Backdrop of War: WW I Through the Cinematic Lens

Thomas E. Graham, Georgia Perimeter College, USA  
Paul Gaustad, Georgia Perimeter College, USA

Abstract: We are quickly approaching the 100 year anniversary of the world’s first “Great War.” World War I has often been called the forgotten war—or worse, the neglected war. In the 20th Century, the world was embroiled in two horrible World Wars. Of the two, the Second World War had a more obvious set of goals and objectives. The nearly 1000 films about that conflict never questioned the rationale for war. In direct contrast, the rationale for WWI, the Great War of 1914-1918, was markedly unclear. We have found that there are virtually no pro-WWI films made in the nearly 90 years since that conflict ended. Of the approximately 130 films made that used the Great War, there are few films that attempt to present reasons for going to war. By the 1920s, the entire western world had a chance to examine the rationale for war and found that the war had accomplished nothing other than wanton destruction. From this moment forward, filmmakers used the Great War as means to promote an agenda beyond the real scope of that conflict. WWI became a mere backdrop. Our research reveals that films on WWI can be divided into four thematic categories. The first three reflect the general negative reaction of the Great War: (1) the Folly of War, (2) Comrades-in-Arms, (3) Romance and Adventure. The fourth theme reflects a significant shift in attitude. By 1940, war was now necessary to crush the evil of Fascism. As a result, the fourth theme– (4) Propaganda for World War II -- manipulated the facts of the great struggle of the First World War to justify a rationale for entering and winning the Second World War. In analyzing these films we get a clearer image and understanding of how history, the arts, and audiences have viewed that horrible bloodbath in the 90 years since.

Keywords: World War I, cinema, history, audiences

1. Introduction

This past November 11th of 2009 marked the 91st anniversary of the “war to end all wars.” Over 65 million served in uniform during World War I. Approximately 9 million died and over 20 million were wounded or missing during that bloody conflict. Today, there is one living American veteran of that war: Frank Buckles who lied about his age so he could serve in the U.S. Army. Worldwide, there are, according to the best surveys, nine additional living veterans. All living veterans are 100 years old and older and will soon depart from this life. When they die, they will be the last link to what many regard as the first significant event of the 20th C.

While historians and political scientists who have studied this war are fully aware of the historical significance of the Great War of 1914-18, the public in general, and our students in particular, rarely if ever, remember this horrible and bloody conflict. World War I has become a
forgotten war, or worse, one seen as either quaint or meaningless to the current times. In fact, this war is the first domino in a chain of major events of the 20th Century: Bolshevism, Fascism, World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and de-Colonialism, all of which caused the deaths of hundreds of millions across the globe over the last 90 years. Thus, World War I needs to be remembered and understood by every generation. Our paper on World War I focuses on what filmmakers have done to help and/or hinder an awareness, understanding and appreciation of this War.

The 20th Century experienced two horrible and bloody World Wars. Of the two, the Second World War was not only larger in scope but also much more destructive to life and property. Current estimates of fatalities in World War II “range from 35,000,000 to 60,000,000--a statistical difference of no small import” (http://history-orld.org/world war two casualties.htm) versus the number of “WW I casualties which amounts to about 40 million, 19 million were deaths and 21 million wounded. This figure includes 9.7 million military deaths and 10 million civilian deaths. The allied Powers lost 5 million soldiers and the Central Powers lost 4 million. These figures are, however, debatable due to the fact that military casualty statistics also include combat-related deaths as well as deaths caused by accidents, disease and being a prisoner of war.” (http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org/examples/world%20war1/ww1%20pages/casualties.html).

The Second World War had a more obvious set of goals and objectives. The leaders of World War II are viewed as either good men defending civilization or evil men attempting to destroy it. In contrast, the rationale for World War I was markedly unclear--beyond the desires for territory and power—it was compounded by an irrational and extreme level of nationalism and assorted alliances, which clouded the thinking of leaders and the common citizens alike. Looking back on WW I, we see neither good men nor evil ones. Instead, we are shocked by the insanity of this unnecessary conflict which caused so much death and destruction and also by the inability of the various leaders to find a way to end the conflict much earlier.

Specifically during both wars, filmmakers produced a series of pro-war films meant to enhance popular support for both conflicts. In the decades following WWII, nearly all of the approximately 1000 films about that conflict, never really questioned the rationale for World War II. On the other hand, we have found that there are virtually no pro World War I films made in the nearly 90 years since World War I ended. Of the approximately 130 films made that utilized this Great War at some level, we have found that no post-war films attempted to present serious justifications for going into that war or remaining in that bloody stalemate. Any pro-war films were generally short silent movies, some of which often included documentary footage that were made during the war or in the months immediately after the Armistice of November 1918.

During the First World War, all belligerent powers, including the United States, placed heavy restrictions on all forms of freedom of speech. By the 1920s, however, the entire western world had a chance to examine the rationale for war and found that the war had accomplished nothing other than wanton destruction and a total waste of human life. Leaders had made big
promises of a better world through victory on the battlefield, but it was obvious to all that the promises were nothing more than empty platitudes which wasted the lives of nearly 10 million young men. From this Mid-1920s forward, filmmakers used the Great War as means to promote an agenda beyond the real scope of that conflict, a “backdrop” to a personal agenda which does little to help us understand the nature of the conflict but does manage to fill theatre seats with moviegoers eager to see their favorite actors in a good story.

Rather than focusing on World War I itself as a historical event with causation and impact on future history, filmmakers have chosen to use the Great War of 1914-18 as a backdrop for other purposes. Noticeably absent are films that deal with the historical event itself, with its causation, and with its impact on future world events. Our research has found that the feature-length films with reference to WWI can be divided into four thematic categories. The first three reflect the general attitudes of the Twenties and Thirties. The categories are:

1. The Folly of War
2. Comrades-in-Arms
3. Romance and Adventure.

The fourth category focuses strictly on the Second World War era. As the world headed toward war again after 1938, filmmakers began to rethink the folly of war. By 1941, war was now necessary to crush the evil of Fascism. As a result, there is a fourth theme, one that manipulated the great struggle of the First World War to justify a rationale for entering and winning the Second World War. Thus, the fourth category focuses on the use of feature-lengths about:

4. WWI as pro-war propaganda for WWII.

The fourth theme posits that these movies were merely another fodder for patriotism. While all films emphasize one of our 4 thematic categories, many films bleed over to one or more of the other themes as well.

2. Setting Parameters

In analyzing these films, the viewer not only gets a clearer image of the events of the Great War but also a better understanding of how history, the arts, filmmakers, and audiences view the horrible events of the First World War. In setting some parameters, the challenge has been to determine what films are within, and which are beyond the scope of our project. Additionally, there is a need to justify these boundaries as valid. So, the following films and genres will not be analyzed: (a.) made for Television shows, (b.) science-fiction movies, (c.) wartime propaganda films, and (d.) Nazi films or Soviet “Agitprop” films (Propaganda, especially pro-communist political propaganda disseminated through literature, drama, music, or art).

By definition, any propaganda film is meant to sway opinion without the benefit of counter-argument in a free society. Wartime documentaries will also not be included. Documentaries, in the context of our project, are viewed as an entirely unique method of filmmaking that essentially films real events as they actually occur and typically does not use actors, scripts, rehearsals, etc.
Often, documentary films are made for use as informative texts consisting of a collection of images from archival sources. Our interest is with commercial fiction films distributed through traditional theatrical venues; made in a free society by filmmakers, screenwriters, and utilizing actors.

What is the very nature of the war film produced for the entertainment of the general public? Films produced during and after the Second World War reminded the audience that Fascism is an evil which must be destroyed for the good of humanity. Movies about World War I, however, lack this truth; instead these films shift the focus to other issues, often using World War I merely as a cinematic backdrop.

3. Folly of War

The WWI films of this category deal with anti war themes. The pain and disillusionment of the war is made evident by the killing, carnage, and ideological confusion present within the contexts of WWI. It is the futility of war, its ideological indifference, the loss and confusion that is presented in World War I films that fall into this theme. However, if we leave our definition here, we shall be doing a disservice. This category may be the most obvious of the four themes, but it is more complex than first assumed. We have found the “folly of war” needs to be subdivided into two subsets which provide a clearer comprehension of the bitterness about the failures of the Great War. One subset focuses on the anti-war decade of the 1920s. After the failure of the Treaty of Versailles to bring lasting peace, Europe and America sought to provide other means to prevent a return to needless conflict.

By 1928, there was a culmination of this anti-war sentiment with the drafting of the Kellogg-Briand Pact which called on all signatory nations to denounce war as an instrument of government. While it may seem understandable now, the Kellogg-Briand Pact reflected a sentiment that all wars are wasteful. As a result, there are a host of films which reflect this anti-war sentiment. A minority of other filmmakers were not so extreme in their desires to denounce all wars as unnecessary. Our second subset focuses on the few films, notably British, which attempted to preserve the honor of the sacrifices made by the soldiers in the trenches.

For this theme we will focus on what is probably the most famous of all anti-war films: “All Quiet on the Western Front” (1930). The film is based upon the 1929 novel by Erich Maria Remarque, who served in the German Army during the war. The film was directed by Lewis Milestone and won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture of 1930. Though often seen in grainy black-and-white, this film has stood the test of time. We have used this film in our college Learning Community class, History Through Film (jointly taught classes which combine both World History and Film Appreciation), as part of a battery of four films on the topic of World War I. We were surprised that our students like this film over more recent films because of its authenticity and its no holds-barred approach.

Both the novel and film begin with the following comment:
“This story is neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped it shells, were destroyed by the war.”

*(All Quiet on the Western Front, Directed by Lewis Milestone, 1930, Universal Studios)*

At the beginning of the film, the main character, Paul (played by Lew Ayers, a conscientious objector during WWII) is listening intently to his teacher promote reasons why a brave and loyal German must volunteer to fight for his country. Inspired to believe that war will be glorious, Paul volunteers only to discover that war is not as promised by his teacher. In the filth, disease, sickness, and hunger of the trench, Paul discovers that war numbs the mind to the daily reality of arbitrary death. At the front, the new recruits learn to survive by doing things that they could not imagine only months earlier.

Two moments require special note. After months of surviving in the horrors of trench warfare, Paul is given a leave. At home, he returns to his old class to hear his former teacher still spewing the same patriotic lines to get other young men to volunteer. When Paul challenges these meaningless slogans, he is called an idler and a traitor.

The second moment comes when Paul briefly shares a shell hole in No Man’s Land with a dying French soldier. Afterwards, Paul becomes numb to feelings even when he is ordered to make pointless frontal assaults against entrenched machine gun nests. The final scenes of the film open with Paul carrying his wounded comrade back to the Aid Station. There, we see the medical personnel playing cards, indifferent--or perhaps, numb-- to the array of dead and wounded men within the first aid station. In the closing scene, as the soldiers march away to face further battle, some look back at the camera. Each is the face of a soldier who died during the course of the film as if to say, “Remember me.”

4. Comrades-in-Arms

Films within this category focus on the virtues and values of loyalty, honor, and respect for the fellow warrior. The themes of brotherhood and compassion for a fellow warrior far outweigh any ideological differences of the characters. What do the “Comrades” have in common? It is the support and concern for each other and the loyalty to the unit--while WWI is presented as the backdrop for the characters to perform. The combatants are brothers under the sea, on the ground, and in the sky during war, particularly this Great War. It is a case of compassion for one’s ideological brother, fellow combatant: in the trenches, in the air, or in the field, sometimes quite literally, dying in the arms of a caring comrade. There is a commonality and a sharing of experiences that propel the comrades in arms theme.

Fighting an enemy who is doing the same brings a shared sensibility. Sharing and living in the same barracks shared by pilots, or in the cramped quarters at sea, or in the same trench for the soldier can bring an intimacy, a sense of brotherhood, a level of respect, and a feeling of
camaraderie. There often becomes a “We are all in this together” attitude. This theme is more easily understood by dividing into 3 subsets: Aviation, Sea, and Trench Warfare.

Focusing on Aviation, the 1927 film “Wings” is well suited. Former WWI military pilot, William Wellman, directs this major Paramount production, which becomes the very first movie to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. It is a story about two young men Jack (Charles “Buddy” Rogers) and David (Richard Arlen) whose competition and contention over a girl, Sylvia (Jobyna Ralston) soon evolves into respect and comradeship as they do aerial battle with the Germans in the clouds over France. At first the two are rivals who have little use for each other but in the contrivances of the script they evolve and grow to love and respect each other during basic training. Their friendship endures women (including Clara Bow as Mary) and the Germans—until one of the friends (David) is shot down and is incorrectly presumed to be killed. David quickly recovers, steals a German biplane, and flies it back toward the Allied territories. The other friend (Jack) goes on a vengeful killing rampage shooting every German biplane in his sights to avenge the presumed death of his comrade in arms. In the fog of battle Jack inadvertently shoots down his good friend’s German plane—leading to the poignant death (literally in his arms) of his friend. Thus we view Wings as a tragic tale of mistaken identity, friendship and, ultimately, love. We learn that a soldier’s best friend is not his weapon but his fellow soldier. For every comrade in arms theme there is little more than fear and death and an end to dreams of family, love and future.

6. Romance and Adventure

Movies have often used wars and military conflicts juxtaposed against love, romance, and adventure stories. The heat of battle has often fueled the passion of lovers alongside the backdrop of war—literally any war. It has served Hollywood well throughout the cinematic ages. Wartime can be a time of encountering great danger. Filled with risk, often a sense of excitement of being part of something bigger than ordinary life, to engage in daring undertakings accompanied with a heightened sense of danger there often comes a heightened sense of passion. Tales of extraordinary events filled with imagination and idealization allows escape from the realities of ordinary life. Like the other major categories of film on World War I, a simple list of films would not provide an easy means to comprehend the breadth of topics. Thus, romance and adventure must be subdivided into at least 3 subsets: Spy plots, daring adventure plots, and as a setting for love and romance in terrible times of war.

From the long line of romance and adventure films, let us focus on, “The African Queen” (1951) directed by John Huston and based upon the 1935 novel by C.S. Forester. It won the Academy Award for its star, Humphrey Bogart, and was nominated for 3 more. It tells the story of two British citizens (the Bogart character is Canadian) trapped in colonial German East Africa. At first, the two main characters, Charlie (Humphrey Bogart) and Rose (Katherine Hepburn), strike us as two unimportant souls lost in the back regions of East Africa. With the coming of war in 1914, they decide to join forces to use Charlie’s open launch, The African Queen, to destroy the only real source of German naval power in the area, a steam-powered gunboat.
In an early scene in the film, Charlie announces that Europe is at war but has only the vaguest notion of which nations have actually gone to war. Clearly, Charlie has no understanding of the causes of war and wants only to sit it out until hostilities cease. After the Germans cause her brother’s (Robert Morley) death, Rose convinces Charlie to turn his launch into a mobile torpedo to destroy the German gunboat which is protecting a major lake against a British counterattack. At first, Charlie argues that navigating the river is impossible because of dangerous rapids, German fortresses, and impassible swamps. However, Rose pressures Charlie to agree to the adventure. Risking danger at every turn on the river, they become more than wartime allies. Shedding their pre-war status of insignificant persons, they become lovers committed to prosecuting the war in their own fashion and for their own personal motives.

After meeting all the challenges along the river, Charlie and Rose attack the anchored gunboat during a terrible storm. The African Queen cannot handle the storm and sinks. Charlie believes that he has not only lost the love of his life but also failed in his mission. In the final scene aboard the German gunboat with the German officers asking Charlie what he was doing on the water. Seeing no reason to continue on living, Charlie gives only evasive and misleading answers. Surprisingly, through a series of unlikely plot contrivances and convenient timing, the African Queen, not completely sunk, succeeds in the sinking of the German gunship. Successful in their mission and now wedded, we can only assume that Charlie and Rose will live out their lives knowing that they have accomplished a great feat of daring do and found their life partner in the process. While we are aware that World War I is the backdrop to the film, the story is of two little people doing an extraordinary thing in a time of crisis, pushing World War I into the background. Forester and Houston need a war and World War I was conveniently available.

7. Propaganda for WWII

It is within this select group of films (Yankee Doodle Dandy, 1942; This is the Army, 1943; The Iron Major, 1943; For Me and My Gal, 1942; Sergeant York, 1941; and others) that pride, nationalism, and love for one’s country during WWI is exploited and heartened to the strains of (among others) Warner Bros’ music and the patriotic lyrics of George M. Cohan’s “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “Over There.” These films are the fodder for enlistment and support of the war efforts of WW II. These films are made to instill a love of country and Americana, the patriotic fervor necessary to inspire enlistees and generate support for America’s involvement in that other Great War, WWII.

For this theme the focus is on Michael Curtiz’ “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” the 1942 Warner Bros. biography of actor, dancer, writer, producer, and song writer, George M. Cohan as portrayed by James Cagney, in his Academy Award winning performance. In a scene that comes midpoint within the film, the audience, both of the military personnel in the film, and the audience watching the movie, are encouraged to participate in the patriotic fervor of Cohan’s well known song, “Over There”. As Cagney encourages the audience (and the viewer as he breaks the fourth wall) to join in, one cannot contain the urge to shout and sing in the support of flag and country and the current war, which in this film clip is WWI. Twenty years later, Yankee Doodle Dandy was made during those terrible days of 1942 when the Axis powers were conquering territories
and driving back the Allies to the brink of destruction. A much older George M. Cohan (Cagney), after being presented with the Congressional (Gold) Medal of Honor by FDR, marches anonymously in a supportive military parade and is asked if he even “knows” the words to “Over There,”? And at peak pitch, a tearful George M. Cohan (James Cagney) joins in another rousing rendition of “Over There” as American soldiers march off to another “great” war. In this case it is to support the film’s current war, WW II.

Conclusion

Filmmakers have not truly examined the causes of the Great War but instead used that war as a convenient backdrop for their agendas or causes. The focus here is of a void in the field of study on film and World War I. Earlier works tended to focus on specific films or perhaps schools of thought or genres. Other historians have focused on films from specific countries or films produced from specific time periods. The hope here is to bridge all these earlier works while at the same provide a larger umbrella for use by the scholar of World War I. Rather than view the war, there is a more pointed focus on the themes of (1) The Folly of War, (2) Comrades-in-Arms, (3) Romance and Adventure in time of a war, and (4) Propaganda used to support the war effort during World War II.

Endnotes


http://history-world.org/world_war_two_casualties.htm

http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org/examples/world%20war1/ww1%20pages/casualties.html

Feature-lengths films on World War I


