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Un long dimanche de fiançailles and Remembering la Somme 1916

“Those ‘Somme Pictures’ are the laughing-stock of the army—like the trenches on exhibition in Kensington. No-man’s land under snow is like the face of the moon: chaotic, crater ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.”—Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, in a letter to his mother, January 1917.¹

Preface: 100 years of *la Grande Guerre* themes in film

With the many centenary commemorations and remembrances of The Great War, the Seventh Art provides not only a window as to how the war has been depicted on the big screen over the years but also reflects the evolutions in our perception of it. First World War film scholar and professor at l’Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Laurent Véray generally divides that 100-year window into four periods in his *La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire*, beginning with the years 1914 to 1920 when most themes, with a few exceptions such as Abel Gance’s 1919 *J’accuse*, portrayed heroism and patriotism, mostly intended to keep national unity. 1925 to 1939 highlights a more reflective and pacifist period, and for the third he chooses Claude Autan-Lara’s 1947 *Diable au corps* (*Devil in the Flesh*) as signaling the beginning of a more critical, anti-conformist, even anti-traditionalist era that would end around 1970. In that

¹ Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, Edited C. Day Lewis (New York: New Directions, 1964) 160. Print.

era, he lists Kubrick's 1957 *Paths of Glory* as "une œuvre charnière," or a "pivotal masterpiece" (145), marking the apogee not only for that generation but also for the whole World War I film genre. At the end of it, however, and different from Kubrick, Véray refers to Dalton Trumbo's 1971 *Johnny Got His Gun* as a landmark and precursor film announcing the future genre, particularly in the way the movie poignantly portrays the physical and mental trauma in its most abysmal state: *Une épave humaine*, or a "human wreck," as he describes Joe Bonham (35).² A minor success in 1971, it was, however, the seed that would confirm the emergence of the fourth phase, what Véray calls the *sorties de guerre* genre, or the returning veterans' forever-changed lives. After Metallica's Grammy-award-winning antiwar music video in 1989, "One," whose story is interweaved with black and white clips from the antiwar movie, *Johnny Got His Gun* subsequently became a cult film.

Véray's present-day chapter begins in the early 1990s, coinciding with the deaths of the Great War's last veterans and the loss of first-hand witness accounts, and hence the brusque rupture in what he terms "*la transmission de la mémoire*" of the war for following generations (8). Beginning with Bertrand Tavernier's 1989 *La Vie et rien d'autre* (*Life and Nothing But*) and then followed by Tavernier's 1997 *Capitaine Conan*, François Dupeyron's 2001 *La Chambre des officiers* (*The Officers' Ward*), and Gabriel Le Bomin's 2006 *Les Fragments d'Antonin*, it is dominated by the theme of mourning and irreparable post-war scars that never heal, and within that theme Jean-Pierre Jeunet's 2004 *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (*A Very Long Engagement*) touches on the incommensurable issue of mutiny and courts-martial during the battle of la Somme.³ On the basis of that facet of the latest First World War movie period and the centennial anniversary of the Battle, Jeunet's film is the subject of this paper.

exécutions pour l'exemple

"La justice militaire est à la justice ce que la musique militaire est à la musique."⁴—Georges Clémenceau

² For more information, see Christophe Gauthier et al., *Une Guerre qui n'en finit pas* (Toulouse: Editions complexes, 2008). Print.

³ Laurent Véray, "La Représentation au cinéma du traumatisme provoqué par la guerre 1914-1918," in Christophe Gauthier et al., *Une Guerre qui n'en finit pas* (Toulouse: Éditions Complexe, 2008) 17-44. Print.

⁴ "Military justice is to justice as military music is to classical music." *Correspondance: 1858-1929* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 2008) 22. Print.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s 2004 cinema adaptation of Sébastien Japrisot’s novel *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* is a relevant film for several reasons. First and foremost, few World War I movies delve in the somber topic of harsh military justice and injustices. Even rarer are those exposing the expedient court-martialing and rapid execution of one of their own *pour l'exemple*, the shockingly severe punishment of a soldier before his comrades to instill fear both in the witnesses as well as the non-present so as not to imitate him in order to maintain military discipline. Moreover, the injudicious system was widely inconsistent in judgment and procedure. In France, it mostly consisted of drawn lots involving the executions of several at a time, as in the case of “Les Martyrs de Vingré.” Out of the thirty wrongfully accused soldiers, six names were drawn and executed on 4 December 1914. After 1921 an exception was made, and all six were later exonerated on 29 January 1921.⁵ *Pour l'exemple* is also known as *la double peine*, or “the double death penalty,” as the alleged cowards’ surviving families suffered vile attacks within their communities, resulting in them being shamed and destitute, living in complete poverty, isolation, and fear. Although executions for desertion were not uncommon in previous wars, such as the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, *pour l'exemple* is First-World-War specific except Australia and the U.S. The chart below indicates the number of death sentences allotted by the military courts and reflects desperate acts to which overwhelmed commanders resorted, especially in view of the fact that many of these were imposed during the first years of the war, indicating the unforeseen rapidity and scale with which the nightmare had gotten out of control:

Death Sentences 1914-1918⁶

Army	Manpower	Capital Sentences	Executions
German	13, 380.000	150	48
Belgian	365,000	220	18
Britain	6, 147.000	3,080	346
French	8, 340.000	2,000	c. 600
Austro-Hungarian	9,000.000	no figure	737
Italian (1915-1918)	5,600.000	4,028	729

It is also one of the lesser-known and most sinister faces of *la Grande Guerre*⁷ and has surfaced in open discussion only in the past decade.

⁵ For more information, see Nicolas Offenstadt, *Les Fusillés de la Grande Guerre et la mémoire collective* (1914-1999) (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1999) 63. Print.

⁶ For an analysis of this chart, see Alexander Watson, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hugh Strachan (Oxford UP, 2014) 193. Print.

⁷ See Guy Pedroncini, *Les Mutineries de 1917* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) 3-9. Print.

From 2012 to 2014, Chloe Dewe Mathews journeyed to Flanders Fields to meticulously research and construct a photographic album with commentaries of some of the hallowed grounds where approximately 964 young French, British, and Belgian soldiers, some as young as seventeen years old, were executed. The victims, sometimes at the mercy of newly trained or incompetent officers, were shell-shocked, confused, disoriented, or lost on the battlefield. In his interview with her for *The Guardian*, Sean O'Hagan describes them as "[. . .] emotionally loaded places until now lost to history, known only to locals old enough to remember the stories told about the executions."⁸ She talked with Piet Chielens, the director of In Flanders Field in Ypres whose expertise is that of the soldiers shot at dawn. [...]

In the preface of his 1983 book *Le Pantalón (The Trousers)* which recounts the case of Lucien Bersot's 13 January 1915 execution for refusing to wear the torn, blood-stained trousers of a fallen soldier, Alain Scoff notes that even today [1983] little has been written on the subject. Official archives seem also to have mysteriously disappeared, or as he writes, they "had been burned during the German occupation during World War II, and I wonder why would the Germans have destroyed proofs of French military barbarism?" (11).

Scoff also makes the point that only Joseph Losey's 1964 *King and Country* (*Pour l'exemple* in French) and Stanley Kubrick's 1957 *Paths of Glory* had dared dealing with the tabooed topic. In France, nothing of the sort had been produced, and, in fact, Kubrick's production based on the appalling story of *les caporaux de Souain* was not shown in French theaters until eighteen years later (11-12). Filmed in Munich, it opened in the Bavarian Capital on 18 September 1957 and was shown in the U.S. in December, and in the *Saturday Review*, Hollis Alpert wrote: "[it was] unquestionably the finest American film of the year. It is so searing in its intensity that it will probably take its place, in years to come, as one of the screen's most extraordinary achievements" (*The Ragman's Son* 282).

Although not mentioned by Scoff, one might also consider including Francesco Rosi's 1970 Italo-Yugoslav *Uomini contro* (*Many Wars Ago*) in that subversive classics category with Kubrick and Losey. Influenced and perhaps inspired by Kubrick's theme and cinema techniques, Rosi's film is based on the fictional but first-hand experiences of Emilio Lussu's 1938 book, *Anno sull' altiplano* (*A Year on the High Plateau*). In 1916 on the *fronte italiano*, or *Gebirgskrieg* ("mountain war"), in the bitter Italo-Austrian entanglement during the Battle of Asiago where General Leone fails to recapture Montefiore, the troops stage a protest and refuse to be sent into another futile massacre. Leone orders a decimation, or "the removal

⁸ For more details, see Sean O'Hagan, "Chloe Dewe Mathews's Shot at dawn: a moving photographic memorial," *The Guardian*, 29 June 2014. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

of a tenth,” the ancient Roman form of punishment, and Lieutenant Sassù is executed for refusing to carry out the order. Véray argues about the validity of the decimation segment; however, he praises Rosi for his meticulous documentation and artistic cinematography (172-176). Following his death in January 2015, Rosi was remembered and commemorated in the following month at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival, fifty-seven years after the controversial *Paths of Glory* was banned. As opposed to most films produced about World War I, these films occupy a niche of their own, for there are few, especially when considering the span of a century of filmmaking. One could categorize them as a *Pour l'Exemple* sub-genre with *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* meriting a mention in that catalogue.

Véray appropriately chooses the expression *sorties de guerre* for his fourth and latest phase. Unlike the first entry for its translation, “exit,” the word “sortie” in French and English means to temporarily or briefly leave any given environment, such as going for a stroll, or in military parlance, for example, a mission that starts when an aircraft takes off and ends upon its return. Thus, the word carries a *double entendre* of inescapability of that milieu, particularly for the surviving veterans and their families dealing with the physical and psychological effects of the aftermaths of war. However, if one excludes Yves Boisset’s 1997 telefilm, *Le Pantalon*, it is the only one in thirty-five years since Rosi’s *Many Wars Ago* to touch on that somber chapter of military justice.⁹

It is against that background that this essay examines and analyzes the following: the context of the film’s historical events and their significance in bringing Manech, protagonist Mathilde’s fiancé, and his *frères de tranchées* to their death sentences in No Man’s Land at la Somme; the rapport between the book and the film, Japrisot as a renowned crime novelist and Jeunet as an award-winning film producer; the theme of love and war with the heroine whose love for Manech—“that many splendored thing”—sends her on a breathless pursuit for confirmation of his fate; the art and science of cinematography, including the *sine-qua-non* role of music utilized in capturing World War I and the post-World War I era; and Jeunet’s successfully intertwining and fashioning it from beginning to end all while maintaining Japrisot’s trademark of a crime novelist.

War and Literature

“War breeds only infamy, futility, and excrement [. . .] and nothing grows on desolate battlefields but the weed of hypocrisy or the pathetic flower of derision

9 In 2009, Patrick Jamin produced the telefilm, *Blanche Maupas*, based on Macha Sery and Alain Moreau’s 2009 book, *Blanche Maupas: la veuve de tous les fusillés*.

because derision is the ultimate defiance, the only way to laugh in the teeth of every misfortune.”¹⁰—Jean-Baptiste Japrisot

Language and literature mirror time and society, and 1914-1918 produced some of the most powerful war poems and prose ever written; those years were also some of the most abysmal in history. After reading Siegfried Sassoon’s “Trench Sketches” (*The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*) while recovering from shell shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother: “I have just been reading Siegfried Sassoon, and am feeling a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench-life sketches has ever been written or will ever be written. Shakespeare reads vapid after these” (*Poets of World War I: Wilfred Owen & Isaac Rosenberg* 12). Many became soldier-poets in spite of themselves. War can do that. For the literary men, the provenance of their muse goes back to that summer of 1914, and by 1917 some already had had their *rendez-vous* with death, such as Alan Seeger the year before, four days into la Somme on 4 July. For others like Wilfred Owen, it will come a year later close to the 11th hour on 4 November 1918. For Sassoon, it was to be 1967. To the end, Sassoon desperately pleaded for us never to forget. By 1917 their narrative had become more incisive and piercing, their linguistic sword cutting ever more sharply to the core, desperately appealing to the world to stop it—now, enough! In April 1917, the echo of their message of the intolerable reality must have reverberated back to the front lines at le Chemin des Dames after the dismal and futile Nivelle offensive killed 40,000 French soldiers in three days. For the *poilus*, enough was now, and mutinies erupted by the thousands.

Mutinies on the Western Front had begun soon after the Great War had erupted, but like everything else in this war, the sort of mutinies facing the generals in the summer 1914 had never been encountered. At the outbreak of the war, the Third Republic’s military code of justice, last revised in 1857, never had to address the *blessures provoquées*, or self-mutilations, thus the government in Bordeaux decided to delegate the full administration of military justice to General Foch. On 6 September 1914, he established *conseils de guerre spéciaux* (special court-martials) which called for the immediate execution without appeal *pour l’exemple* in order to galvanize the remaining decimated troops; for the British, the main objective of “shot at dawn” was to maintain morale.

During the First Battle of la Marne in September 1914, the carnage level had increased to such a point that some refused to continue fighting, and others self-mutilated to justify their non-combative attitude. The punishment had come

¹⁰ Jean-Baptiste Japrisot, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, Trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1991) 28. Print.

swiftly and harshly, with names, ranks, and motives read aloud, and executions carried out in front of their comrades in arms. So determined were the generals to stop it that, on 7 September, for example, General Boutegeourd ordered seven *poilus* of the 327th Regiment to be quickly executed without interrogation.

Given this established extreme form of punishment for disobedience, Pétain was now faced with the problem of inflicting either 1) too harsh a punishment, and he would probably lose the French army and the war, or 2) too “soft” a one, which would probably yield the same end result. He had to find some sort of a compromise. On 18 June, he declared: “Je maintiendrai cette répression avec fermeté mais sans oublier qu’elle s’applique à des soldats qui, depuis trois ans, sont avec nous dans les tranchées, et qui sont nos soldats,”¹¹ a cruel compromising for many since 3,500 *conseils de guerre* took place resulting in hard labor and 600 death sentences issued with forty-nine carried out. He did allow for some improvement, such as more frequent troop rotation, more leave time, better food and medical care, and a few more tanks to replace some of those going on the offensive. Eventually, mutinies faded.

Une longue histoire d’Amour: novels and cinema

Director Sam Fuller (*Steel Helmet*, 1951), one of the “Big Red Ones,” said, “A war film’s objective, no matter how personal or emotional, is to make the viewer feel war.”¹² Of the many war films and as a rather restrictive genre or sub-genre which would not fail Fuller’s observation, one could consider those treating courts-martial in The Great War and include *Paths of Glory*, *King and Country*, *Uomini contro*, *The Wars*, and *Le Pantalon*. Of particular interest here is the 2004 Academy Award nominee and César winner for best cinematography, best costume design, and best production design: Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s production of Japrisot’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. Ranking 7th overall in the World War I genre for total grosses at the box office, the film depicts five French soldiers found guilty of self-mutilation at la Somme, of their being sentenced to charge into No Man’s Land at Bingo Crépuscule—an almost guaranteed death, and of Mathilde, who, in the war’s aftermath and with the assistance of a private detective, searches for confirmation of the fate of her fiancé, Manech, one of the five condemned men. The French government did not select this film as the French submission for the

11 My translation: “I shall maintain repression firmly, but not without forgetting that it is directed toward soldiers who have been with us for three years in the trenches and who our soldiers are.” See Denis Rolland, *La Grève des tranchées: les mutineries de 1917* (Paris: Imago, 2005) 363. Print.

12 Geoffrey MacNab, “Fury, film review: Brad Pitt stars as an unsympathetic hero in muted war movie,” *Independent.co.uk*. The Independent, (20 October 2014). Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

award due to the fact that it was a Warner Brothers' production; otherwise, it may have received more accolades.

As is characteristic of many movies of all genres, the origin of Jeunet's World War I film lays in a moderately popular 1991 novel of the same title written by Sebastien Japrisot, a *nom de plume* for his real name, Jean-Baptiste Rossi. A prolific award-winning writer of many genres—*Le Prix de l'unanimité* (1966), *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière* (1963), *Le Prix d'Honneur* (1966), and the Crime Writer's Association Silver Dagger for the best Thriller (1968)—he is perhaps best known as “The Graham Greene of France.” A dozen of his books have been adapted to the silver screen, and globally, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, is undoubtedly his most widely recognized *chef d'œuvre*.

Inspired by Maréchal Fayolle's *Les Cahiers secrets de la Grande Guerre*, a history of Pétain's inflicting the death sentence to punish those soldiers who self-mutilated for a leave or discharge, Japrisot wrote *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* in 1991. He named the front-line trench “Bingo Crépuscule” after British Lieutenant-General Byng, commander of the Canadian Corps in 1916. In the novel, the French soldiers named the trench after him at “crépuscule,” or twilight, and created “Bingo” because it is an Anglicized phonetic spelling of “Byng au,” a detail not explained in the movie.

Another source of inspiration for Japrisot is *l'affaire des caporaux de Souain* where four French soldiers—Théophile Maupas, Louis Lefoulon, Louis Girard, and Lucien Lechat—were the *condamnés à mort pour l'exemple*, the subject of Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*. Blanche Maupas, a Norman schoolteacher and the wife of Théophile, conducted a private detective investigation to find soldiers who could clear her husband's name; she even contemplated murdering General Réveilhac for having had him executed. In *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, we recognize Blanche both in the character of Mathilde, the fiancée who leaves no stone unturned to ascertain the destiny of her *bleuet*, or cornflower (a name given to the recruits of 1917), and in the character of Tina, the vengeful prostitute who not only dreams of killing the general who ordered the execution of her man but actually does it. Also recognizable in the film and in the novel is top-brass codger General Réveilhac in the character of General Lavrouye. Finally, of the few French soldiers in *la Grande Guerre* who managed to escape their execution, perhaps the most extraordinary one is that of Vincent Moulia, the mutineer who, in June 1917, after a dangerous jaunt full of traps, made it home to his village of Nassiet in Les Landes, not too unlike the character Benoît Notre Dame in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. Although not

a journalist, Japrisot won the *Prix Interallié*, an annual French literary award for a novel written by a reporter.

Un long dimanche de fiançailles: mise en scène

Like Japrisot, *cinéaste* Jean-Pierre Jeunet gained international recognition with award-winning films of different genres, such as *Delicatessen* (1991), *The City of Lost Children* (1995), and *Alien: The Resurrection* (1997). However, *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), one of the biggest global French language box office hits of all time, marked his consecration as a respected international film director, only to be augmented three years later by *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004). Upon Japrisot's book release in 1991, Jeunet's thoughts immediately turned to its adaptation to the big screen. Perhaps Tavernier's 1989 *La Vie et rien d'autre* may have influenced him in that direction and perhaps even more is Tavernier's 1996 release of *Capitaine Conan* with its topic of military justice on the 1918 Bulgarian Front. His most inspiring muse, however, was another book: *Les carnets de guerre de Louis Barthes, tonnelier, 1914-1918*, a most remarkably well-written, detailed diary of a private who survived fifty months, most of them under fire, on the Western Front. This literary World War I historiographical treasure had been "hermetically sealed" in a family drawer for six decades until Louis' son, Abel, brought it to light in the 1970s, and scholar Rémy Cazals had it published in 1978 (*Poilu* xxiv).

Moved by the passing of Sébastien Japrisot in 2003, Jeunet adapted the writer's novel and produced another award-winning film with performances from many who played in his *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, including Audrey Tautou portraying the protagonist in both films. Here as Mathilde, she is the polio-stricken *bretonne* orphan who hires detective Germain Pire to look into the destiny of her fiancé, the shell-shocked soldier who allowed his hand to be shot by a German sharpshooter. Manech's four companions in death include the following: Angel Bassignano, the handsome, worthless Corsican pimp who, believing the war will be over by Christmas 1916, choses Verdun instead of prison; Corporal Benjamin Gordes, the impotent carpenter who wants his best friend, Bouquet, to impregnate his wife so he no longer has to fight; Kléber Bouquet, Gorde's best friend and the oldest of the five condemned; Francis Gaignard, an intelligent Parisian welder incapable of clearly expressing himself; and Benoît Notre Dame, a savvy taciturn farmer from la Dordogne. Sergeant Daniel Esperanza escorts all five to the deadly trench where they will go over the top to die either from German fire or from the cold. Both he and Célestin Poux, another survivor of the war, reveal pertinent detailed clues to the young woman about what happened that fateful night.

As director, Jeunet had to make many critical decisions when construing Japrisot's complex, war-crime-mystery-romance novel: he had to determine the degree of fidelity to the original work in his adaptation of the novel, and, in the process of making his interpretation and adaptation a fruition on the screen, he had to have the collaboration of an entire film crew and cast, which is not always a given. A good case in point is Kirk Douglas and Stanley Kubrick and their making of *Paths of Glory* when Douglas, livid upon receiving Kubrick's entirely revised and rewritten script, threatened to cancel film production. Similar to Douglas's dissatisfied reaction is the discontentment of Nevil Shute and Gregory Peck with Stanley Kramer's including a romance in his production of *On the Beach*.

As is often the case, movies rarely meet one's expectations, but, in the case of Jeunet's production of Japrisot's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, most viewers can appreciate his adaptation because he remains true, for the most part, to the novel's plot and the personalities of its main characters. Some of the liberties he takes in his adaptation are historically rich and culturally interesting, and those that reflect inattention to important details are disappointing.

When well researched and creatively and meticulously produced, Seventh Art adaptations cannot only co-exist with the book but can also take on an identity of their own and surpass the quality of the literary work. For example, Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 release of *The Godfather*, based on Mario Puzo's novel of the same title, went on to become one of American fiction best sellers of all time, which many moviegoers today may not realize, and Allen Barra observed that "Those who read the novel today in search of a greater appreciation of the movie are bound to be disappointed; it quickly becomes apparent the book's success isn't based on literary merit."¹³ Or, among World War I films, David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, in which screenwriter Michael Wilson took inspiration from T.E. Lawrence's own 1935 memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: a Triumph*, as well as Lowell Thomas's 1924 best selling *With Lawrence in Arabia*. As columnist Charles Krauthammer recently observed and suggested: "*Lawrence of Arabia* vs. the real T.E. Lawrence. They diverge. Accept them on their own terms, as separate, and independent realities."¹⁴

The Titles and the Plot: French versus English

Like many directors, Jeunet entitles his film after the novel, thereby immediately establishing his desire to remain faithful to the original text's title, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* or, in English, *A Very Long Engagement*. Some may find

¹³ "What Puzo Godfathered 40 Years Ago," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 August 2009. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

¹⁴ "Men wielding power in hellish times," *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2015. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

the English title a bit ambiguous, for “engagement” has two meanings: one being a promise to meet someone at a particular time and place, and the second being a commitment to eventually become married. The more literal translation, “A Long Sunday Engagement,” is not only more accurate, but it also captures the very essence of the plot as well as the “meaning” of both the movie and the novel: the leitmotif of Mathilde’s longing and time painstakingly standing still all while searching for her fiancé. Japrisot entitles his first chapter “Samedi Soir” (“Saturday Evening”) and concludes the novel with “Lundi Matin” (“Monday Morning”), thereby providing a time reference for the reader regarding both the plot and the meaning of the title of his book. The English translation’s enigmatic *double entendre* of “engagement” in the title well reflects Mathilde’s situation as a *veuve blanche*, i.e., a white widow, an unwedded fiancée, or an engaged woman whose groom is a war casualty: seven years of waiting, hoping, and searching as well as her commitment to marry Manech, even if it requires a posthumous wedding. Like the title, the plot, too, is mysterious, perplexing, and complex due to the epistolary genre where numerous characters share their own version of what they witnessed, experienced, or learned from hearsay to help Mathilde in her quest. Further obfuscating readers and viewers are the pervasive flashbacks and the introduction of numerous characters between 1900 and 1924.

In August 1919, a moribund Esperanza notifies her that he did not see her beau die. With this news, the rejuvenated and obstinate Mathilde begins her crusade to uncover the mystery surrounding Manech that cold day between two trenches: did he die? if he did, how did he die? did he survive? if he did, where is he? *Veritas vos liberabit*. After searching and hoping for seven years, the biblical symbolic number for positive renewal, Mathilde’s very long engagement ends with a new beginning “Monday Morning”—the one with soldier Manech comes to a close, and the one with amnesia-stricken Manech starts afresh, just as if the Great War never occurred.

The Setting: la Somme

Jeunet commences his movie with the typical opening sequence of stage décor: no voices, dramatic music, and ambiguous oscillations between documentary realism: rain, trenches, and piety with an aestheticization of *pathos*. We hear heavy rain drops falling into the water-logged trenches and a slow, somber instrumental composed by Grammy Award winner Badalamenti (“*Twin Peaks* Theme,” 1990) to better evoke death and mourning: a measured, rhythmic *adagio*, without a theme *per se*, that echoes throughout the film, accentuating the heroine’s sadness. Touching and moving, this music could be best described as dramatic, somber,

respectful, dignified, lonely, and depressing. Thom Jurek's Allmusic.com review describes it as "a truly enjoyable, if undramatic score [that] does not feel or sound like a body of music that can be taken as a separate work from the film it illustrates" (*A Very Long Engagement* [Original Motion Picture Soundtrack]). Film and music have been inextricably intertwined from the beginning, and, along with the images and the dialogues, they have the power to engage viewers' senses as no other art forms can. Like the dialogues, music comprises that invisible element constantly communicating with the audience, but, unlike dialogues which often do not tell the truth, a good score expresses the emotional or circumstantial truth, and no other film sequences provide the opportunity of establishing a rapport with the audience's attention like an opening sequence; in other words, the composer doesn't get a second chance to make a first impression. Badalamenti's score is good but not in the league of those composed by John Williams, Maurice Jarre, Bernard Hermann, or Max Steiner, for example.

The eschatological opening scene shows la Somme on a freezing rainy day, 6 January 1917, at a battlefield cemetery with a half-destroyed life-size crucifix, only Christ's left hand and feet still nailed to the cross, and with a black horse cadaver hanging in a tree, bringing to mind the third charger of the Apocalypse whose horseman carries the scales of justice. It is obvious that Jeunet has opened the door for us to see his interpretation of Armageddon where injustice has triumphed, and Dante's *Inferno*, canto III, line 9 comes immediately to mind: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate."¹⁵ Jeunet's image of Christ's pierced left hand foreshadows the reason the five soldiers of this story are found guilty of mutiny—voluntary self-mutilation of the hand—as well as their destiny: condemned to die in this Dantesque frozen hell. The winter of 1916-1917 was the coldest and wettest in living memory.¹⁶

The camera then solemnly pans to bleak residua of a chillingly silent battlefield scene that day at Bouchavesnes—freezing cold, heavy rain, water-logged trenches, and barbed-wired sticks from the parapet to the gray horizon—illustrating Jeunet's attempt to authentically reproduce the trench conditions of la Somme. Japrisot's battlefield, however, is snow covered, which Jeunet—unlike Carion who used fake snow to accurately capture the 1914 Christmas truce in his *Joyeux Noël*—either could not or chose not to portray. Not doing so, however, is a *lacuna* in Jeunet's

15 "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Courtney Langdon (London: Humphrey Milfred Oxford UP, 1918) 26. Print.

16 For more details about the climactic conditions, see Jen Bartram, "Remembering WWI: weather in the trenches," *weather.network.com*. The Weather Network. 4 August 2014. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

adaptation of the novel, for it is a must-have detail in portraying not only the climactic conditions of la Somme but also Manech's character. For example, Japrisot portrays a shell-shocked boy-at-heart soldier making snowballs and a snowman in No Man's Land. Jeunet, however, pictures Manech blowing bullets out of a pistol and carving three Ms on a tree in No Man's Land. "The devil is in the detail." If seemingly a minor error, depicting inaccurate weather conditions in war films can result in negative reviews with the critics, especially if the battle in question, for example, is the one Churchill called "Undoubtedly the greatest American Battle in World War II"¹⁷—The Battle of Bulge—fought under near arctic conditions in December 1944 in the rugged Belgian Ardennes forest, but Ken Annakin's 1965 production of the battle features tank scenes fought in a snowless, barren, semi-arid Spanish landscape, a "detail" among others. No snow in la Somme's winter is similar to no soaring temperatures in the Nefud. Also apparent is the striking resemblance between Jeunet's opening trench scene with Kubrick's, *sine* the torrential rain, and even Tch ky Caryo bears a striking resemblance to Kirk Douglas. As the five court-martialed soldiers trudge through almost knee-high deep mud, hands tied behind their back, the narrator introduces them one by one.

The Five Court-Martialed Soldiers

Almost identical to the novel, Jeunet has a non-present narrator present the five soldiers and explain their pre-war history as well as the circumstances leading to their self-mutilation, their court-martial, and their marching to their execution at Bingo, but here the narrator, with a soft, almost semi-apathetic woman's voice, speaks over Badalamenti's brooding "Main Title / The Trenches." She starts the film with the following time reference: "Saturday, the 6th of January, 1917, five condemned soldiers were escorted to Bouchavesnes at the Front in the Somme."¹⁸ Japrisot's narrator, however, begins the story *in medias res* with the fairy-tale opener, "Il  tait une fois [. . .]" ("Once upon a time [. . .]"), then introduces the soldiers, "cinq soldats qui ont fait la guerre" (there were five soldiers who had gone off to war [. . .]), but concludes the line on a tragic tone: "parce que les choses sont ainsi" ("because that's the way of the world") (9). Because it is a French film adapted from a crime-mystery-war novel that delves into self-mutilation, courts-martial, the death penalty *pour l'exemple*, and *les sorties de guerre*, most foreign film

17 Alex Kershaw, *The Longest Winter: The Battle of the Bulge and the Epic Story of World War II's Most Decorated Platoon* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo P, 2004) 174. Print.

18 Quotes that do not have page numbers are from the movie, *Un long dimanche de fian ailles*, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, perf. Audrey Tautou, Gaspard Ulliel, Jean-Pierre Becker, Dominique Bettenfeld, et al. (Warner Brothers, 2005). DVD.

cinéphiles probably expect a bleak ending, and the opening scene certainly confirms what they would anticipate: an intransigent outcome similar to Kubrick's where the court-martialed are executed before a firing squad, or the even more macabre ending in Losey's *King and Country* where British army lawyer Captain Hargreaves gives the *coup de grâce* to his bound and blind-folded client, Private Arthur Hamp, at his court-martial for desertion by putting a pistol in his mouth and blowing his brains out. For Jeunet's viewers, the anticipated dénouement is less certain.

"Attention au fil!" ("Watch out for the [telephone] wire!") exclaims one of the many unknown cadaver-like faces in the trenches as the condemned trudge forward to their execution destination; this line serves as a leitmotif and is echoed with the introduction of each of the five court-martialed, a "line" impoverished in the film compared to the novel, for it is a life line, an umbilical cord of sorts, connecting the soldiers in their womb-in-hell trenches to their high commander officers far away from the battlefields and to President Poincaré who can pardon them. This vital wire also serves as metaphor for the characters' lifeline as well as the noose by which they can hang themselves and the wire that leads Mathilde through a geographical and psychological labyrinth in her quest for the truth about Manech's destiny.

Following the opening of Japrisot's novel, Jeunet's next sequence consists of flashbacks where he first introduces each soldier with name, tag number, and draft office; then recalls their *âge d'or* before the war via nostalgic sepia sequences; and concludes with images illustrating their self-mutilation. Also identical to Japrisot's introduction is Jeunet's dedicating more time to each character introduction, devoting from 80 to 100 seconds to the first four and 135 to the last, with each one captivating the senseless bloodletting of trench warfare that explains the soldiers' disobedience, mutiny, self-mutilation, court-martial, and death sentence *pour l'exemple*.

The oldest and the first of the five condemned is Kléber, named most likely after the French general who succeeded Napoleon as commander in Egypt in 1799 and was assassinated the following year, and nicknamed Bastoche, an *argot* deformation of la Bastille that evokes a physically strong, imposing man, much like the building. He is also referred to as The Eskimo for the years he spent hunting in Alaska. Jeunet focuses on his wearing German boots that he had taken them from a dead *Boche*—a historical example of the superiority of the German uniform compared to the French with their old, 19th-century *godillot*. A Parisian carpenter in love with a redhead before the war, he would often meet her for a drink at Petit Louis' bar in Golden Hand Street or in the privacy of his studio, and Jeunet skillfully parallels

the repetitive back-and-forth motion of Bastoche's hammering and lathing in his atelier with their fornicating. One night in his war bunk while trying to get rats off his body with a pistol grip, he accidentally shoots himself in his right hand and, as a result, is court-martialed for self-mutilation, receives the death penalty, and is sentenced "to go over the top" at la Somme. In Japrisot's novel, however, Bastoche, instead of trying to scare the rats away, struggles—and never succeeds—to pull a white hair from his head, but Jeunet, preferring to capture the misery of the trenches *à la* Kubrick, Milestone, and Losey and to render his Bastoche less vane, chooses the rat over the hair. Of the five, he is the only one to have accidentally maimed his hand and, once over the top and upon throwing the grenade at the "Albatross" (a German plane), is fatally hit by its machine gunner.

"Watch out for line!" says another unknown soldier as the narrator introduces the second of the five, Francis Gaignard, falling face down in the mud. In the pre-war sepia biographical clip that follows, we see Francis (a.k.a. Six-Sous, an inversion of *franc*—or *sous*—and *six*, the equivalent of the British "sixpence") happily soldering for the railroad in Bagneux. Although aesthetic, the scene is unrealistic in that he is smoking a cigarette while wearing a full-faced solder's helmet. Smart yet unable to express his thoughts clearly to the other soldiers, he desperately tries to explain that "they build the cannons of their own destruction, but it is the rich who sell them;" or, as Paul Valéry keenly expressed in one of his moral aphorisms, "La guerre, un massacre de gens qui ne se connaissent pas, au profit de gens qui se connaissent mais ne se massacrent pas."¹⁹ As Francis's nickname suggests, men are barely worth a sixpence in wartime, and, similarly, his wise words are worthless when they fall upon the deaf ears of his comrades soused on cheap wine, the soldiers' constant cohort. Jeunet then shows the combative circumstances that lead to his arrest: in a trench and face-to-face with an innocent-looking teenage German private surrendering in an almost pre-pubescent voice, Francis, unable to kill him, watches his fellow *frère de tranchée* stab a bayonet in his belly. Traumatized, Francis mutilates his right hand by grabbing the barrel of a firing machine gun; however, in the novel, he shoots himself in the left hand. Jeunet's deviation is appropriate, for what better way for Six-Sous to maim his hand than by "soldering" it to the barrel of a machine gun firing between 400 and 600 rounds per minute.

Once over the top, Six-Sous, almost insane from a gangrene-induced fever, is shot in the head by the Germans while pissing, standing up like a man—his last wish—

¹⁹ "War, a massacre of people who don't know each other for the profit of people who know each other but don't massacre each other." See Scott Bates, *Poems of War Resistance from 2300 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1969) 170. Print.

all while singing “La Chanson de Craonne,” also known as “Adieu la vie” (“Goodbye to Life”), an anti-war song sung by the sixty-eight of the one hundred ten divisions of the French Army who mutinied after Nivelles’s disastrous offensive at le Chemin des Dames on 16 April 1917. Japrisot’s Six-Sous sings, instead, “Le Temps des cerises” (“Cherry Season”), a revolutionary song associated with la *semaine sanglante* of 1871 when French troops toppled the Paris commune; it evokes what life will be like when a revolution will have changed social and economic conditions. Some consider Jeunet’s opting for “La Chanson de Craonne” as an anachronism because its final version was written three months after Bingo Crépuscule battle. The origin of “La Chanson de Craonne” dates back, however, to the Battle of Lorette à Ablain-St. Nazaire (from September 1914 to September 1915), then was modified in order to sing about the Second Battle of Champagne, and in 1916 was sung during the gruesome Battle of Verdun. Six-Sous sings the refrain at his death: “Adieu la vie, adieu l’amour, / Adieu à toutes les femmes. / C’est pas fini / c’est pour toujours. / De cette guerre infâme / C’est à Craonne sur le plateau / Qu’on a risqué sa peau. / Car nous sommes tous condamnés / Nous sommes les sacrifiés [...]”²⁰ Because this song was born on the battlefields of the Western Front in 1914, Jeunet is certainly justified in replacing “Le Temps des cerises” with the fatalistic, subversive, anti-war “Chanson de Craonne.”

In introducing the third of the five, Benoît Notre Dame of the Dordogne, the bravest and the toughest of the five (a.k.a. That Man for always being private and discreet), Jeunet deviates slightly in his presentation pattern in that the narrator immediately shows and explains the war circumstances that lead to his self mutilation: outraged upon seeing his commanding officer cursing dead infantrymen—calling them lazy cowards and ordering them to get up to attack—as well as kicking the cadavers, Benoît kills him by drowning him in the mire. “Benoît,” the Old French word for “blessed,” the English equivalent to Benedict, was an orphan found on the steps of a village church in Saintes, thus his surname Notre Dame; with a full name such as “the blessed / our Lady,” neither the reader nor the viewer should be surprised about his destiny as a *condamné pour l’exemple*. Like Six-Sous, he self-mutilates, firing his rifle into his right hand because he was left-handed, but, smarter than the other two, he files his bullet to do less damage. The narrator concludes the introduction of Benoît with the pre-war sepia biographical

20 “Good-bye to life, good-bye to love, / Good-bye to all the women, / It’s all over now, we’ve had it for good / With this awful war. / It’s in Craonne up on the plateau / That we’re leaving our skins, / ‘Cause we’ve all been sentenced to die. / We’re the ones that they’re sacrificing [...]” For complete translation, see Martin Pegler, *Soldiers’ Songs and Slang of the Great War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014) 381. Print.

clip: his wife beside him, he was hauling hay with a horse-drawn wagon on his farm in the Dordogne when draft officers took him away, put him on a train, and sent him off to war at its onset in August 1914.

“Watch out for the line!” is Sergeant Esperanza’s “line” when the narrator introduces the fourth condemned soldier—the Corsican, Angel Bassignano (a.k.a. Common Law), and the camera zooms in on the low hanging phone line. While she explains that “the telephone wire is the only link to the land of the living—a flimsy wire, their only chance for President Poincaré’s pardon,” we see Angel get “clothes lined” by it, and ironically he is the only one of the five who believes Poincaré will pardon them. To lighten the mood, Jeunet incorporates an unexpected humoristic scene: a prostate-afflicted-looking Angel pisses with a content sigh-of-relief expression in the helmet of his sleeping *frère de tranchée*, empties the urine-filled helmet (the least he could do), and wipes his urine-sprinkled hands on the soldier’s blanket. In the pre-war sepia biographical clip, the narrator describes him being as attractive as an angel but diabolical like a demon: “all who had known him, he was no angel at all. He was a liar, a cheat, a show-off, a sneak and a troublemaker. Before all this, Tina worked as his whore.” Jeunet continues the humor, showing Angel settling a score with a rival village pimp by stabbing him, not in the back or heart but in the ass. As a result, he received a five-year prison sentence. Japrisot’s Angel, however, is not from Corsica but rather Marseille and the son of Italian immigrants. In summer 1916, common-law criminals such as Angel had the choice to do prison time or to fight in the war. Believing *la Grande Guerre* would be over by Christmas 1916, Angel chose the latter, unaware of the calvary that awaited him in the trenches of Verdun. Anticipating an inevitable death in a No Man’s Land in 1916, Angel and a comrade agree to shoot each in the hand at the chime of his pocket watch; Angel loses only two fingers in his left, but his poor buddy takes the bullet in the face (and in the novel is also trampled by a horse spooked by their gunfire).

Corsican viewers who are familiar with the novel may find intolerable Jeunet’s egregious transformation of Angel from an Italian immigrant living in Marseille to a Corsican coward, and rightfully wonder what was Jeunet’s purpose, other than to propagate negative stereotypes about their culture all while enjoying filming on their beautiful island. Once in Bingo’s No Man’s Land, Japrisot’s Common Law yells to the Germans, “I’m surrendering, don’t shoot!” (229), and Corporal Thouvenel, a mean, trigger-happy sharpshooter, reacts: “That goddamn bastard, he’s fucked us up enough, he’s mine!” (229) and shoots him in the back of the head. Jeunet’s Common Law, however, is a pathetic, yellow-bellied Corsican standing in

No Man's Land with pants dropped to his ankles, waiving his underwear on the end of a stick, and crying, "I surrender! I'm like you! Germans are good! Don't shoot! Have mercy! I'm not French, I'm Corsican! I don't have anything against the Germans!" Of the five, he is the only one shot by his own *pour l'exemple*. Regarding the centuries-old antagonistic relationship between Corsica and France, Jules Vallès, in the 4 March 1871 edition of the newspaper, *Le Cri du peuple*, wrote the following which may shed light: "La vérité qu'il faut dire, c'est que la Corse n'a jamais été et ne sera jamais française. Voilà cent ans que la France traîne à son pied ce boulet. Nous l'en voyons estropiée, meurtrie. Le Corse est naturellement mouchard et assassin."²¹

The fifth "Attention au fil!" signals the introduction of the last condemned soldier: Jean Langonnet, a nineteen-year old from Capbreton. His family and friends call him Manech, a name typical of the Landes area near the French Pyrenees, but his comrades call him *Bleuet*, a name given to the young recruits of 1917 for their blue uniforms. Onomastically, Jean evokes Saint John, the only one of Christ's original twelve apostles to have lived into old age, suggesting he will endure the war; however, Manech also designates the innocent expiatory lamb, implying that he will not survive his death penalty. Today, the *bleuet* is distributed in France every 11 November and 8 May in honor of the young, fallen soldiers of *la Grande Guerre* and is the equivalent of the poppies in honor of America's war dead traditionally done on Memorial Day, not Veterans Day, a practice that takes its origin from John McCrae's 1915 poem "In Flanders Fields." To capture Manech's previous life, Jeunet, using retro, documentary-style black-and-white film, shows us a brave, generous, and carefree young man risking his safety to help others, rescuing men caught in a maelstrom near a lighthouse. But now, in the sepia sequences with canon-deafening detonations, mutineers executed *pour l'exemple*, "trench cleaners," and winds blowing potentially lethal chlorine, Manech is afraid of his own shadow.

Using flashbacks and alternating between two 1916 battle scenes of la Somme, Jeunet illustrates the ghastly cause of Manech's instant psychological transformation from being a brave young soldier to a frightened child with a perpetual demented smile. First, the camera captures a valiant Manech going over the top to charge the Germans followed by a battle scene where one bombshell too many on 16 November 1916 at la Somme not only obliterates his comrade to smithereens but also covers Manech from head to toe with the mutilated body, filling his mouth with his

²¹ "The truth is Corsica never was and never will be French. For a hundred years France has been dragging this ball and chain around her foot. We see her [Corsica] as disabled, bruised. The Corsican is by nature a sneaky assassin." See Simon Mazzoni, *Le Temps des épreuves : un petit Corse sur le Continent* (Ajaccio: DCL éditions, 1999) 81. Print.

trench brother's innards. In the novel, he is so traumatized by the horror of his blood-soiled uniform that he strips naked. In this scene, Jeunet also demonstrates attention to historic detail by zooming in on a tank crossing No Man's Land, for, thanks to the British, it did make its first appearance at la Somme in September 1916. After getting a mouthful of guts and spending ten long, rainy November days in a trench with a hard-core, no bullshit sergeant, Manech, unable to stomach the war after literally swallowing its butchery, executes his plan to earn a discharge by raising his right hand one night while holding an English cigarette just above the trench parapet for a German sharp shooter to hit it. The *Boche* did not miss: two fingers are obliterated. His comrades thought for sure Manech won "the winning ticket" back to his fiancée, but his sergeant, catching him in this self-mutilation scheme, calls it "the ticket for a court-martial," resulting in a death sentence in No Man's Land between the Bingo Crépuscule trench and the German's. Manech's comrades beg the sergeant to ignore it, "to be human for once," but their plea is in vain. This sequence well reflects the conflict between the camaraderie allegiance of the *frères de tranchées* and the commanders' duty *pour la France*.

Unlike Jeunet's Manech, Japrisot's is from Cap-Breton, near Biarritz in the *département des Landes*, very far from Bretagne, but because his hometown's name includes "Breton," his comrades assume he is from Brittany; their ignorance, however, does not bother him, for Manech is a discreet, quiet, and peaceful lad. Also in the novel, Manech tried to contract jaundice by swallowing picric acid, and, instead of losing only two fingers from that well-aimed German bullet, he lost half his hand—and the surgeon had to cut off the other half. Today's moviegoers may consider Jeunet's rendition of self-mutilation of the hand as an extreme example of a soldier's desperation for a discharge; however, in Losey's *King and Country* many willingly sacrificed an entire limb.

In spite of injury, tied hands, and forced march through the freezing water-logged trenches to the front line to face death at la Somme, Manech walks tall and proud like a maimed animal trying to survive; and, unlike the others who are already half dead, collapsing from cold, hunger, and fatigue—both physical and mental—Manech, with the "smile of a demented child" (14), gains a certain *je-ne-sais-d'où* strength from this life-threatening circumstance, inducing a Proustienne-like experience of remembering his past: heading home from school in the snow, dog waiting for him, and craving a honey *tartine* with a big cup of hot chocolate, the very meal he requests before his execution. Instead of showing a schoolboy flashback, Jeunet, catering to the audience's penchant for romance, opts to capture Manech and Mathilde making love for the first time, which is logical, since Jeunet

decided not to include any snow in the battle scenes. In their only sex scene, he also echoes the “string-of-life” leitmotif with Manech wiping away a spider’s dangling thread from his face as he cusps Mathilde’s right breast with his right hand, another *lapsus* on Jeunet’s part, for it is illogical for Manech, missing his right pinky and ring finger, to be able to feel her pulse with his mutilated hand as walks through the trenches.

Mathilde: *l'épopée de la femme* and *la Grande Guerre's* aftermath

Using the *chiaroscuro* technique, Jeunet saves the introduction of the main character, Mathilde, for last by fast forwarding from the *scuro* of the morbid scene of Manech and company at Bingo to the *chiaro* of Mathilde in 1920 Brittany, zooming in on her reaching the top of the lighthouse where a heavenly, golden sunshine bathes her in hope and determination. Positive, superstitious, and intuitive by nature, she senses that he is alive; Jeunet’s lighthouse symbolically guides her away from the tenebrous, doubtful thoughts of the naysayers who try to convince her to accept his death notice as fact. In her low moments, though, she plays the tuba, the only instrument capable of sounding her sorrow. Japrisot’s Mathilde, however, never climbs any stairs, for she is bound to a wheel chair due to a mysterious fall when she was three years old (66-67), but to allow her character to move more freely, Jeunet opts to portray her as a polio-afflicted girl with a limp. And to reduce the number of characters, he also portrays her as an orphan adopted by her aunt and uncle when her parents were killed in the infamous tramway fire crash in Paris 10 August 1903, also known as “the Couronnes disaster” where eighty-four people perished. It still remains the worst Paris metro disaster since it first went into service 19 July 1900. The historiographer Jeunet uses black and white photographs to capture this scene, adding to the documentary-style aspect of his movie.

Before Jeunet’s Mathilde, there was the terse 1920 bourgeoisie Mme de Courtil being chauffeured around the battlefields of Verdun on a mission to identify her dead husband in Tavernier’s 1989 *La vie et rien d’autre*; then, there was the same Sabine Azema as the compassionate nurse Anaïs attending to *gueule cassée* (disfigured veteran) Adrien in Francois Dupeyron’s *La chambre des officiers*, the first film in thirty years since *Johnny Got His Gun* to address physical disfiguration. In 2006, Pieta-figure nurse Madeleine Oberstein shares the screen with Antonin whose *sortie de guerre* is the focus of psychological trauma caused by the incessant haunting vision of overwhelming death scenes in Gabriel Le Bomin’s *Les fragments d’Antonin*. From the beginning of this new kind of unprecedented absolute war, women were drawn into it in large numbers: whether it be on the front-line

ambulances or on the assembly lines behind them, they were needed everywhere, and many wanted to do their part. Today's World War I films reflect that historic aftermath époque marked by women, and, even if those films never acquire the official designation "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant," they do affirm Véray's conception of the evolution of 100 years of *La Grande Guerre* filmmaking and its *sorties-de-guerre* as *le genre nouveau*.

La Veuve blanche—fil d'Ariane as fil conducteur—and les Sorties de guerre

With the obstinacy of a Blanche Maupas, Mathilde, using both the *fil téléphonique* and the letters from *les sorties de guerre* as *fil d'Ariane*, follows all leads and navigates a Daedeleian labyrinth designed and created by high commanders to conceal each other's dirty work and Manech's fate. With that relentless, unwavering determination to uncover the truth, both in the novel and in the film, she personifies the *le fil d'Ariane* as *fil conducteur*, the narrative thread that leads both Thesean readers and movie watchers through the maze in her quest to find her Manech, dead or alive.

In June 1920 (August 1919 in the novel), Mathilde, a *veuve blanche*, receives the first clues from dying Sergeant Esperanza, and, with the name like that, it is not coincidental that he raises Mathilde's hopes, or that he is dying from the Spanish flu. In the novel, Japrisot incorporates a bit of levity in the novel's gravity with this character not giving a damn if the fly to his old faded pajamas is open, much to the dismay of the nuns and Mathilde, a character-defining detail Jeunet ignored.

From Esperanza Mathilde learns the following: that Célestin Poux, "the mess hall marauder," gave Manech a bright red woolen glove to keep his good hand warm once in No Man's Land; that there was a "Albatross" with a machine gunner in the back seat firing furiously; that Angel was waving his underwear to surrender to the Germans; and that Manech was carving three Ms, representing the alliteration "Manech aime Mathilde"²² on a tree in No Man's Land. Esperanza gives Mathilde a "box of evidence" containing Manech's last letter to her, the last photo of the five together, Bastoche's last letter addressed to Petit Louis that recounts his reconciliation with Biscuit and his love for Véronique, Benoît's encoded last letter to his wife, and Angel's pocket watch to Tina Lombardi.

Desperate for assistance to find Tina Lombardi in the labyrinth, Mathilde hires Germain Pire, a "worse-than-a-weasel" private investigator who boasts of his

²² "Manech loves Mathilde" is the true translation but is "Manech's marrying Mathilde" in the English version to keep the alliteration.

detective skills, such as when he discovered the real cause of the 1917 train wreck that President Poincaré tried to cover up where 425 French soldiers on leave died due to faulty brakes and overloaded cars.²³ His search begins in Corsica where he is greeted by a bunch of stubborn old women who do not understand French and a defecating donkey and, shortly afterwards, is chased out of town by an angry posse; later, however, a few enticing prostitutes convince him to stay. Mathilde also hires Pierre-Marie, the family lawyer, to dig through the military archives to try to find the official report of Bingo, 7 January 1917. Together, they are granted access to the classified files, and unbeknownst to her, Pierre-Marie does, indeed, find President Poincaré's pardon papers, but "the good-ole-boy lawyer that he is" opts not disclose his revelation.

When Célestin corroborates Esperanza's story and confirms that he witnessed only the deaths of Angel, Six-Sous, and Bastoche, he re-ties Mathilde's "thread" of hope, and this thread of clues leads Mathilde to a Parisian jail where Tina Lombardi, found guilty of murder, is to be beheaded, which Jeunet captures using a silent, black-and-white-documentary-style clip. Mathilde learns from Tina that Poincaré had, in fact, pardoned all five, and deduces that her lawyer had concealed the pardon papers. With another series of flashbacks, Jeunet summarizes Tina's merciless vengeful adventures from enticing Lavrouye to a brothel for some deadly "tie-me-up tie-my-down" sex to killing the belligerent Thouvenel. As Tina says her *adieu* to Mathilde, she opens Angel's pocket watch and discovers a hidden piece of paper with his last words of advice to her: "Vengeance is pointless. Try to be happy and don't ruin your life for me. Your Angel in Hell." If she could only turn back the hands of time and find her Angel's last wish before she dedicated her life to revenge.

The string of hope and the truths she has gathered from Esperanza, Célestin, and Tina logically guide Mathilde to her last possible lead: Benoît on his property at "the end of the world," as he calls it, where he not only validates the previous clues but also provides more facts. During the 7 January 1917 battle at la Somme's No Man's Land, he quickly took action to dupe everyone by changing his identity, first by swapping his boots and dog tags with deceased Gordes, the boots that well shod a German, Bastoche, Gordes, and now him. He then did the same for the fatally wounded and pneumonia-stricken Manech, swapping his dog tags with those of already-dead Desrochelles, and sought succor in a zeppelin hangar turned into a field hospital at Combles, from where Manech is immediately evacuated as Desrochelles. When a German bomb falls on the zeppelin hangar/hospital,

²³ For more details, see André Pallatier, *Le tragique destin d'un train de permissionnaires: Maurienne 12 décembre 1917* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2013) 161. Print.

blowing it to kingdom come and killing everyone except one, all assume that Gordes died there and Benoît in No Man's Land. As Mathilde bids *adieu* to Benoît, she carefully looks at his hand and says, "Strange, you made a hole in your life line," to which he replies, "Normal, I'm dead, like your fiancé at Bingo Crépuscule. If you ever find 'Jean Desrochelles' alive, let me know."

Shortly thereafter, detective Pire delivers guiding news to Mathilde to lead her out of the labyrinth: Manech is alive but an amnesiac convalescing in a home at Milly-la-Forêt. After a very long engagement and all dressed in white as if it were her wedding day, Mathilde finally finds her way out of the bureaucratic labyrinth, and who better than a priest to "re-unite" their *fil*. Their relationship comes full circle with Manech asking her the same question he did when he first met her as a boy: "Does it hurt when you walk?" As tears roll down Mathilde's cheek, we hear Badalamenti's woeful "Why Do You Cry." As a *sortie de guerre*, Manech, now a "new" man thanks to amnesia, triumphs over *la Grande Guerre*—its abominable butchery at la Somme and his execution *pour l'exemple* as well as its aftermath, shell shock, and PTSD; and Mathilde, as *fil conducteur* navigating her way through the deceptive maze designed by duplicitous high commanders, finds her way out of the labyrinth to discover the same, kind, happy, innocent Manech she met as a little girl.

"À ceux qui auront toujours vingt ans"²⁴

Unlike earlier World War I and motion pictures of more recent wars, and in spite of some directors' best archival research efforts, 21st-century productions lack a certain measure of hard realism and that indefinable *je ne sais quoi* of authenticity which can largely be attributed to that loss of first-hand accounts, that loss of reference points, that loss of guidance, that brusque and irreplaceable loss of *la transmission de la mémoire*.

Un long dimanche de fiançailles is not a war film, as such, but rather a film about war, a mystery-love story of semi fictitious characters set in the real world of post World War I with flashbacks of the very real Battle of la Somme and a war at its lowest point. In this latest film genre period, it is more about the "feel of the aftermath" and more particularly the *sorties de guerre*—the veterans trying to piece their lives back together, the new life of widows, and "white widows" such as Mathilde. However, it does contribute to re-open and shine the light again on those forbidden and largely buried First World War dark dossiers of *pour l'exemple*. Even if official archives were burned during the German occupation in World

²⁴ "To those who will always be twenty." See Alain Scoff, *Le Pantalon* (Paris: JC Lattes, 1983). Print.

War II, as Alain Scoff was told during the course of his research, and even if the witnesses and their direct descendants are no longer living, the *ne plus ultra* sordid wrongful acts were so engraved in those witnesses' memory and the surrounding grounds that today, if one makes the pilgrimage to those places of execution as Chole Dewe Mathews did many times, the faded bullet holes in the walls are still there, the resounding echo of those synchronized shots is still there, the smell of powder hovering in the air is still there; and, however thin the thread of memorial transmission may be, some of the descendants of the direct descendants are now on a mission. If, when released eleven years ago, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* played a small role in that awakening, and if only for that, it deserves a high accolade.

Because of the immense worldwide success of Jeunet's 2001 comedy released only three years earlier, *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, starring the same Audrey Tautou as Amélie, some critics, unable to separate her from Mathilde, humorously re-named *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* as *Les aventures d'Amélie dans les tranchées* (*Amélie's Adventures in the Trenches*). They may have a point, in which case it may have to do more with an actor's talent and versatility than the director's. In diametrically opposed genres from musical to Cold War intrigue and apocalypse, it would be difficult to imagine Maria von Trapp in Robert Wise's *The Sound of Music* and Mrs. Farrow in Blake Edwards' *The Tamarind Seed* other than Julie Andrews, or John "Lucky" Garnett in Georges Stevens' *Swing Time* and Julian Osborn in Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* other than Fred Astaire. Tautou's role as Mathilde, inspired from the real Blanche Maupas in her long battle to judicially discharge the tragic injustice inflicted on her husband Corporal Maupas, is anything but humorous, and unlike Andrews and Astaire, she performed for the same director in both films with an almost identical crew on the same location within three years' time, rendering the dissociation with Amélie more difficult.

Sometimes, for *Nouvelle-Vague* World War I film directors, just a few classical music notes, for example, can go a long way in authenticating the set and the actors' credulity. Similar to literature, with its richness in allegorical and metaphorical symbolisms, the connectivity to classical music can do that, particularly in dramatic moments and when the chips are down: Beethoven in Zanuck's *Longest Day* did convince the audience that fate was really knocking at the door, and Wagner in Dupeyron's *La Chambre des Officiers* did allude to the protagonist's long forlorn journey ahead. Joe Queenan in "Hey, there's an orchestra up here!" cleverly refers to the use of classical music on the big screen as a shorthand: "Handel indicated that the snobs have arrived, Mahler that someone is about to die, but not before pouting about it, and Wagner is a sure sign that big trouble's brewing" (*The*

Guardian, Friday, 5 October 2007). The story of Manech and Mathilde is one of love lost and love found again but bitter-sweetly, and in this instance, Jean Sibelius' *Valse Triste*, for example, could sublimely re-enforce the power of the happy-sad moment when he asked her again, "does it hurt when you walk?"

Throughout the movie, the soundtrack features no magical elements of tragedy in its melancholic personality. The mostly string orchestra, executing simple themes in an unenthusiastic harmony with little variety, evokes a loneliness that begins to get old after thirty minutes into the 133-minute movie. David Lean's preferred composer, Maurice Jarre, once explained that a good musical score should contain counterpoints in order to better mark a film's contrasts. Film critics describe a great score as one that elevates the movie and contributes to making it a memorable one. As good as Badalamenti's score is, and in spite of a Cesar nomination for best Music, it does not do that.

Like language and literature, the Seventh Art also mirrors time and society, and with the memory of the First World War passing from a living to a cultural one, its cinematic perceptions and conceptions inevitably lose the realism of some of the films of previous decades. Amid ubiquitous enmity, *Saturday Review* Hollis Alpert's visionary introspective review of *Paths of Glory* was quite prophetic in 1957, for the coronation did come, and the film now occupies its place in the Pantheon of motion pictures. Like noble wines, 1957, 1964, and 1970—with Kubrick, Losey, and Rosi—were excellent years, and their appreciation should only continue for years to come. With the best artistic intentions in mind, directors like Jeunet, Tavernier, and others had to come to the realization that attempts at projecting the morbidity of The Great War attracts neither financial support nor enough viewers willing to "stomach" it. To their credit, however, they are at least exposing us to its *sorties* and life in the aftermath, which has been neglected or ignored for too long.

If *Un long dimanche de fiançailles'* two condemned soldiers surviving the Bingo Crépuscule death sentence seems incredulous, improbable, implausible, or a too-good-to-be-true ending "à la Hollywood," at least the "truth-is-stranger-than-fiction" cliché is true in this case. It could be no more applicable than to the very real several-time-wounded Verdun *Croix de Guerre* recipient corporal Vincent Moulia who literally and very narrowly escaped the execution squad *pour l'exemple* in 1917. Sometimes in war, things like that happen, too. Furthermore, with the unspeakable number of casualties of Verdun and la Somme along with its deceptions, the battle Glover calls "[. . .] the extreme case of futile loss [. . .]" (*Humanity: A Moral History of The Twentieth Century* 157), Allies' morale was at its nadir, and, as the backdrop of Jeunet's film reminds us, desperate measures were apical. By June 1917, after le

Chemin des Dames and overwhelmed by mutinies, Pétain, reluctant to launch another major offensive, declared that he would rather wait for more tanks and the arrival of the Americans.

Epilogue

Finally, nearly 100 years later, it would be heartening for them to know that their voices—Sassoon’s plea to us, Owens’ message to his mother, and Seeger’s idealistic cry—all resonated in unison into the 21st century one June day 2012 in Oslo during a most befitting and moving ceremony. Awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize while under house arrest, Burmese democratic opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, one of the most prominent political prisoners of the past three decades, was finally able to deliver her acceptance speech in the Radhus before King Harald V, Queen Sonja, and other dignitaries. She reverently and eloquently articulated, “[. . .] The First World War represented a terrifying waste of youth and potential, a cruel squandering of the positive forces of our planet. The poetry of that era has special significance for me because I first read it at a time when I was the same age as many of those young men who had to face the prospect of withering before they had barely blossomed.” After quoting from “I Have a Rendezvous with Death,” she continued, “[. . .] youth and love and life perishing forever in senseless attempts to capture nameless, and unremembered places. And for what? Nearly a century on, we have yet to find a satisfactory answer” (“Aung San Suu Kyi—Nobel Lecture,” *Nobelprize.org*). In one of the organization’s more felicitous ceremonies in memory, “The Lady from Rangoon” chose not the words of Shakespeare but those of Alan Seeger who wrote these verses before being killed in action at la Somme on 4 July 1916:

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air —
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.²⁵

²⁵ Verses 1-6 of “I have a rendezvous with death.” Mark W. Van Wienen, *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002) 142. Print.

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