. They are however extraordinarily keyed in to Trumbo's own experience.¹⁹ The over-determined father sequences are understandable in terms of a generational conflict that was surely present during the First World War, but which became acute during Vietnam when America was riven by distinctly pro- and anti-war generations. However, there is too much specific grievance in that motif to make it work well alongside the political message.

The fantasy sequences are remarkable for their boldness in an American film. Trumbo uses Donald Sutherland, a prominent anti-war campaigner, as Jesus in two extended scenes—the first is when he plays cards with the troops who are marked for slaughter. A metaphor throughout the film is that life is gambling and that the longer you are in the game, the more certain you are to lose. Christ's card-playing buddies, including Joe, have already lost and so they protest vainly about it. The second sequence is of Jesus in his carpenter's shop making cartloads of white crosses for graves. There Joe seeks personal advice from Jesus, but Sutherland's Jesus is a curiously reticent and resigned figure. He tells Joe he should leave because "you're a particularly unlucky young man" and that "it's cruel to pretend that anyone could help you". At the beginning of the film there is a certain amount of religious discourse about the nature of reality and of the spirit, and the insubstantiality of the material—Joe's mother (played by blacklistee Marsha Hunt) is aligned with this part of his upbringing. By stripping Christ of all transcendental significance beyond his cultural value as a symbol, the film reinforces the supremacy of the material, Joe's material condition of dismemberment, from which all else flows. A brief

¹⁹ Almost everything that Joe recalls is an incident from Trumbo's early family life, particularly the scenes with his father, which are the ones most closely related to the war polemic. His father, expresses disappointment with his own life and his own smallness or mediocrity, particularly with a critical inability ever to make money, declares his son to be similarly mediocre and then says: "For democracy, any man would give his only begotten son". The film treads a fine line between memoir and didacticism and the father is one of its problem areas. Trumbo, for instance, insisted on shooting the scene of Joe's father's death in the very room where his own father died. Joe's loss of his father's fishing pole, the only thing he says has any real value to him, clearly has some phallic significance.

shot where we see Christ driving a train full of the dead with a white scarf flowing out behind him is a scene conceived by Buñuel. Trumbo himself appears in the film as a mustachioed philosopher arguing that war can be rational. Just as matter exposes spirit, so unreason prevails over reason in this didactic Brechtian sequence.

These films are therefore a sample of the newly-emerged counter-culture's position on wars past and present. They were made or heavily influenced by exiled or blacklisted directors and writers using material from the First World War to shape an argument about how war had helped to occlude the reality of class struggle. Their strategy was largely to ignore the official enemy and concentrate on what leaders were asking of their subordinates. They assert, as a conclusion drawn from 1914-18, the irrelevance of courage in combat in the face of stupidity and overwhelming adversity. The duplicity of recruitment and the rigged nature of judicial process are foregrounded in the earlier pictures; later ones focus on the sufferings of survivors and those left behind. Much of recent historiography has been concerned with the effects of the war on the home front.

It is tempting to argue that the counter-culture's view of the First World War then became the hegemonic one. A remake of Sheriff's *Journey's End* transposed to the Flying Corp, *Aces High* (1976), directed by Jack Gold from a screenplay by Howard Barker, has the same atmosphere of doomed youth as its original but this time it interpolates pompous generals who, indifferent to the feelings of subordinates, send them to their deaths. This stereotype was so well established that it could be used as the basis for the comedy TV show *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC 1989), where, far from impugning cowardice, we are expected to empathize with the central characters' efforts to be sent home. Another indicator of the counter-culture's appropriation of the war had occurred a year before, when the thrash metal band Metallica acquired the rights to the film *Johnny got his Gun* to feature in their video of the anti-war anthem "One"²⁰ from the album ... *And Justice for All* (1988).

²⁰ The band found it was cheaper to purchase the film than to pay royalties. In the seven-and-a-half-minute video, scenes from the film with dialogue play over the music and lyrics in a *mêlée* of despair and nihilism.

However, we do still continue to argue over the Great War's meaning and to apportion responsibilities differently. When screenwriter and novelist William Boyd put together his own film *The Trench* in 1999, about the final days before the Battle of the Somme, the plot had returned to a more neutralist position.²¹ The ordinary soldier was still the principal sufferer but officers were not so clearly their tormentors. The 2017 film version of *Journey's End*, directed by Saul Dibb, is grim but not particularly rancorous. Reappraisal of events as momentous as those of the Great War is natural and inevitable. Popular stereotypes come under pressure from these reappraisals, albeit more slowly. The centenary has seen many television documentaries, including the revisionist *Dan Snow's Battle of the Somme* (2014) and Snow's mini-series *Passchendaele 100* (2017), which ask us to look at the generals and their tactics more soberly. They share the tone of the 2017 *Journey's End* in being closer to the 1930 film than to any of the 1960s treatments of the war. For example, critic Chris Packham writes about the recent version of *Journey's End*: "Though set at a specific moment in time, the film could be about terminal cancer patients or condemned prisoners, a deeply felt catalog of the behaviors of men who know they're about to die".

As the Great War passes from living memory and memorial into the history books, it will be harder to retain the anger and frustration that its participants and their immediate children felt so keenly about the first technologized and industrialized war. The evidence would seem to suggest that anger and indignation have about the same life-span as a man.

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²¹ According to Amy Sargeant, there is even a character in *The Trench* based on the filmmaker Geoffrey Malins, the originator of the official film perspective on the war (57).

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ABSTRACT

From the vantage-point of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Great War, it is useful to remember that there was a revival of interest in the war around the time of its fiftieth anniversary, that is, in the years 1964-68. This period is interesting for the fact that it culminates in 1968, the generally agreed high-water mark of leftist aspiration in the west. Films about the war are normatively dominated by a liberal-left understanding of its dynamics and so this article seeks to explore how they could not fail to reflect a contemporary leftist agenda. The four films which constitute the corpus of this paper are Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), Losey's *King and Country* (1964), Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) and Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun* (1971), films made just before, during or just after the 50th anniversary. The critical role of American black-listees and exiles is clear in this list, but what I would like to explore is the formal treatment of the war, either generically through the filter of military court-martial procedures or (subsequently) in the use of carnivalesque elements to reflect outraged social perceptions of its absurdity. One of the problems with film representation of the Great War is that it has remained in our imaginations, like the conduct of the war itself, remarkably static. Finally, I will suggest ways in which these handlings seek to reprocess clichés about the war and bring the conflict into a modern, more politicized, frame of reference.

KEYWORDS

1960s war films; clichés revisited; formal treatment of war

RESUMO

A partir do primeiro centenário da Grande Guerra, é útil trazer à memória o renovado interesse pela guerra que surgiu entre 1964-68, quando do 50.º aniversário. Ao culminar em 1968, momento geralmente considerado como apogeu das aspirações de esquerda no ocidente, é um período interessante. Os filmes sobre a guerra são dominados por uma compreensão das suas dinâmicas que parte da

esquerda liberal. O presente artigo procura explorar como tais filmes não teriam podido evitar reflectir a agenda esquerdista sua contemporânea. Quatro filmes constituem o corpus deste trabalho: *Paths of Glory* (1957) de Kubrick, *King and Country* (1964) de Losey, *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) de Attenborough e *Johnny Got his Gun* (1971) de Trumbo. Todos foram feitos imediatamente antes, durante ou após o 50º aniversário da guerra. Sendo claro o papel crítico que neste elenco desempenham os americanos exilados e na lista negra, o que gostaria de aqui explorar é o tratamento formal da guerra, quer genericamente através do filtro dos procedimentos militares nos conselhos de guerra, quer (e subsequente-mente) do uso de elementos carnavalescos para reflectir percepções sociais de indignação perante o seu carácter absurdo. Um dos problemas da representação fílmica da Grande Guerra reside no facto de ela ter persistido nas nossas memórias de modo notavelmente estático, como aliás aconteceu com a própria condução da guerra. A concluir, sugiro os modos como tais tratamentos (da memória) da guerra procuram reprocessar estereótipos sobre a guerra, trazendo o conflito até um quadro de referências mais moderno e politizado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Filmes de guerra da década de 60; estereótipos; tratamento formal da guerra
