

War Narratives of “All Quiet on the Western Front”

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Abstract: This article commences by exploring the renowned novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque, offering a concise introduction to three film adaptations derived from it. It emphasizes the achievements of these adaptations and their societal impact during their respective eras. The subsequent section conducts an in-depth evaluation of a new cinematic adaptation, dissecting its strengths and weaknesses. The author's perspectives primarily revolve around three key aspects: firstly, the article delves into the distinctive narrative perspectives and the desired emotional impacts conveyed through the use of third-person viewpoints in the films. Secondly, it scrutinizes the various artistic techniques employed, such as the immersive qualities of panoramic cinematography, the unconventional use of colors that distinguish it from typical war-themed films, and the occasionally unique, and at times eccentric, musical scores. Lastly, the article undertakes an analysis from the viewpoint of German filmmakers, seeking to comprehend the reasons behind significant alterations made to the original source material.

Keywords: war narrative, anti-heroism, german cinema

1. Introduction

All Quiet on the Western Front, authored by Erich Maria Remarque, a German veteran of World War I, was published in late January 1929. Regarded as one of the most formidable anti-war literary creations, it found significant popularity in the European market as a bestseller. The narrative unveils the harrowing journey of a young soldier who initially embraced military duty with fervent patriotism, only to confront the grim realities and traumas inflicted by the Western Front. The novel's literary triumph has garnered considerable attention from filmmakers across the past century.

In subsequent years, specifically 1930, 1979, and 2022, the story bore witness to three distinct cinematic adaptations, each garnering commendation and leaving an indelible mark on the annals of film history. These adaptations, born of different eras, exhibited remarkable variations in their portrayal of war narratives. This article embarks on a critical analysis of the war narrative within the 2022 adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Departing from the original novel's first-person perspective, this adaptation, produced by German director, showcased another approach to the World War I. The crux of this article delves into an examination of the narrative viewpoint, thematic elements, and the visual aesthetic of the film. This research aims at discerning how the

portrayal of war scenes in *All Quiet on the Western Front* has been reimagined in this specific war history and to explore the artistic possibilities of war narrative in contemporary cinema.

2. Literature Review

In “Narratology,” Gerald Prince defines “narration” as “the telling of real or fictional events and states within a temporal sequence [1].” War narration, with a thematic reference, refers to a series of narratives centered around the event of war, possessing profound historicity and ideological significance [1]. For a long period after the end of World War I, the shadow of the war lingered, and the impact of the war on people’s lives gradually made writers and artists realized that the war was not the “great war” portrayed in political propaganda. The soldiers deeply scarred by the traumas of war, unable to reintegrate into society, also prompted those who hadn’t experienced the war to recognize its brutality and to begin contemplating its meaning [2]. It was under these circumstances that autobiographical literary works began to emerge, such as Edmund Blunden’s autobiographical novel *Undertones of War* (1928), Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* (1929), Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* (1928), and Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* (1933). These works retold the history of World War I for the public from the perspective of participating soldiers. They sharply contrasted with the official media’s glorification and embellishment of the war, questioning and subverting the political and authoritative discourse behind the wartime narrative.” [2] Among them, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a war narrative literary work born precisely in this context, depicting the cruelty of war and the trauma it inflicts on humanity through the author’s firsthand war experiences. War narrative films can depict scenes from wars or convey the emotions and effects of war. It captures both the grandeur of battles and the intimate moments of human suffering, resilience, and courage. The films of *All Quiet on the Western Front* are war narrative films which revolve around the experiences of Paul Bäumer, a young German soldier, during World War I. The narrative explores the brutal realities of war, the physical and emotional toll it takes on soldiers, and the disillusionment that arises from the contrast between patriotic ideals and the harshness of combat.

The first adaptation of the film was made in 1930, directed by Lewis Milestone and starring Lew Ayres, won the Best Picture and Best Director awards at the 3rd Academy Awards. It mercilessly shattered the “sacred” aura that imperialism had placed upon war, condemned the unjust wars of imperialism, and stands as one of the most influential anti-war films in the history of cinema [3]. The 1930 adaptation was released shortly after the end of the silent film era and during the early years of the sound film era. It was released just over a decade after World War I ended, which means that it was made with relatively fresh memories of the war. The film is in black and white, which was the standard for films of that era.

The second adaptation of the film was made in 1979, directed by Delbert Mann starring Richard Thomas and Ernest Borgnine. The film won the 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 a Special. The 1979 adaptation benefits from advanced filmmaking techniques, including color cinematography, more realistic sound design, and improved visual effects. This version provides more context for the characters’ experiences before and after the war, contributing to a richer understanding of their motivations and struggles.

The third adaptation was directed by Edward Berger – a German director, in 2022. The film adds a parallel storyline not found in the book, which follows the armistice negotiations to end the war. “*All Quiet on the Western Front* is one of the greatest works in German film history,” stated German Minister of Culture Claudia Roth on the 20th. The previous day’s announcement of the British Academy Film Awards saw the war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* winning seven major awards including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay, making it the

biggest winner. This is also the first time a non-English language film has achieved such remarkable success. This German-produced new version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* has not only received acclaim from the British audience but has also been nominated in several categories at the American Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Cinematography, and Best International Feature Film, making it a strong contender for this year's awards season. It's also the Germany's first-ever remake. The British newspaper *The Guardian* believes that besides its outstanding performances, *All Quiet on the Western Front* achieved great honor in the UK due to its timing of release, which "awakened our attention to the 'unsettled Eastern front,' just as the cautionary words of American writer Faulkner go: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past'" [4].

3. War Narrative in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

3.1. From the First-person Perspective to the Third-person Perspective: Retelling the War Story as an Observer

Whereas the novel of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is written from the first-person perspective, the German version of the film no longer narrates the story from the protagonist's eyes. Instead, the film presents the entire war story from a third-person point of view to the audience, by which the story could be unveiled from multiple plot lines.

Three implications of the shift in perspective could be identified.

First, the new version of the film placed a greater emphasis on visual intensity, depicting the war landscapes in details by which audience could see the scenes of pallid faces, pitch-black scorched earth, and deep red blood dominating the entire frame. Unlike the narrative in which Paul is the sole narrator, this cinematic adaptation exhibits a greater ambition to immerse the audience in the battlefield, rendering all bloody scenes and suffocating tank crushes with an eerily serene forest in an authentic manner. As a result, the narrator maintains a distance from emotions and sentiments. The absence of the narrator imparts a documentary nature to the story.

The third-person perspective also enables the introduction of new plot lines, which effectively unfolds various positions within the context of the war. In terms of the plot, the novel includes a plot where Paul visited home, using the first-person narrative to express Paul's personal sentiments to family and his nostalgia. However, this part was removed in the movie, and instead, negotiations between the two opposing armies. This addition conveys the theme of a ceasefire from a different viewpoint. This plotline is entirely presented from the third-person perspective, serving as a forceful critique of the procrastination of war decision-makers at the negotiation table. It also rebukes inept generals who, driven by a sense of false honor, led soldiers to launch a final attack before the ceasefire, ultimately sealed the fate of the protagonist, leaving the audience with a profound sense of sadness and anger, an effect that cannot be achieved in a first-person perspective.

What's more, the shift in perspective contributes to depict the war in a collective manner. In the cinematic version, Paul's friend, as the buddy of the protagonist, also plays a crucial role to unveil the emotional changes of young soldiers. Instead of reflecting the trauma of a single soldier, the director addresses the impact of the war on an entire generation. At the beginning of the movie, these young people's faces are glorious, their eyes are shining and they hail by raising their arms after the speech of the principal. They believe in the ideals of patriotism and honor, expecting their experience in the war to be heroic and glorious. With the progression of the plot, the audiences can feel Paul's transformation from initial excitement and eagerness to disappointment, sorrow, anger, numbness, and ultimately collapsing in the final moments of the ceasefire. Particularly impactful is the scene where Paul, even after being stabbed through the chest, continues to struggle and walk, gazing into the distance at the battlefield. The cruelty and ruthlessness of this image instantly evoke the audience's fear of war.

3.2. The Art of Death: The Cinematography of the War

Panoramic photography has been extensively utilized in the film to depict the whole picture of the battlefield. This panoramic photography is a type of wide-screen cinema. During filming, three cameras are interconnected, each capturing one-third of the wide image on separate 35-millimeter films. During projection, three projectors are used to simultaneously screen on a single wide screen, synthesizing the entire image, offering the audience a 146” horizontal field of view, akin to witnessing a “panorama,” and providing a more authentic sensation [5]. These grand and authentic scenes contribute to enriching the content of the scene, enhancing artistic expression, especially suitable for depicting natural landscapes, crowd scenes, and war scenes.

The “authenticity” of Remarque’s novel lies in a dimension of individual experience, but the third adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* transforms it into a widescreen panoramic mode. In addition to providing a concrete portrayal of the panoramic array and battlefield suppression (including the crushing of the living bodies/corpses, and the camera panning over the protagonist’s head from the trenches), this tank battle segment alternates with long shots of military commanders’ distant perspectives and discussions of negotiations representing peace, aiming to achieve a macroscopic simultaneity. This does indeed achieve a visual grandeur, which excites both the filmmakers and a portion of the audience. However, at the same time, the core of this adapted work drifts further away from Remarque’s original concepts [6].

In addition, the film presents panoramic scenes with static shot. To depict forests, wolf dens, mountains, snowy landscape and woods via a fixed angle shot, the director leave a room for audience’s imagination and interpretation. The overall color palette of the visuals leans towards a cool color palette with dark blue undertone, interspersed with a pallid light, evoking a somber sensation. Many other war-themed movie scenes, a prevalent depiction is the vivid red of fresh blood. However, in this film, the scenes of bloodshed are portrayed with an intense, dark red hue. On the contrary, the glaring color is the stark, pale complexion illuminated by the intense white light reflection. Ironically, the scenes of negotiations between the French and the Germans officers appear much more amicable: with exquisite tableware, tidy attire, and beautifully adorned train carriages, make it the stark contrast to the backdrop of incessant frontline artillery fire. Military negotiations aim to present a multi-dimensional panorama of war politics. Through the alternating narrative and contrast between the high-ranking military officials and the lower-level soldiers, a more macroscopic perspective is created. This exposes that war is merely a game and a tool for political elites to achieve their own political agendas and personal gains by exploiting the lower ranks. This setup is used to accentuate the film’s core message of denouncing war and advocating against it [7].

Additionally, the artistic techniques for depicting panoramic scenes are also different. Comparing with the other two adaptations, in the new version of the film, there are no artistic strokes like the “capturing butterflies” from the 1930 edition and the “emulating larks” from the 1979 edition, completely severing the poetic connection between war and art. Faced with the brutality of war, picturesque artistic scenes lacks the power to transform it into a transcendent aesthetic imagination, leaving only lamentation and condemnation [8]. However, the film features various instances of serene blue-black forests with pallid light, isolated farmer’s house standing amidst vast expanses of glistening white snow, illuminating flares shooting up into the sky with a dazzling brightness, and scenes filled with charred branches and scattered corpses, creating a visually stunning and suffocating effect. These panoramic scrolls represent a facet of war narrative where individual experiences are stripped away, emphasizing the overall scope of the war.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the soundtrack of this film is highly distinctive. German composer Volker Bertelmann doesn’t rely on beautiful melodies to win over the audience; in fact,

his melodies are somewhat monotonous. He often employs orchestral arrangements that are ethereal, elusive, and extremely tense. Especially in the thematic melodies, there's a deep, resonant rhythm in the lower tones, akin to an ominous motive that permeates and controls the entire work from beginning to end. The atmosphere is solemn, oppressive, filled with a sense of inexorable fate, as if there's nowhere to escape during the intermittent lulls of war, conveying the mechanical relentlessness of the war machine and the bleakness of human life being as inconsequential as dust. The moment it enters audiences' ears, they will soon engage in the scene of the battlefield.

3.3. Remake History: German and Its Anti-heroism Perspective in War Narrative

What makes this movie an important piece among all the adaptations is that it is Germany's first remake of the novel - entirely produced by a German team, including the director, cast, and music production and German language, etc. Compared with other adaptations which were produced in America, this German version presents a more reserved attitude towards the war, and showcased an anti-heroism perspective in narration. The German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* has undergone greater changes compared to the two American versions, it reduced the psychological portrayal of Paul's journey to the battlefield, replacing it with visceral depictions of blood and gore. While the physical fragmentation is undoubtedly the most palpable harm war inflicts upon individuals, the deeper mental disarray strikes at the core of human beings, further illustrating the inherently anti-human nature of war [9]. The omission and absence of this aspect result in the new version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* appearing somewhat inadequate in its exploration of depth, which is truly regrettable.

For World War I, Americans did not play a leading role on the battlefield, while Germany was aggressor of War. For a German version of the novel to be created by the original German team holds extraordinary significance (especially a century after the end of WWI). Particularly in terms of the added perspectives of diplomats and generals negotiation, which carry a sense of introspection and self-examination. The Director of the film Edward Bergersaid, "Both the United States and the United Kingdom have been shaping heroes and defending themselves through war movies, but in German war films, there are no heroes, and there is no glorification of killing the enemy because in war, there are no victors, only survivors [10]."

4. Conclusions: Failure or Success

Although this film has garnered global reputation, precisely due to this reflection on history, Germans sacrificed relevant nuanced experiences in an operation marked by self-esteem, resistance, and insensitivity. In this German version of the film, why were many significant segments from the original work removed, such as Paul's visit home and the training of new recruits, while military negotiations were added? In a nation that has twice been defeated in wars, such as Germany, and in the backdrop of repeated critique and reflection on topics like war by German intellectuals, it's difficult for these subjects to be glorified once again [11]. Perhaps, this is precisely why the film refrains from depicting and interpreting heroism.

The third-person method used in the film presents stunning panoramic scenes, delivering a strong visual impact to the audience. However, it lacks individual descriptions, including depictions of personal psychology and highlighting individual performances. This, though, is precisely the director's deliberate arrangement. In short, what he intends to showcase is the harm inflicted by war on all of humanity, rather than depicting and emphasizing the individual traumas caused by war, let alone portraying individual heroism. It's a depiction method of hyper-realistic war narrative.

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