

The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film

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The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film

Edited by

Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż

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Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż and Martin Löschnigg

Introduction: “Have you forgotten yet? ...”

Military historian Richard Holmes once complained that the Great War was “far too literary” a conflict (xvii), meaning not just the enduring popularity of wartime and interwar literature, but also “another burst of writing” after the Second World War (12), which gained momentum throughout the subsequent decades, producing works of fiction which by now have become canonical in Great War studies, such as Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* or Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*. However, the First World War has become as much a ‘cinematic,’ ‘televised’ and ‘theatrical’ conflict as it remains a ‘literary’ war, and one can hardly imagine studying the subject today without having seen *Gallipoli*, *La vie et rien d’autre*, *Blackadder Goes Forth* or *Oh! What a Lovely War*. Notwithstanding the many other social, political and military conflicts which have torn the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the sheer number of books, plays and films which are continuously being produced on the Great War is the most manifest “evidence that this huge and terrible war still casts its chilly shadow over our own times,” as even Holmes admitted, despite all his reservations regarding the “inaccuracies [...] and stereotypes” inevitable in fiction (12–13).

Though pinpointing the exact beginning of the post-memory phase must inevitably be arbitrary, it can be tentatively assumed that since the late 1950s/early 1960s the subject matter of the Great War was gradually taken over by authors, playwrights and filmmakers for whom this conflict was a historical event located in a distant past and not a part of their own experience, though a connection was strongly felt through family (hi)stories and/or strong national identification. The term ‘post-memory’ refers, first and foremost, to the time span we are interested in, but it serves also to differentiate between the cultural representations of the Great War based on memory (Great War veterans continued to write memoirs and/or fiction after the Second World War, they appeared in documentaries, and their testimonies became a staple part of historical accounts) and those literary and film representations that are imaginative (re)constructions of the war, necessarily based on historical research. In other words, by ‘post-memory’ we mean literally ‘after memory,’ indicating the absence of a first-hand empirical connection to the war depicted in literature, on the screen, or on the stage.

The title of our volume must, of course, evoke immediate associations with Marianne Hirsch and her definition of “postmemory,” yet this is positioned very firmly within “the personal, collective and cultural trauma [of the Holocaust]” (5), and tied to Eva Hoffman’s idea of “the second generation [as] the hinge generation” (1). It is therefore far too restricted to be applied to the phenomenon we wish

to explore in this volume. The seemingly unimportant insertion of a hyphen thus serves to express that ‘post-memory’ is an expansion – rather than a simple borrowing – of Hirsch’s concept. The volume brings together chapters on writers and filmmakers representing successive post-memory generations (with an emphasis on the plural), and the importance of time and place for understanding why and how they chose to ‘return’ to this distant conflict. The Great War has haunted artistic imaginations with its traumatic implications primarily in Western Europe and, to a certain extent in the U.S. However, it has also inspired authors and filmmakers to promote a strong and proud sense of national identity, predominantly in Canada and Australia. The Great War remains a relatively side-tracked conflict in the literature and film of the nations of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as Russia. One can detect in post-memory literature and film a discernible need to include hitherto marginalized perspectives for reasons of race or gender, and restore the necessary prominence to unduly ‘forgotten’ Great War battlefields. What is more, though it is undoubtedly true that every single novel, play, feature film or docudrama can be said to perform a commemorative function, inducing us to ‘remember,’ it is equally true that these imaginative ‘returns’ to the Great War are strongly influenced by the current socio-political circumstances and contemporary versions of national history, telling and showing us as much about the period in which they were produced as about the reality and significance of the past military conflict. In other words, the present volume intends to show the Great War in post-memory literature and film as “[a] multiplicity of social experiences and representations, in part contradictory and ambiguous, in terms of which people construct the world and their actions” (Confino 1399).

One may refer at this point to Australian novelist David Malouf’s definition of “fictive histories,” which aptly identifies the issue of the inevitable contemporizing of the past: “our only way of grasping our history – and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now – the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people’s entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there.” Adapting Malouf’s definition for the purposes of this volume, the following can be said about post-memory literature and film about the Great War:

[...] of course it’s not the real world, it’s not the way it was in [1914–1918], it’s a way that [1914–1918] appears in the significance it has [in the time of the author, dramatist or filmmaker]. The readers are then able to take all of that into their consciousness and their imaginations so that it’s moved out of the world of fact into something like the world of experience – but more like dream experience than real experience. [...] That’s the extent to which it’s a different history: it’s a dream history, a myth history, a history of experience in the imagination. And I keep wanting to say societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in that kind of way. (Interview)

There are reasons, however, for which we prefer to refer to *post-memory* and not fictive *history*. Though we fully embrace Malouf's definition, it was formulated to identify a trend in prose fiction, whereas this volume also includes chapters that put the imaginative (re)constructions of the Great War in literature and film under close historical scrutiny. We have also decided to include discussions on the Great War in docudrama and documentary, in full agreement with Wulf Kansteiner that "memory's relation to history remains one of the interesting challenges in the field" (184).

Our understanding of "post-ness" derives from Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of "historical consciousness" which "no longer listens sanctimoniously to the voice that reaches out from the past, but, in reflection on it, replaces it within the context where it took root in order to see the significance and relative value proper to it. This reflexive posture towards tradition is called interpretation" (111). It is, however, *post-memory* that we feel indicates more powerfully the need to create what Eva Hoffman has called "a sense of living connection" with the past (qtd. in Hirsch 1). The issue at stake here is what Mark Salber Phillips calls "historical distance," a concept equally valid for literary and film studies as it is for academic and popular histories: "every form of [...] representation must position its audience to some relationship of closeness to or distance from the events and experiences it describes" (95). *Post-memory* literature and film reinterpret and redefine the Great War but – at the same time – they create and perpetuate an empathic connection with this past, and endow it with a significance for the present. Re-working Hirsch's definition, one can see the following purpose of *post-memory* literature and film:

[to establish] [a] relationship that the generation[s] after those who witnessed [the Great War] bear [...] to those came before, experiences they 'remember' only by means of the [novels, plays, films, TV series] among which they grew up. [And] these experiences [are intended to be] transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memor[y] in [its] own right. [Post-memory's] connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative [constructions]. (5)

The question at the heart of this volume is to what extent literature and film about the Great War created so many decades after the conflict, and reflecting the vantage points of different nations, effectively establish new "dimension[s] of our relationship with the past" (Phillips 96), and what strategies are employed to diminish the "ideological" and "affective" modes of historical distance, allowing "the past [to be] presented as a place of emotional and ideological engagement?" (Phillips 92). And we use the term *post-memory* because, as Kerwin Lee Klein has so rightly noted, "memory appeals to us [...] it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost by history" (129), remembering nonetheless that "[collective memory]

is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated” (Kansteiner 180).

The volume is divided into four sections, reflecting what we consider to be the most important preoccupations within the vast field of post-memory literature and film about the Great War. Section one (“‘Entrenched’(?) Perspectives: The Cultural Legacy of the Great War”) brings together chapters which examine the complex workings of trans-historical cultural interdependence. It is indisputable that there can be no in-depth understanding of the Great War without recourse to its wartime and inter-war cultural representations. From the point of view of present-day readers and viewers, however, the Great War literary and filmic canon is inevitably filtered through post-memory literature and film. As T. S. Eliot wrote, “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead,” but, as the poet emphasizes, it is also the case that with every new work of art, “the ideal order” of the previous “existing monuments” is altered: “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (44–45). Margot Norris’s discussion of Delbert Mann’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Caroline Perret’s analysis of Gillies MacKinnon’s *Regeneration/Behind The Lines* and Louise Hooper’s documentary about Great Britain’s most renowned soldier poet demonstrate how such productions deliberately and effectively convince us of the timelessness and universality of Great War literature in its most canonical anti-war version, as represented, most poignantly, by Erich Maria Remarque and Wilfred Owen. Concomitantly, these chapters foreground the degree to which post-memory productions function as the inseparable cultural supplement to the Great War’s literary and cinematic legacy, perpetuating this legacy, but also adding new interpretative contexts. The subsequent chapters by Ross J. Wilson on “cultural trauma” in British, Canadian, and Australian prose fiction, film and documentary, and Marlene A. Briggs on “regional trauma” in the writings of Alan Sillitoe and Ted Hughes, authors defined by their mutual industrial Northern-English working-class background, investigate the extent to which post-memory literature and film remain ‘entrenched’ in the epistemological paradigms created by wartime and inter-war cultural representations, as well as the motivations behind this seemingly continuous need to validate the futility-oriented version of the Great War. The section concludes with chapters questioning the trans-historical adaptability of the established cultural images of the Great War. Paul Skrebels takes under scrutiny the representations of gas

warfare in post-memory film, highlighting the fact that the use of poison gas, as a uniquely Great War battlefield weapon, rendered it a problematic subject for film-makers, aiming for a more universally-applicable message about the threat of weapons of mass destruction and the inhumanity and impersonality of industrialized warfare. Ty Hawkins's analysis of Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* proves that the literature generated by military conflicts subsequent to the Great War, though always looking back to the cultural legacy of this paradigmatic war, necessitates the construction of its own representational models in order to capture the distinctiveness of the socio-political and military circumstances of the contemporary conflict as well as the psychological costs of fighting a different war.

Section two ("The Challenge of Form: How to 'Remember' the Great War?") brings to the foreground the issue of "formal distance" defined as "the wide variety of textual or other representational devices that shape the reader's experience of the text or [film]" (Phillips 97). The chapters collected in this section are united by their interest in the modes of post-memory cultural representations of the Great War and the ways in which these various modes allow for an empathic immersion into the past and/or a contemporary encoding of this – by now very distant – military conflict. The opening chapter by Thomas Schneider offers an in-depth comparative analysis of the technical, structural and iconographic aspects of the two adaptations (so far) of *All Quiet on the Western Front* as war films in their own rights, shaped less by their founding text as by their directors' politically-determined visions of how modern warfare should be shown on the screen. Marek Paryż's chapter follows the same line of argumentation, showing the degree to which Robert Clem's adaptation of William March's *Company K* creates its own autonomous aesthetics and ideology, answering the demands of its own time rather than adhering to the historical context of the original text. Most importantly, however, these two chapters show the supremacy of the generic prerequisites of the war film to the criterion of fidelity in the case of these particular film adaptations, and they both raise the important question about the capacity of the visual medium to engage the viewer more powerfully than the written word. In turn, Michael Paris looks at the rise of the convention of the docudrama and its increasing importance in shaping popular perceptions of the Great War by combining purported historical veracity with fictive dramatizations. Performativity as a means of both constructing a sense of national identity as well as revising national history is an issue at the heart of Martin Löschnigg's discussion of Anglo-Canadian drama. The stage cannot be ignored as one of the more important venues for perpetuating post-memories of the Great War, with contemporary dramatists employing a variety of strategies intended either to diminish or to enhance the alienation effect endemic to contemporary theatre, constructing

divergent theatrical models of representing history in order to create a post-memory understanding of the past. The intricate relationship between history and post-memory is foregrounded in David Malcolm's chapter devoted to the hitherto sidelined academic and popular modes of 're-imagining' the events of 1914–1918. While the Great War features prominently in allohistories as one of the most important turning points of the twentieth century, it rarely appears in allohistorical fiction, and the reason appears to reside in the impossibility of imagining a future-present that does not involve the slaughter on the Western Front. If re-writing the history of the Second World War (the victory of the Third Reich) does not obliterate the Holocaust, the re-writing of the First World War carries the danger of 'un-writing' the 'truth' of the conflict located in the realities of trench warfare in Flanders and France. The concluding chapters investigate the ways in which the Great War is re-remembered in representational modes which are all too often relegated to the status of entertainment-oriented literature. Phil Fitzsimmons and Daniel Reynaud invite us to the world of comics/graphic novels/*bandes dessinées* (the proliferation of terms indicating the problematic status of the genre) in order to show the importance of popular culture in shaping/reshaping contemporary understandings of the Great War. Using the example of French literature, Jean Anderson convincingly argues that the comfort of reading crime fiction relating to the Great War resides in its ability to promote an ideal of justice, though this ideal will inevitably vary, depending on the period in which the texts were written. Concomitantly, the chapter focuses on the impact of the conventions of detective fiction on the wartime and post-memory representations of the Great War.

The term 'post-memory' as used in this volume bears considerable overlap with that of 'cultural memory.' Well before the centenary, the First World War finally and completely passed from what Jan Assmann (48–66) has called "communicative memory," an inter-generational memory conveyed mainly through oral tradition (and thus commensurate, to some extent, with Marianne Hirsch's concept of – unhyphenated – 'postmemory'), into "cultural memory," a form of collective memory which is based on symbolic objectivation. The cultural memory of the war is expressed and perpetuated by literature and film, the visual arts, memorials and the rituals of commemoration. However, the relation between the cultural memory of the war and its media is reciprocal, as media (in the widest sense) have not only represented but also decisively shaped the war's remembrance. In this respect, there has also been a great deal of mutual influence between cultural history and the arts. If cultural historians have drawn on the literature and art of the First World War, contemporary writers, artists and filmmakers have necessarily acknowledged their indebtedness not only to their wartime forebears, but also to works of cultural history. Thus, for instance, Paul Fussell's classic, if also much criticized, *The Great War and Modern Memory* of

1975 stands in the background of a number of recent novels on the Great War, as do the accounts by Erich Maria Remarque, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and others. This complex relationship between earlier and later sources, and the reciprocity which characterizes the cultural memory of the war and its mediation, are the reason why many of the essays in the present volume also engage with sources from the time of the Great War or shortly after, addressing the question of how these sources have contributed to shaping the post-memory image of the war.

Since Jan and Aleida Assmann proposed the concept of cultural memory, their categories have been modified and refined by a number of scholars (see for instance Manier and Hirst), not least because media such as film and television complicate the binary division into communicative and cultural memory. What is more important for an understanding of post-memory conceptions of the Great War than a rarefied catalogue of different 'memories,' however, is an awareness of the intricate connection between cultural memory and history. "History," as Henry James reminds one, "is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what 'happens,' but the much finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connection with it" (182). James's statement is impressively borne out by representations of the First World War in both cultural history and the arts, as these representations transcend the historical to include myth. Indeed, as Jan Assmann has emphasized, cultural memory is "mythical history" transmitted through "ceremonial communication, mediated texts, icons, dances, rituals, formalized language(s)" ("Communicative and Cultural Memory" 117), and recent examples of literature and film on the First World War clearly illustrate the interaction of the historical and the mythical in its cultural memory. 'Myth' is a notoriously vague term which has been used to include a wide range of cultural and sociological meanings. Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss emphasize its explanatory function, regarding myths as culturally engendered imaginaries which, according to Lévi-Strauss, "appear to attenuate [the] crying illogicality of reality" (3). Evidently, this is of major relevance for representations of the experience of the front-line in World War I, an experience which has in many ways become synonymous with the illogical and absurd. Accordingly, Fussell shows that the war engendered a turning "towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental and the universally significant" (121). In the context of the cultural memory of the war, Bernard Bergonzi refers to myth as "actions, persons, events, stories which escape from their historical background and have the continuing power to haunt our imagination" (8). In this sense, the front-line in the Great War has brought forth a distinct mythology of its own, which is manifested in the images which have become firmly 'entrenched,' as it were, in the public imagination, images of mud-swamped trenches, of the

shell-cratered no man's land between the lines, and of soldiers clambering 'over the top' to be mowed down by machine guns. This iconography has underlined the liminality of the war experience, as symbolized most potently by no man's land, an absolute borderline whose transgression meant the sacrifice of a whole generation of young men, sent to perish in the mud. Indeed, as Francis Spufford has pointedly put it, "[w]e assign to [...] [World War I] the meaning of murderous absurdity; it has the permanent function in the culture of reducing military glory to the equivalent of an invitation to walk into the blades of a combine harvester" (12).

Images of World War I as an epitome of "murderous absurdity" have been at odds with those interpretations which have conceived of the war as a national foundation myth or a national 'master narrative.' As "[n]ation-states produce narrative versions of their past which are taught, embraced, and referred to as their collective autobiography" (Aleida Assmann 101), the Great War of 1914–1918 has figured as a milestone on the road to nationhood especially in Canada and Australia. The papers in section three of the present volume ("Identities: The Great War and National Post-Memories") investigate how post-memory literature and film represent the role of the war in the transformation of early twentieth-century (colonial) societies into (multi-ethnic and multi-cultural) modern nations. They analyse the renderings (and questionings) of national mythologies about the war, concentrating, for obvious reasons, on Canada and Australia, but also dealing with post-memories in the U.S., Ireland, Italy, and Russia. In the case of the latter, as in that of other major belligerents (France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and its successor states), national memories of the war were partially eclipsed by the events that followed, which may account for the relative scarcity of post-memory literature and film on World War I in those countries, as compared to Britain, Canada and Australia. In any case, it accounts for a complexity of historical and cultural remembrance which deserves extensive study by cultural historians.

In the cultural memory of Britain, the Great War has come to signify the end of the old Edwardian world, which thus came, *pace* T. S. Eliot, not with a whimper, but with the bang of 1914. In spite of World War II, whose toll on the population exceeded that of its predecessor, the First World War has thus remained Britain's traumatic war, as the Vietnam War has proved for the U.S. In the same way, recent representations of the Great War in the countries of the former British Empire, especially in Canada and Australia, have tended to engage with the significance of the war as the death-knell of the old imperial world and the birth of modern nations. Although, figuratively speaking, the war had imprinted the Old World anew on the maps of countries which had already entered the road to decolonization, their military support of the mother country undoubtedly accelerated developments towards national sovereignty. First and foremost, however,

the foundational mythology of the war which emerged in these countries proved functional with regard to post-war concerns, fulfilling the emotional needs of societies which had suffered loss and bereavement on an unprecedented scale.

The role of the Great War in the cultural memory of Canada is dealt with, in this section, by Sherrill Grace and Hanna Teichler. Grace analyses Timothy Findley's seminal novel *The Wars* (1977), which initiated further literary investigations of the significance of World War I (and of war in general) as a Canadian national narrative. Published in the late 1970s, *The Wars* stands before the backdrop of an emphasis on 'Canadianness' in the country's literature and arts during that decade, and of the war fought by Canada's neighbour in Vietnam. This seems to have engendered a need (as expressed in Findley's novel) to question public attitudes towards war, including the validity of a national foundation myth based on World War I. Most importantly, however, *The Wars*, as Grace argues, carries with it a "narrative imperative to bear witness" to the detrimental effects of war on humanity. The fact that the Canadian 'master narrative' of the Great War has tended to exclude marginalized groups such as for instance the country's First Nations people, is discussed by Teichler, whose chapter focuses on a novel which has brought the participation of Native Canadians in the war to the attention of a wide readership, Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005).

Like the major writers of the Great War themselves, post-memory literature and film have either searched for a 'true' anti-mythical and anti-heroic (post-) memory of World War I, or have thematized the contested nature of the memory as such. In this respect, too, there are many similarities between representations of the war in recent Australian and Canadian fiction and film. The chapters by Christina Spittel, Clare Rhoden and Daniel Reynaud in this section analyse how Australian novels and films especially since the 1980s have rendered Gallipoli and the Anzac myth, and their function as a national narrative conveying images of 'Australianness.' As they show in their discussions, the myth has been questioned, while at the same time the need for national narratives seems to have remained unbroken. As a result, it seems that 'Anzac' has now become inclusive with regard to Australia's multicultural society, and even reconciled with the demands of a social consensus which condemns war.

The heterogeneity of U.S.-American society is reflected in the personnel of Platoon Movies, a type of war film which developed during World War II. Richard Slotkin shows how the multi-ethnic make-up of these movies is anticipated by the 'Lost Battalion,' composed mainly of recent immigrants, and the Harlem Hellfighters, an African American unit, in the First World War. In retrospect, the military exploits of these units appear of symbolic significance, pointing to the mythologizing of multi-ethnicity on the one hand, and the actual status of racial and ethnic minorities (black Americans and new immigrants) on the other, whose

expectations of civil equality for their loyalty to the nation were disappointed after the war. Among the European belligerents, Italy was one of the youngest nations, formed in the second half of the nineteenth century through the unification of very diverse regional traditions. Maurizio Cinquegrani compares earlier Italian war films and memoirs with Great War films of the 1970s to show how the ‘memories’ created and shaped by film reconstruct the past with regard to a present determined by national needs. The same applies to the Irish situation, as Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż shows in her discussion of Tom Phelan’s novel *The Canal Bridge* (2005). Phelan emphasizes the Great War context of the 1916 Easter Rising, and portrays the ambivalence of Ireland’s remembrance of both events – mythologizing the Dublin victims while repressing the memory of the Irish dead in the ‘British’ war in France and Flanders. Concluding this section, Angela Brintlinger deals with Russia’s ‘forgotten war’ on the examples of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *August 1914* (1971) and the novel *Moonzund* (2008) by Valentin Pikul.’ What emerges from these texts is that the subordinate position of World War I in the Russian cultural memory can only partially be explained by the fact that this was an ‘imperialist’ war ignored by Soviet Russia, tied up with Revolution and Civil War.

Section four (“Interrogations: Cross-Cultural and Trans-Historical (Re)Interpretations of the Great War”) is concerned with post-memory literature and films which render the Great War within larger temporal or spatial frameworks, investigating the ideological dimensions of its remembrance especially in Cold War and post-colonial contexts, and emphasizing perspectives which historical accounts have tended to neglect or have only recently begun to consider more extensively. Geert Buelens shows how the latent threat of a truly global conflagration during the Cold War era fostered anti-heroic images of the Great War, including the rendering of desertion and the portrayal of front-line soldiers as victims of a ‘war machine’ or of their own general staff as important themes, in post-1945 films on World War I. In this chapter, Buelens also discusses films from the former Eastern bloc countries to point to the tension between ethnic nationalism and Communist internationalism, whose difference to the ‘internationalism’ of the Habsburg Empire is emphasized in his examples. With regard to Western Europe, he shows how the needs for Franco-German reconciliation as a prerequisite for European integration have shaped the depiction of the ‘other’ in Great War films, and how British productions have explored the class-based and imperialist associations of the war, including Britain’s role *vis a vis* the Irish. The imperialist dimension of the war also stands in the centre of Richard Smith’s chapter, which deals with the little-known contribution of Caribbean soldiers to Britain’s war effort on the example of three (very) recent British television documentaries and docudramas. What emerges from these sources is a conflict between empire loyalty among West

Indians (in spite of the often depressing social conditions at home), and British reluctance to acknowledge to the full the valour of imperial troops because of a fear of pressure for self-determination in reward for their services, not to speak of institutionalized racism in the British Army. As Smith shows, these aspects of the West Indian war experience are important for understanding the positioning of Caribbeans in the course of the twentieth century as colonial subjects, independent citizens, and, in the case of the many post-World War II immigrants, British nationals. In the chapter by Anne Samson, the (post-)colonial dimension of the war is further explored through a discussion of literary and filmic representations of the war in East Africa. The novels from different sides and time periods as surveyed by Samson demonstrate how this colonial 'sideshow' to the war in Europe developed its own dynamics and memory, freighted with issues of national identity and (post-)colonial ideologies.

In the case of Canada, the country's war effort did not only give rise to a narrative of national emancipation, but was also to channel divisions of class, region, ethnicity and race into a national Anglo-Canadian culture. In a political sense, the memory of the war functioned to create a nation which was to be homogeneous in character. On the example of Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* (2001), by now one of the best-known Canadian novels on World War I, Alicia Fahey shows how post-memory fiction has undermined this 'unifying myth' of the war by rendering marginalized perspectives on the war, including those of women, of French Canadians, of the First Nations people and of 'ethnic' immigrant communities, like the descendants of German immigrants in Urquhart's novel. In particular, Fahey concentrates on the way Urquhart renders the memory of Vimy Ridge, a part of the Battle of Arras in spring 1917 in which an 'all Canadian' contingent gained an important victory, and a focal point in Canada's collective memory of the war. *The Stone Carvers* is also one of the novels discussed by Brigitte Glaser, who shows how in World War I fiction from countries of the former British Empire post-colonial issues are often closely aligned with those of gender. Drawing on a selection of novels mainly from Canada and Australia, but also including Doris Lessing's fictionalized family memoir *Alfred and Emily* (2008), Glaser discusses literary representations of the war experience of nurses and of women on the home front, together with portrayals of the impact of the war on the (female) artistic imagination, as in C. K. Stead's 'biofiction' on New Zealand-born Katherine Mansfield (*Mansfield: A Novel*, 2004). As Glaser argues, her selected texts display an intricate connection between the limited agency of their female protagonists in wartime and the relational nature of their experience with their positioning on the margins of the empire.

The scope of the chapters in the present volume testifies to the on-going interest of writers and filmmakers in what historians have come to regard as the Ur-

catastrophe of the twentieth century – a catastrophe, however, whose political, social and cultural implications escape unequivocal description:

And yet, one might argue that, in its implosive and disintegrative power, the Great War [...] did have a positive side. By subverting context it liberated text. By undermining old authority, it released creativity. It threw us all back upon ourselves. In that sense it was and remains the great emancipatory adventure-experience of the modern age, open to all, invoking all, involving all, democratic, symbolic, and inescapable. It is the representative event of [the twentieth] century. (Eksteins 317)

It is this profound ambivalence of the war and its role as a catalyst in the development of modernity that – one may safely say – will continue to exert a challenge for literature and film well beyond the centenary.

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Part 1: ‘Entrenched’(?) Perspectives: The Legacy of the Great War

Margot Norris

Revisiting *All Quiet on the Western Front*

The epigram to Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* states bluntly that "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it" (n.p.). In a sense, this statement serves as a warning to filmmakers, particularly filmmakers of war movies that inevitably end up functioning as adventure stories, intentionally or not. The novel was published in Germany eight years after the ending of World War I under the title *Im Westen nichts Neues*, followed by an English translation published by Little, Brown, and Company in 1929. Within a year, Lewis Milestone directed a film bearing the same title as the novel, which went on to win Academy Awards for best film and best director, as well as nominations for screenwriting and cinematography. Almost forty years later, Delbert Mann directed a remake of *All Quiet on the Western Front* for television. This 1979 film earned a Golden Globe Award for best motion picture made for television, as well as an Emmy Award for outstanding film editing for a limited series or special. A third remake of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, starring Daniel Radcliffe and directed by Mimi Leder, was to have begun in 2012.¹ Given that both Milestone and Mann retained Remarque's exact title for their films, it is fair to evaluate their adaptations with respect to their fidelity to the clearly stated intention and message of the 1929 novel. And yet, given this obligation to avoid adventure in the interest of promoting a strong anti-war and pacifist agenda, how can the medium of film, with its inherent requirement to transform words and images into spectacle, possibly comply? We are effectively obliged to examine, evaluate, and critique adaptations from the political perspective of their polemical agenda, methodology, and success, and a systematic comparison with the narrative and poetic strategies of the original is required for such a critique. At the same time, such a strategy of comparison also benefits from setting the films into the larger contexts of their historical moments and those of their directors.

Charles Silver, the curator of the New York Museum of Modern Art's film department, posted a review on the occasion of the July 2010 screenings of the Milestone film at the museum. In it he reminds us that "Hollywood could hardly have been more jingoistic in the period surrounding the First World War." It may have required a decade for enthusiasm about the war to cool sufficiently to publish a critical novel like Remarque's in English, and to make a film like Mile-

¹ Andrew Kelly discusses various projects to re-release the Milestone film in 1939, 1950, and 1984 in Germany, and in the 1990s in Holland (cf. 150–155).

stone's not only acceptable but also highly popular. Lewis Milestone's complex background may well have contributed to his sympathy for Remarque's response to the war. Born Lev Milstein in Russia and raised in Odessa, Milestone was educated in Belgium and Berlin, and was fluent in German and Russian. After emigrating to the U.S. before this country's entry into the war he volunteered for the Army Signal Corps and worked as a maker of short educational films for soldiers in the service.² Delbert Mann too served in the U.S. military, although his war experience belonged to a different era. Mann was born in Lawrence, Kansas in 1920, that is, after the end of World War I. After graduating from Vanderbilt University in 1941 he enlisted and became a bomber pilot in the U.S. Air Force, for which he flew numerous missions in the European Theater of Operations. Neither filmmaker appears to have experienced hand-to-hand combat of the kind that Paul Bäumer endures in the novel. However, their war experiences may nonetheless have given them sufficient insight into the salient message of Remarque's novel to have compelled their quite faithful translations of its themes, narrative strategies, emotional temper, and war scenes into their films.

In order to offer a systematic analysis of how the films adapt the Remarque novel, it may be helpful to divide the discussion into a series of related topics and specific techniques and scenes that present them. In contrast to Remarque's deliberately disjointed narration, Milestone unfolds the story of Paul Bäumer in a linear fashion, while the Mann film stays with the sequence of the original. I will therefore first contrast the openings of the three works and their effects on the reader and viewer. The Milestone film's changed opening calls attention to the abuse of authority at home and in the military in relation to the soldier, making the point that the psychological violence endured by soldiers comes not only from the danger of guns and bombs but also from the hierarchical nature of the service itself. The contrast between such figures as the teacher Kantorek and the postman Himmelstoß with the kindly Katczinsky illuminates how conflicts about power, intrinsic to the causes of war, are already operative on the social level of both the home front and the military. We will then shift to the vulnerability of soldiers by looking at the figure of the wounded young Kemmerich, whose death and its aftermath are simultaneously treated with a significant combination of poignancy and dismissiveness. The wounding and death of Kemmerich has its counterpart in the wounding and death of Gerard Duval, the French soldier Paul stabs in a shell hole, a moment that transforms the killing of the enemy from an act of heroism into an experience of traumatizing guilt. A contrast between the scene of

² George Mitchell writes that Milestone "was first assigned to the Army's training film unit at Columbia University. After a time there he was transferred to Washington where he worked in the laboratory and learned to cut film" (43).

war and the scene of civilian civic and domestic life readdresses the intractable divide between the two that in itself transforms the soldier's state of being into a psychological no man's land. Finally, the hopelessness of camaraderie, of soldiers attempting to care for each other and support each other as they are relentlessly killed and lost ends in all three versions of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in the solitary death of Paul Bäumer.

Much of the power of the Milestone film comes from the highly ironic contrast between its opening celebration of soldiers amid excitement about war and the shock of seeing these sentiments defiled by the gruesome reality that ensues. Following an enigmatic conversation about casualties, the film opens with soldiers marching to the sound of band music, while women jubilantly throw flowers at them and people cheer them as they go off to fight. We generally associate such scenes with the celebratory welcome of returning soldiers who are being thanked for their service and sacrifice. By preempting this order, the film turns the cheering and celebration into an example of credulous naiveté and innocence, of failing to grasp that war is not a symbolic or cultural exercise but a deliberate production of bodily and material injury and death. This early innocence will intensify both the irony of the later misery in the trenches, and lay the ground for the alienation Paul will feel when he returns home on leave after a time at the front. This introduces the pacifist political argument that war is produced by an inherent discrepancy between its idealistic promotion and its actual cruel activity. As the scene shifts to a classroom, this promotion is intensified by the exhortation of a schoolteacher telling young boys that "The Fatherland needs leaders" and that enlistment will be "the glorious beginning to your life." The boys can hardly contain their rabid enthusiasm to enlist after this exhortation. This opening fails to emphasize the crucial element of impending death in the famous Latin line, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, "It is sweet and right to die for your country."

Remarque opens his novel very differently, with a strange moment of contentment spoken by a soldier "five miles behind the front." The voice, which will be revealed to belong to Paul Bäumer, goes on to say that "Yesterday we were relieved, and now our bellies are full of beef and haricot beans" (1). Being at the front does not look so bad, judging from the double portions of sausage and bread, until we learn that the double rations are the product of the loss of half the company of young men. They went out as a group of a hundred and fifty and came back as eighty – hence the surplus of provisions. We can see here that Milestone preserves Remarque's strategy of opening with a moment of acute irony, although he chooses a different set-up for delaying and then producing it. Interestingly, Mann uses both techniques. He has the narrative voice introduce Katczinsky at the outset – "He is known as Kat" – and himself, "My name is Paul Bäumer. I am eighteen years old." Paul then introduces his friends, one by one and by name, so

that we become familiar with their faces and their plans for the future, to study theology, become a forester, return to wife and farm. This opening is followed by scenes of the frightening life in the trenches, the whistles that announce attacks, the soldiers charging, the retreat, and dragging a soldier with a wounded leg back into a trench. Mann then echoes Milestone by having a flashback to a peaceful classroom before the war, where a distracted Paul begins drawing a little bird that has come to the window, while a teacher exhorts support for Germany, the land of Beethoven, Schiller, and Goethe. This teacher is far less rabid than Milestone's, and he even offers Paul a friendly cigarette when he keeps him after class. "You are a dreamer," he tells Paul, but now "you have duties as a man." "Of course you'll enlist," he exhorts and predicts, and of course Paul does. The Mann film, like Remarque's opening, produces an earlier interior view of the protagonist's delicate but grounded sensibility. In spite of the battle scenes, this opening is more realistic than the polemical beginning of the Milestone film, a difference that also owes something to the disparate technical features of the two films.

These technical differences reflect the different film-making eras in which the two movies were produced. George J. Mitchell begins his discussion of the making of the Milestone film by stating "*All Quiet on the Western Front*, produced by Universal Pictures in 1930, is considered today to be a landmark motion picture" (41). This is because it was one of the earliest Hollywood films to include the new medium of sound, which was introduced only in 1927. Given its recent departure from silent films, the Milestone production still relies on the over-dramatization and visual exaggeration that had come to characterize silent film. Its depictions of modern warfare are therefore unusually vivid and powerful – at moments verging on the histrionic – a characterization not inappropriate for the disturbing nature of the material.³ The battle scenes were filmed in the hills north of Laguna Beach, California, an area now known as a tourist resort but at that time the undeveloped land of the Irvine Ranch – a setting that in black and white works surprisingly well to convey the spiritual wilderness of the trenches. Delbert Mann filmed the television movie in Czechoslovakia, making it one of the first American films set in the then Communist bloc. This gives the village scenes particularly a quite authentic simulation. Mann's 1979 film is in color, a feature that may strike us as almost unnatural for a World War I representation, since our general visual images of that period are based on black and white photographs and therefore tend to take black and white form in our imagination. Andrew Kelly's dismissive report on the Mann version argues that World War I films should inherently be made in black and white: "Trench combat has always been best seen in black and

3 Mitchell gives a great deal of credit for the film's art to the cinematographer Arthur Edeson, who had invented a quieter camera that could be mobilized to film scenes (cf. 46–47).

white: monochrome conveys the brutality and the starkness, the sheer awfulness, of the trenches and of No Man's Land; colour seems to give it glamour" (156). Although he makes no reference to color, Scott Frisina strongly disagrees in his IMDb review. He argues that the Mann film "brilliantly captured the horror of World War I," and that "This is a dirty film. Bäumer, Kat and the others almost always have mud and dirt caked on their hands and uniforms." Indeed, there is no "glamour" to the color of the Mann film, which ensures that the soldiers' drab uniforms blend into the equally bland brown and black and grey surrounding of the trenches. In spite of being a "color" film, the Mann film's hues are virtually monochromatic with the exception of the blue of the French uniforms, which helpfully differentiates the combatants.

One might argue that both Milestone and Mann compensate for the specificities of their media in opposing ways that nonetheless serve to maintain fidelity to the Remarque novel. While the visual exaggerations of the black and white film compensate for the lack of realism that color might impart to make both war's violence and celebration highly dramatic, the Mann film seems to work hard to tone down overly dramatic actions in the interest of preserving the strange quietude of the Remarque novel, its inevitably noisy and chaotic battlefield scenes notwithstanding. This may partly result from the more faithful narrative sequencing of the action, and partly from its focus on the psychological effects of life on the brutal front in the sensitive Paul Bäumer portrayal by Richard Thomas. Mann had after all directed the 1955 film *Marty*, based on the novel by Paddy Chayefsky, that won both an Academy Award for Best Picture and a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.⁴ Ernest Borgnine, who won a surprising Oscar for the lead in that film, was chosen by Mann to play the important part of the sympathetic Stanislaus Katschinsky in the Remarque film. Although Richard Thomas is known chiefly for his role as John Boy Walton in the television series *The Waltons*, he had earlier played Fleming in a 1951 television adaptation of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Like Remarque, Mann follows the opening scene and the flashback to the schoolroom with the soldiers' visit to the hospital to see their friend Kemmerich. However, he adds an effective link between the opening rescue of a soldier with a wounded leg, and the depressing discovery that Kemmerich's leg

⁴ Kelly's brutal review of the Mann film, which he calls "a generally pointless production," argues that "[i]t was poorly reviewed and sank quickly." He cites two negative reviews, but pointedly fails to mention either the Golden Globe award or Emmy award the film received. Margalit Fox's *New York Times* obituary for Delbert Mann also neglects to mention the Golden Globe and Emmy awards his *All Quiet on the Western Front* received, instead giving a lengthy discussion of a 1968 incident when football fans were furious that a Raiders and Jets game was interrupted to show Mann's film *Heidi* on schedule.

has been amputated. Mann also adds an ironic detail to the setting that may be more familiar as an image of the American Civil War than World War I – namely a church used as a field hospital.⁵

Both films preserve Remarque's use of ironic contrast between the seemingly idyllic moments of soldiers enjoying blessed moments of quiet camaraderie in a field, smoking or playing cards, and the sadness they will encounter in the hospital setting. Mann gives this scene a rare infusion of bright color, as he dots the grass with red poppies and blue flowers, and lets Paul close his eyes and remember school day picnics on the grass with pretty girls and accordion music. This daydream is brutally interrupted by a comrade telling him that they are going to see Kemmerich – the soldier whose leg was wounded in the earlier attack. Remarque's hospital scene derives much of its power from the discrepancy between the role that material possessions, Kemmerich's stolen watch and highly desirable boots, play in the exchanges and concerns of the soldiers, and the mortality and physical pain that dominate as the larger reality of the scene. "[A]nybody can see that Kemmerich will never come out of this place again," Paul thinks to himself in the novel (14). In the Mann film, the soldiers' first visit to Kemmerich remains hopeful in spite of his pain. "Pain is your ticket home," one of the fellows tells him. Paul even makes drawings of the church hospital and Kemmerich after the visit. But his friend Müller reminds him that their friend will not need his boots again: "Why should an orderly get them, and not one of his friends." Paul has a flashback to a talented Kemmerich performing brilliant gymnastics, followed by the boy telling him that "They've amputated my leg" on his return visit to the hospital. Kemmerich now clearly knows he's going to die and disposes of his possessions. "If you find my watch, send it home," he tells Paul, breathing heavily, and "Give Müller my boots." Richard Thomas's painfully subdued demeanor expresses the trauma of recognizing that his friend is dying, and that he can do nothing more than offer platitudes until it is over and orderlies hurry to remove him to clear the bed for another patient. That moment of strained speech to his dying friend produces a powerful and effective sense of helpless grief, making it one of the most brilliant moments of Richard Thomas's acting in the film. Mann now inserts a flashback to the scene where amid joyful music the boys in their Sunday best, with bouquets of flowers in their lapels, are seen off on the train by a tearful Frau Kemmerich, begging Paul to take good care of her son. This intensifies the dreadful irony of the boy's unceremonious end in the presence of his impotent friend, who can do nothing to save him or spare him.

5 For a photograph of an American Army field hospital inside the ruins of a church in France, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Field_hospital_WWI.jpg.

Because it progresses in chronological order, the Milestone film moves from the soldiers' jubilant enlistment, to scenes of their brutal discipline in a recruit camp before taking them to the front, their first skirmishes, and the wounding and death of Kemmerich. This re-arrangement of the sequence of the action has the powerful effect of having the viewer share the soldiers' loss of innocence as they go from patriotic joy to the grim reality of military discipline, and to the horrifying damage inflicted on the body by armed conflict. Remarque's sequence in the novel actually puts the bullying and tormenting by the recruit trainer Himmelstoß as a bracket around the boys' hospital visits to the wounded Kemmerich. The effect of ordering events this way is to stress the illogicality of military training, which brutalizes the boys while doing nothing to enhance their survival skills in the field. The miseries of warfare are shown to be doubled forms of cruelty: the abuse by authority and the pain and death inflicted by enemy arms. Remarque further contrasts Himmelstoß's futile and sadistic training with Kat's resourcefulness in scavenging and finding food for his men, further intensifying the disparity between military authority and hierarchy and its practical operation on the ground if it is to be effective in promoting survival at the front. Mann's sequencing is closer to Remarque's than to Milestone's. After the death of Kemmerich and Paul's flashback to the boys' departure from home by train, the flashback continues with the scenes of Himmelstoß making the soldiers throw themselves in the mud over and over again, hitting their hands with his pole as they present arms, and waking Paul in the middle of the night to run up and down stairs in his underwear in punishment for a moment of resistance. This hews quite closely to Paul's account in the novel. In all three productions, Remarque's, Milestone's, and Mann's, the soldiers' ambush and beating of Himmelstoß as he leaves a pub at night, gives both the men and the reader a rare moment of satisfaction that justice has been done. This in turn contrasts with the overwhelming sense of all three productions, that war itself offers no such satisfaction, and produces no justice whatsoever.

The irony of Himmelstoß's brutality is that his training is perfectly useless to the soldiers heading for the front. When they meet Kat in the Mann film, he first tells them that they'll need to work hard to forget everything they've learned in their basic training. He urges them to get some sleep before taking them out on their first patrol, where they will be traumatized by a horrific scene of wounded horses. The scene is as horrible in the film as it is in the novel, where the "screaming of the beasts" goes on and on until the men hold their ears in agony. Remarque writes, "It's unendurable. It is the moaning of the world, it is the martyred creation, wild with anguish, filled with terror, groaning" (62). The horses are finally shot, and Detering, the farmer, curses at the sight. "Like to know what harm they've done," he says in the novel (64) – a statement made ironic by the

fact that the same thing can be said of the recruits who will later be killed by shelling and in a gas attack. The mercy killing of the wounded horses sets up another even more traumatic moment when a very young and very scared recruit is badly wounded during a gas attack. Kat knows he will not survive, and he and Paul think it best to euthanize the boy when medics arrive to take him away. The novel makes it clear that the boy will face the same fate as the screaming horses: "In an hour he will become a bundle of intolerable pain. Every day that he can live will be a howling torture" (72). The mercy killing of the horses magnifies the agony of dying soldiers who are refused a similar kindness. "Such a kid," Kat says of the young boy in the book. "Just a baby," he says in the film. However, the theme of euthanasia also sets up the larger grim truth which Paul voices in the Mann film, that soldiers are not only victims but also killers: "We can destroy and kill," "We turn into thugs and murderers." And it is here that *All Quiet on the Western Front* produces one of its most unique and valuable insights, which differentiates it from more conventional war novels and films in which the enemy is either reprehensible or abstract and in a sense invisible, while the soldiers they attack and fight against are represented as innocent victims whose own violence is defensive and justified. In the famous scene depicting Paul's killing of a French soldier with the intimacy of a close-up, the moral binary of wartime enemies is thoroughly confounded.

Remarque's novel sets the death of Kemmerich and Paul Bäumer's killing of the French soldier so far apart that the two deaths function almost like book-ends – a structure preserved by both the Milestone and the Mann films. The point, of course, is to transfer the poignancy of Kemmerich's death to the other side, to emphasize that the deaths of enemy soldiers are just as dreadful and bitterly sad as the deaths of comrades. In the Mann film, Paul hides in a ditch because there are soldiers in blue, signifying they are French by their uniforms, moving above him. Suddenly a blue clad soldier jumps into Paul's ditch, and Paul instinctively stabs him. The man is not dead, but he is incapacitated and Paul literally has blood on his hands. He wants to leave but cannot because the shooting continues, and as a result he will be trapped with the dying French soldier for hours. The soldier cannot speak but he looks at Paul, he moves his head, he moans. Paul holds his hands over his ears. He clearly finds it painful to listen to the moaning of the dying soldier, as he and his comrades earlier found it intolerable to listen to the screaming of the wounded horses. Finally, he moves toward the man to comfort him and try to help, removing his helmet, unbuckling his belt, opening his jacket and shirt, of course soaked in blood. Mercifully, the French soldier finally dies, but this in no way defuses Paul's anguish. "I didn't want to kill you," he tells the man. "I will write to your family," he tells him in a desperately sad bid to offer some reparation. But as he searches the man's paper his anguish becomes

only more intense. There is a photo that makes it clear that the man has a wife and a little girl. And his papers give his name and his profession. “I have killed Gerard Duval, a printer,” Paul says. By having Duval never speak, Remarque avoids any sentimentality and offers instead a sentiment which is appropriate, which a reader can understand and with which he or she can empathize. The enemy is just another version of the self, a virtually identical version of the self, with a name, a profession, a family. The inanity of war, in which human beings are obliged to kill other human beings like themselves is poignantly dramatized in this scene.

Before the fighting that leads to Paul’s killing of Gerard Duval, we see Paul in a ditch during a shelling, spotting a completely terrified Himmelstoß cowering helplessly, unable to move even though the men must get out of there. Paul is obliged to slap him to get him moving, an ironic reversal of roles, in a sense, with the further irony that Paul strikes only to save his former tormentor, not to discipline him. After this terrible battle sequence is over, it is the cowardly Himmelstoß who is unaccountably awarded a medal – intensifying the irony even more. The grim fighting is followed by a break during which the soldiers swim in a stream when they are distracted by female laughter and a friendly “*Bonjour*” from a group of passing French women. What ensues is a curious reprise of the picnic fantasy Paul was seen to enjoy earlier in the day, but with an odd twist. The soldiers bring the women some bread and sausage, and the famished women fall on the food, devouring it gratefully in large chunks. This draws our attention to the theme of hunger throughout Remarque’s novel and its film versions. One of Kat’s notable accomplishments is the scavenging of food for his men, which is ever in short supply.⁶ In turn, the women’s hunger is a reminder that war also causes tremendous hardships to the civilian populations on both sides. When Paul returns home after recovering from his injury in the hospital, he ironically brings bread, cheese, and butter to his own family, who are clearly struggling. The scene with the French women ought to be erotic, with the nearly naked men and the ensuing hand-holding and embracing between the soldiers and the girls. However, the emphasis is on compassion, on the humane encounter their meeting offers both sides, instead of what ought to be an enemy collision. Discussing this scene in the Milestone film, Andrew Kelly writes: “The scene with the French women is particularly important in stressing the point about the futility of international differences” (162).

⁶ A decade after the publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the dramatist Bertolt Brecht produced the play *Mother Courage and her Children* about a woman who travels the battlefronts of the Thirty Years’ War with a canteen wagon allowing her to profit from the soldiers’ need for food and supplies.

Both the Milestone and Mann films also preserve the desolate nature of the interval of Paul's visit to his home town and his family. The Mann film shows damaged buildings, looking very authentic, thanks to the Czechoslovakian setting. As in the book, the visit curiously presents Paul with a strange gender divide. Remarque has Paul note that "My mother is the only one who asks questions. Not so my father. He wants me to tell him about the front; he is curious in a way I find stupid and distressing" (165). His mother is ill, perhaps dying, and his sister struggles with her care and the insufficient provisions. His father, on the other hand, wants to show off Paul's uniform and take pride in his son while the mother is literally worried sick about him. The village men continue with their totally unrealistic and untenable patriotic cant without bothering to ask Paul to infuse their fatuity with his experience. The men think they know best and resist becoming enlightened. The women sense the truth of the violence and the cruelty of war, but must be spared confirmation of their terrified intuitions, obliging Paul to lie to them, to make it sound as though things are not too bad, and will not be worse in future. Mann also preserves Paul's painful lie to Kemmerich's mother that her son died instantly and never suffered. Even when she insists and demands "I want the truth," he takes the oath that will in a sense seal his own doom: "May I never come back if he wasn't killed instantly." This lie ends up haunting not only Paul but all three productions of *All Quiet on the Western Front*: the novel, the Milestone film and the Mann film. Remarque ends Paul's first person narration with the titular army report, "All quiet on the Western Front," on the day of Paul's death. As long as Paul narrates his story, we are reassured that he is alive. Once we are given the sentence "He fell in October 1918", however, we know that he is gone. Still, the third person voice comforts us just as Paul comforted Kemmerich's mother, telling us that he fell forward and looked as if he were sleeping, and that turning him over, "one saw that he could not have suffered long." We are as fatuous if we believe this as Kemmerich's mother if she believes Paul. No one dies quietly at the front, and in the end the novel and the movies lie to us just as Paul was obliged to lie, to keep grief at his inevitably cruel death from imploding us emotionally.

There is one more devastating casualty to deal with before we come to the death of Paul and to the end of the story, and that is the death of Kat. In the novel Paul suffers the same delusion that he tried to foster in Kemmerich, that Kat will be all right, that he has only an injured leg, that he has only fainted rather than being "stone dead," as the medics tell him. In the Mann film, the experience is just as difficult for Paul to negotiate. He first reassures Kat that he'll soon be in a comfortable bed in the hospital, although he knows from having been in hospitals that no wounded soldier is ever comfortable. He is so desperate to get Kat to the medics that he somehow manages to carry the much larger, bulkier man to the

bombed out church that is full of corpses. There he is told “You could have spared yourself that. He’s stone dead.” Paul, incredulous, tries to give Kat water to drink, and when he realizes that his friend is actually gone, he keeps saying “He was talking. Twenty minutes ago. He was talking.” The novel renders this experience of Paul’s as the most poignant in his life. He cannot bear to be separated from the only person in his life who understands what he has gone through, who inspired him and comforted him and gave him hope. He gets Kat’s address so that they can stay in touch and visit after the war, and even thinks of shooting himself in the foot so that he can accompany Kat to the hospital. He is so shaken when Kat is dead that the orderly asks with bafflement, “You are not related, are you?” “No, we are not related,” Paul thinks, although the reader, who has accompanied the men on their terrible journey, and who is also now intimately connected to them, understands perfectly that Paul and Kat were more intimately related by their common experience than any blood relatives or family members could ever be. The film extends a similar intimacy to the viewer.

After the death of Kat, Paul himself is in effect emotionally dead. His classmates are all gone. Kat is gone. It is autumn and there is talk of an armistice. The reader, aware of the history of World War I, knows that the war did indeed end on 11 November 1918. Paul dies on 11 October, we are told in the Mann film – exactly a month earlier. Before his end Paul tells us in the novel, “Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more” (295). He has lost everyone and everything: “I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear.” Both the Milestone and the Mann film faced a great challenge in deciding how to represent the death of Paul on the screen, since it is not pictured but only offered with a speculative comment in the novel. Milestone’s decision was brilliant: to have a butterfly descend on the lid of a can, and have Paul shot by a sniper at the moment he reaches to touch the butterfly, “a timeless symbol of beauty and innocence” as Richard Firda calls it (103). The butterfly harks back to a collection of mounted butterflies seen on Paul’s earlier visit home. Mann clearly cannot appropriate Milestone’s butterfly, so he substitutes an effective variant. We first encountered Paul in a classroom drawing a bird outside the schoolroom window while his teacher vigorously promoted the war to his students. Paul, the dreamer, was distracted by the bird. And so, the Mann film ends with Paul once more writing or drawing in a notebook while the war surrounds him, distracted by the sight and sound of a bird when he is shot. It is a tribute to both the director Delbert Mann and to the actor Richard Thomas that the Paul Bäumer of the American television film preserves the sensitivity, the emotional delicacy and empathy, of Erich Maria Remarque’s memorable protagonist in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

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Caroline Perret

Wilfred Owen and His War Poetry in *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* and *Regeneration/Behind the Lines*

This chapter deals with the representations of British poet Wilfred Owen and the uses of his most celebrated war poems in two very different types of British films. Gillies MacKinnon's feature film *Regeneration/U.S.: Behind the Lines* (1997), based on British author Pat Barker's novel of the same title, tells the story of WWI officers sent from the trenches to Craiglockhart Military Hospital for the treatment of war-related neurotic disorders, devoting considerable attention to the famous meeting of Wilfred Owen (Stuart Bunce) and Siegfried Sassoon (James Wilby).¹ The film deals with a wide range of issues, including the development of military psychiatry, the conflict between generations, class distinctions between officers and soldiers, duty and courage as opposed to the horror of war, and, last but not least, war poetry in its functions of telling the 'truth' of the soldiers' experience and of being a form of protest against the mass slaughter on the Great War battlefields. In the BBC documentary entitled *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* (dir. Louise Hooper, 2007), presenter Jeremy Paxman travels to the former battlefields of France in order to elucidate how the most horrendous conditions of trench warfare generated some of the most compelling poetry in English. The journalist juxtaposes the language of poetry with the language of jingoism and wartime propaganda. The documentary includes actual WWI images and footage as well as dramatic re-enactments of the poet's life, with Samuel Barnett performing the role of Wilfred Owen. Though the films' aesthetic approaches and narrative strategies obviously differ, they share a similar concern with the question of expressing the hell of war truthfully, as well as a comparable tendency towards the blurring of boundaries between historical facts and poetry, and the use of biographical details to give an aura of authenticity to the story.

First aired by BBC One in November 2007, and later shown on BBC Four in November 2008 and 2010, the documentary is a tribute to the author of "some of the greatest war poetry ever written," and "the second most studied poet in Britain [after Shakespeare]." It is ironical, Paxman states, that though Owen

¹ *Regeneration* is the original British title, while *Behind the Lines* is the American title. It would also be interesting to note that Stuart Bunce played 2nd Lieutenant Frederick Radley of the 1/5th (Territorial) Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment in *All the King's Men* (dir. Julian Jarrold, 1999), where his character recited Rupert Brooke's "If I should die" at the grave of a killed British soldier at Gallipoli.

“reinvented war poetry,” there was not one collection of his works published prior to his death at the age of twenty-five. Some of his poems would be included posthumously in the anthology *Wheels* of 1919, edited by poet Edith Sitwell, who also published a small selection of his poems in 1920, with an introduction written by Siegfried Sassoon. It would take a few decades, however, until Owen’s reputation as “the greatest poet of the First World War” was to become firmly established. The poems included in the documentary, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” “The Last Laugh,” “The Show,” “The Sentry,” “Strange Meeting,” “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” and “Insensibility” were chosen for being most representative of the realities of trench warfare, in particular its deafening sounds and violence, the gas attacks, the No Man’s Land and mutilated landscape, and the weapons of the war. In addition, the chosen poems tell us about Owen’s personal combat experiences, his fear of death, and his coping mechanisms. The film *Regeneration* likewise makes use of Owen’s poetry: “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” “Greater Love,” “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” “The Calls,” and “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young.” This choice of poems underscores the anti-war message of the film in opposition to State propaganda, and more subtly, the ambiguity of feelings on the part of Owen – and Sassoon. While underlying the worse horrors of war, resulting in the unnecessary loss of young lives as well as the physical and psychological traumas of the surviving soldiers, the film deals with the pride in sacrifice and the sense of duty on the part of the officers and soldiers.²

The commemorative documentary is introduced by the preface Owen wrote for his intended collection of fifty war poems: “This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.” Owen rejects the political and military rhetoric which justifies and glamorizes war and argues for a warning and humanising role that poetry should play amidst its horrors, not just those of WWI, but those of any military conflict. Paxman voices over the footage of unprecedented carnage: “WWI brought the fruits of the industrial age to killing, massed it, mechanised it, and turned it into wholesale slaughter. Between 1914 and 1918, nine million men were to die.” The fact that “Owen gave a voice to these men” is acknowledged by the complementary images of soldiers going ‘over the top.’ Generally, the documentary shows Owen transforming from a sensitive young man troubled

² In contrast to Barker’s novel, MacKinnon’s adaptation begins and ends with Owen, who is moreover given a greater role than Sassoon. For a detailed comparison of the novel and the film adaptation see Westman.

by the “rough” men he had to command into a perfect soldier and efficient officer respectful of his fighting men and defender of their cause.

The first poem to appear in the documentary is “Dulce et Decorum Est” (October 1917 – March 1918). It is read with passion, first by Paxman, with accompanying archival footage of soldiers in the trenches, and then by Samuel Barnett, in the role of Owen, looking straight at the camera, as if the poet himself were talking – across time – directly to us, the contemporary viewer, in order to establish a physical and emotional proximity between the viewer and his message. The images of soldiers in the trenches fade into a dramatic re-enactment of a gas attack. The title is taken from a well-known quotation from one of the ancient Roman poet Horace’s “Odes,” *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, that translates into “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” In opposition to this rallying call to war, often used at the start of WWI, Owen focuses on one of the worst horrors of the Great War: a gas attack. As such, “Dulce et Decorum Est” has become one of the most iconic pleas of the anti-war cause, and its choice as the first poem to appear in the documentary indicates the sharing of such a stance by Paxman. The lines “But someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And floundering like a man in fire or lime [...] / Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning” is a poetic, and yet precise rendering of the effects of being gassed by chlorine, described in the documentary as “drowning in one’s phlegm” by military historian Taff Gillingham. Owen’s language is direct and realistic, aiming for the shock effect, and leaving the reader with disturbing images, such as “froth-corrupted lungs,” the “sores on innocent tongues,” i.e. the regurgitated substances in the soldier’s mouth, the dying man’s face being “like a devil’s sick of sin,” the burning of live tissue with “lime,” as well as the “hoots” of the “five-nine” explosive shells, the guttering sounds made by the dying man. The poem uses the pattern and rhyming of a French sonnet, but then breaks its conventions down to accentuate the profoundly chaotic nature of the event as well as despair at the collapsing moral order. While the first part of the poem is written in the present as the action unfolds and the soldiers are trying to come to terms with the assault, the second part is written as though Owen were distancing himself from the horror, as if in a “dream,” but one from which the reader can experience a powerful sense of compassion, but also a feeling of revolt. Indeed, Owen concludes with an ironical use of the Roman motto, calling it “the old lie” being told “To children ardent for some desperate glory” (*The Poems* 117).

On arrival in France in 1917, Owen wrote about his initial reaction to his mother: “there is a fine heroic feeling about being in France.” He was as yet unaware, Paxman states, that the “life expectancy of an officer on the front line was [then] measured in days.” Owen was soon to face the realities of trench

warfare. A year earlier, the infamous Somme offensive had been launched. As Paxman emphasizes, propaganda played its part: “films of the greatest historical event that has ever yet been pictorized were watched by awe-struck citizens,” but “the worst horrors were never shown,” such as the “60,000 casualties” on the very first day of the battle. Owen was “appalled by the shattered landscape,” a shock that gave rise to the poem “The Show,” the title referring to the army slang for battle. As in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” the idea of war reporting is again present, with a personal involvement particularly noticeable through the use of the pronouns “I” and “my.” Owen is very specific and concrete about what the combat involves: once the men come out of the relative safety of the trenches, they are confronted by a ground “cratered like the moon with hollow woe,” “the horror of harsh wire,” “hidden holes” – the remnants of exploded landmines, and “foul openings” – the corpses which lay in no-man’s land. The “slimy paths” also tell the reader that WWI soldiers lived and died in mud, heads to the ground (“intent on mire”). Adding to these descriptions, a similarity is made between the battered landscape and the mutilated bodies and minds of the men by means of half-rhymes and the breaking up of some of the stanzas (for instance, lines 10–13), as well as specific phrases personifying the landscape, such as “myriad warts,” “sweats of dearth,” and “fitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.” This resemblance between the shattered battleground and the bodies and souls of the men is evoked in the documentary footage accompanying the reading of “The Show,” as well as in the introductory scene of *Regeneration*.

Moreover, throughout the poem, ‘Death’ is the soldiers’ companion, with a particularly brilliant half-rhyme depicting the landscape as “a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth.” Such is the chaos that the men are no longer identifiable as human beings and seem to be in a transmuted state, they are “long-strung creatures” and “[b]rown strings [...] with bristling spines.” Words related to movement and action also seem animalistic or sub-human, such as “migrants,” “slowly uncoiled,” and “writhed and shrivelled.” Generally, the image of a terrifying living hell is evoked by an ambiguous sensation of distance and reality, typical of nightmares: the vision is one from “a vague height,” the experience “[a]s unremembering how I rose or why,” and the description uncertain with “It seemed” (*The Poems* 132). At the centre of “The Show,” there is the notion of a loss of identity, the soldier being insignificant in the face of historical events. His life itself is worthless, not in his eyes, nor the public’s, but in the eyes of the politicians who have made the decision for the nation to go to war and for the massacre to continue. The latter is the result of a choice “of whose life is a life, and whose life is effectively transformed into an instrument, a target, or a number, and is effaced with only a trace remaining or none at all” (Butler ix–x).

According to Paxman, Owen's poetry developed as a reaction against the legitimization of WWI by the nation state and military power, supported by some intellectuals such as Rudyard Kipling and Rupert Brooke, as well as against the "romantization" (Paxman's own words) of warfare at the time, evident in such pervasive hymns as "Jerusalem." After his one-year stay at Craiglockhart, Owen considered the function of poetry as testimony more important than ever before, as pointed out by the journalist: "Owen was determined to go back to the front, as it would give him the authority to speak. As an officer, he felt a responsibility to lead his men; as a poet, he felt it his role to bear witness to their suffering and courage." The sonnet "Anthem for Doomed Youth," written between September and October 1917, is a mournful elegy to young soldiers whose lives were unnecessarily lost in WWI and thus a plain anti-war statement. The octet consists of a list of the deafening sounds of trench warfare – "monstrous anger of the guns," "stuttering rifles' rapid rattle," whose alliteration echoes the sound itself, "wailing shells" – set against the restrained atmosphere of the church. Symbolic of the sanctity of life and death, religious imagery abounds: the "passing-bells" tolled to announce someone's death, the "orisons" or funeral prayers, "voice of mourning," "choirs," "candles" – lit in the room where a body lies in a coffin, "holy glimmers of goodbyes," "pall" – a coffin cloth. This juxtaposition suggests the inadequacy and pointlessness of organized religion when confronted with such butchery. Indeed, the expression "die as cattle" conjures up the image of a slaughterhouse. In particular, the word "mockeries" seems to articulate such a tension, and the "choirs of wailing shells" is an astonishing metaphor uniting both God's and the Devil's world, while "patter out their hasty orisons" denotes disrespect. As such, the poem is a clear rejection of the religion with which Owen was brought up. Progressively, the poem moves away from the fighting front to funeral rituals conducted by the families of the dead "from sad shires," the English counties and countryside from which a large proportion of the soldiers came, and with "bugles," commonly played at military funerals. The tone and the pace quieten from harsh fervour to regretful and solemn reflection, until the poem quietly closes with the "drawing down of blinds," whose corresponding dimming of the light is echoed in the dusk descending onto earth in a finite and slow gesture, as though to let the dead person lie in peace (*The Poems* 76).

Paxman's opening comment on Owen's verse being "far, far more vivid than any war reporting can ever be" posits Owen's poetry, and the documentary itself, within the "question of the epistemological position to which we are recruited when we watch or listen to war reports" (Butler xii). Incidentally, this question seems also to be suggested by the poignant footage of a soldier carrying a man (or is it a body?) on his back and looking at the camera, his eyes void of understanding. Butler contends that the state regulates the understanding which the public

has and receives of violence by framing a certain version of reality. In this perspective, she suspects that the framing act becomes a part of “the materiality of war and the efficacy of its violence” (Butler xii–xiii). It is common knowledge that WWI marks the beginning of what will become “image propaganda” (“Le vrai contre le faux,” Gervereau 91). Thus it is potent that Owen’s poetry is very descriptive of the specificity of war, its weapons, both mechanical and chemical, their effects on the human body and psychology. Those were, of course, absent from state propaganda, and I would agree with Butler that with regard to the normative images chosen by the State, these censored images form “a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance” (xiii). They do so even more convincingly, I would think, as they are seen through the ‘eyes’ of the reader’s imagination, thus avoiding the pitfalls that “graphic depictions can sometimes do no more than [lead to] sensationalism and episodic outrage” (Butler xiv).³ Moreover, the reader is given the space to own these images mentally – almost physically – by means of a profound appeal to his/her senses. This is, I believe, the strength of poetry as opposed to photography and film, as it enables “a normative evaluation of a war” in Butler’s terminology, so that the public can indeed question the validity of such an enterprise (xv). It therefore seems redundant, to come back to our discussion of Paxman’s documentary, that the image of gassed soldiers is shown as the poem is read out, as it cancels its suggestively poignant effect and reduces it to “graphic depiction.” In this sense, this documentary perfectly exemplifies contemporary image-oriented and performance-oriented culture, as the reading of poems is always accompanied by photographic images, documentary footage, or re-enactment, as if poetry – on its own – were no longer sufficient to convey the message.

Moreover, Butler believes, as I do, that “[t]here is no thinking and judgement without the senses, and there is no thinking and judgement about war without the senses assuming a social form [...]. Waging war in some ways begins with the assault on the senses; the senses are the first target of war” (xvi). Paxman’s comment that Owen embodied the opposition between war and poetry, a core idea of his argument, reflects the belief that poetry becomes a part of the framing – or rather the re-framing of war. The tension between war and poetry is ‘embodied’ in Owen’s tribute to the men who fought and his anger against “the armchair generals and war-mongers who sent young men off to die,” his dignifying and celebrating of “those who had to do the fighting.”

³ I am talking here about the difference between the passive ‘seeing’ of photographic or film images and an ‘imagining’ of the scene described in the case of poetry, which forces the reader to become emotionally and ethically involved.

The appreciation and resonance of Owen's poetry with contemporary soldiers is illustrated in the documentary with an interview with Major Justin Featherstone, an Iraq war veteran and recipient of the Military Cross, who remarks: "[H]e speaks with an honest, almost blunt vision of what being a soldier is about." This is also eloquently articulated in Paxman's conclusion:

It was not until the 1960s that Owen's poetry really gained popularity. His unflinching depiction of war spoke powerfully to the protest generation. But these poems speak to every generation which chooses to listen. [...] What Owen does is to enable us to understand that war is about more than the strategies of generals or the manufactured animosity of politicians. His lasting memorial is to enable us to understand the human experience of war, in short, the pity of war.

To illustrate this point, a photograph of the soldiers in Owen's battalion, the 2nd Manchesters, is shown in the documentary. In this group portrait, while the feeling of camaraderie between the men is palpable, the soldiers look exhausted and ragged.⁴

This type of war photograph, the one which avoids the graphic depiction of war itself, is particularly poignant. According to Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, the photographic image is already beyond the present moment to convey the pathos of past times. It "does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (85). It is, by its very nature, located in history, but in this very specific instance it is also looking implicitly at the perspective of death, it almost acts as one entry in the visual diary of the narrative of death, something the documentary does not fail to exploit. This point is also made by Susan Sontag in *On Photography*: "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (70). This haunting resonance, it would seem, would produce in the viewer an understanding of the vulnerability and finite nature of human life. Then this characteristic of Jacques Derrida's concept of "absolute pastness," to be applied here to the photograph, would be the condition for the grievability of its subjects, whose lives are in the process of non-being, and therefore for the compassion of the viewer towards the afore-mentioned subjects. This in itself could be quite a political outcome for the photograph. Indeed, the photograph can be an "invitation [...] to pay attention, reflect [...] examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers" (Sontag 117). However, like Laurent Gervereau in *Les Images qui mentent*,

⁴ Later in the documentary, Paxman would explain Owen's emphatic description of his friendship and respect in his last letter to his mother a few days before his death when sheltering in a forester's house in Ors.

I believe that there is a remedial dialogue between image and text, an exclusive efficiency of the pair of image and text, whether the latter is written or spoken (cf. 312–313). True understanding can only come from narrative, explanation and information, and this is beautifully demonstrated by both Hooper's documentary and MacKinnon's film.

The effectiveness of both films derives from their structure, following what André Bazin has termed the "ideological documentary of montage," whose "aim is less to present than to demonstrate," since "[it has] the flexibility and precision of language." In this method, images and text are treated as raw materials that are re-arranged so as to demonstrate the desired argument (Bazin 34). Of course, in the case of propaganda, this is a 'dangerous' technique, as it "lends the logical structure of discourse to the images and the credibility and evidence of the photographic image to the discourse. The viewer has the illusion of being present at a visual demonstration, when it is in fact only a sequence of [fragmentary views] which are held together only by the cement of the accompanying words" (Bazin 35). In the documentary, however, this method leads to a convincingly humanist message, whose foundation of evidently well-researched information lends an aura of objectivity to what is shown. The use of photographs, footage, and re-enactment as well as poetry enables the viewer to share the journalist's anti-war views.

In both *Remembrance Tale* and *Regeneration*, the year Owen spent at Craiglockhart is foregrounded as the most formative period of his life. In April 1917, Paxman explains, Owen was on the front line to hold a railway line as a German shell struck the embankment and projected him into the air only to land him amidst the scattered remains of a close friend. Following the incident, Owen suffered from shell-shock. The documentary shows images of suffering patients, demonstrating how the "body simply could not take the stress of intense modern warfare any longer." According to Professor Edgar Jones from the Maudsley Hospital in London, which was set up in January 1916 for the purpose of treating shell-shocked cases, neurasthenia involves a range of very extreme symptoms: "tremor, shakiness, loss of sensations, headaches, general loss of nerves," which, as the documentary images demonstrate, affects body functions so severely that it is a struggle to walk or even stand. We also learn from *Regeneration* that mutism was another symptom, and as it was considered to be a sign of blocked memory, hypnosis was used following Freud's lead. Professor Edgar Jones explained that it originated from the constant thought of losing one's life as well as tension between performing one's duty and saving one's life. The soldier, therefore, unconsciously created symptoms in order to leave the front line. Some early treatments were monstrous, pitiless and inhuman, including the application of electric shock. Dr Yealland in London, for instance, terrified the soldiers

to restore their function, as the pain of the jolt was hoped to be worse than the fear of going back to the front. Owen was luckier as he was treated in the progressive Craiglockhart Hospital for officers near Edinburgh. While innovative Dr H. J. Brock used occupational therapy to reconnect the soldiers with their natural environment and the idea of friendship, he encouraged Owen to edit the hospital magazine *Hydra* and write again. With this method, he rightly hoped, Owen would confront the horrors of war and re-live his nightmares in poetry as part of his recovery process. According to Paxman, “the saving of Owen’s sanity was really the making of him as a poet.” This period of intense creativity was also enhanced by his meeting with Siegfried Sassoon, who assisted him redrafting the poem, substituted “doomed” for “dead,” and found the well-known by-name of “patient minds.” (The amended manuscript copy, in both men’s handwriting, may be found at the British Library, as indicated in Paxman’s visit there.)

In *Regeneration*, the focus is on the despair and anguish of the patients suffering from shell-shock. The preferred method of William H. Rivers is to encourage the officers to speak about their nightmares and hallucinations. The viewer of the film is thus confronted with horrors of war through his/her own imagined images, which I believe puts into practice again the internalisation of our senses discussed earlier. In one sequence, for instance, we learn of Burns, who cannot eat because of his memory of rotten flesh, or of the experience of having to live with the skulls of dead soldiers embedded in a trench. In this manner, the viewer is completely immersed with the sensual engagement necessary for a more profound understanding of the war.⁵ Throughout the films, there are short sequences which deal with the issues raised earlier, such as the opposition between war and poetry; the “terrifying, noisy, suicidal” military strategy [sic] which would let soldiers walk in broad daylight while being shot at and which would eventually sacrifice, according to Prior, “15,000 lives” – some as young as 17, with asthma or even tuberculosis – “for an advance of 500 yards of mud”; the social-class hierarchy of the army – which would even be reflected in the psychological symptoms of suffering patients; the compassionate portrayal of neurasthenia as a mental wound, as opposed to the military presentation of it as a weakness; the issue of the lack of recognition of the soldier’s individuality. In the film, the latter point is carefully being re-addressed by Sassoon and Prior, who both make sure that they name and identify their victim friend, whose dying circumstances have triggered hallucinations and mutism. The film, however, pushes these ideas even further with the character of Prior, who, formerly mute, becomes the most virulently outspoken of all the patients. In an argument reminiscent of Antonin Artaud’s “Van

5 Except in the case of Prior’s trauma, whose cause is shown to the viewer in very graphic details.

Gogh: the Man Suicided by Society,” he reverses the general consensus, arguing for the madness of the war decision-makers.

Paxman explains how Owen decided to join up and train as both a soldier and an officer following the “frantic recruitment campaign” initiated by British War Minister Lord Kitchener to attract volunteers, and the propaganda onslaught, with the popular press filled with patriotic slogans and “jingoist tosh” about a war that would end by Christmas. Paxman adds that Owen was concerned that a German victory would threaten English culture, and he wanted to save the language of Keats and Shakespeare. This is the most important piece of information given by Paxman about Owen’s motivations for enlisting, as the war was indeed propagated as a “liberation war.” Butler’s statement about the necessity to define the criteria used for the validity and justifiability of current conflicts waged in the Middle-East in order to develop an efficient opposition applies here: WWI was thought to be “an inevitability,” “or even a source of moral satisfaction,” and it is in this sense that popular support was then being “cultivated and maintained” (ix). It was also the reason why it was such a difficult war to oppose. Siegfried Sassoon’s example is telling: as a recognised poet and officer decorated with the Military Cross, he publicly condemned the on-going conflict as a “war of aggression and conquest” in his “Public Statement of Defiance” in July 1917. In order to avoid court-martial, he was transferred to Craiglockhart. Sassoon was thus effectively silenced, his case clearly showing the power of the State to ‘neutralize’ anti-war sentiment. In fact, Sassoon was rebelling against the artifice of what Butler defines as “victimisation”:

If a particular subject considers her- or himself to be by definition injured or indeed persecuted, then whatever acts of violence such a subject commits cannot register as ‘doing injury,’ since the subject who does them is, by definition, precluded from doing anything but suffering injury. As a result, the production of the subject on the basis of its injured status then produces a permanent ground for legitimating (and disavowing) its own violent actions. (179)

Moreover, both Owen and Sassoon were aware of the ambivalence of their moral position when, while strongly against the war, they decided, after their stay at Craiglockhart, to go back to the front to fulfil their duty to protect the soldiers under their command – a decision which is made very explicit in both the documentary and film. Such an act demonstrates that they understood the clear distinction “between (a) that injured and rageful subject who gives moral legitimacy to rageful and injurious conduct, thus transmuting aggression into virtue, and (b) that injured and rageful subject who nevertheless seeks to limit the injury that she or he causes, and can do so only through an active struggle with and against aggression” (Butler 172).

However, I would further emphasize a point which is not made in the documentary, and only alluded to in the film, namely that both Owen and Sassoon also had some unconscious reasons to go back to the front, which can only be explained by survivor's guilt. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud allocates the role of the super-ego to the process of internalising and transforming the lost other as a recriminating voice. This voice then speaks exactly what the ego would have said to the other if the latter had stayed alive (cf. 243–258). This dialogue is precisely what is at play in “Strange Meeting,” whose following lines best exemplify this point:

“Strange friend,” I said, “Here is no cause to mourn.”
 “None,” said the other, “Save the undone years,
 The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
 Was my life also; I went hunting wild
 After the wildest beauty in the world,
 Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
 But mocks the steady running of the hour,
 And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here” (*The Poems* 125).

For Emmanuel Levinas, ethical responsibility originates from an anxiety, itself due to an ambivalent choice which continues to be unresolved. This ambiguity could have been settled through the acceptance of the predominant choice – in this case, the one of killing, but instead, it gives rise to an ethical choice that seeks to preserve life rather than destroy it:

There is an anxiety of responsibility that is incumbent on everyone in the death or suffering of the other (*autrui*). The fear of everyone for themselves in the mortality of everyone does not succeed in *absorbing* the gravity of murder committed and the scandal of indifference to the suffering of the other (*autrui*). Behind the danger that everyone runs for themselves in an insecure world, there dawns the consciousness of the immediate immorality of a culture and a history. (164)

Moreover, following Theodor Adorno one has to be aware that war and violence waged in the name of peace and civilisation may reveal their own barbarism, even when they are rationalised by assuming and sometimes constructing the savage impulses and human inferiority of the “enemy”:

The affront against taste and consideration, from which no good act is exempt, completes the leveling, which the powerless utopia of the beautiful opposes. From the beginnings of mature industrial society, the allegiance to evil was not only the precursor of barbarism, but also a mask of the good. Its dignity passed over to evil, by drawing all hatred and all resentment of the social order to itself, an order which drilled the good into its members, so that it could be evil without punishment. (88)