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# **Making Trauma Visible: Representations of Shell Shock and War Trauma in Films about the First World War**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree BA (Hons)  
in History.

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Sidney Nolan, “Young Soldier” (1977)<sup>1</sup>

[‘Head of Gallipoli soldier with bloodshot eyes...He appears to be in a state of shell-shock. It is reminiscent of his ‘Head of a soldier’, 1942...which represents Nolan’s reaction to the Second World War as lunacy.’]<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Nolan, “Young Soldier” (painting, 1977), accessed through “The Australian War Memorial” website, <http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/ART91438> (access date: 9th August, 2010)

Dedicated to, and in memory of Herbert Clarence Chalk (1896-1991).

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<sup>2</sup> “The Australian War Memorial” website, <http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/ART91438> (accessed 9th August, 2010)

### Abstract:

The First World War was the first war to really witness mass outbreaks of hitherto unseen physical and psychological disorders resulting from combat. These disorders, which baffled the first doctors who encountered them, came to be known under the umbrella term of 'shell shock.' Cinema about the Great War has played an important role in conveying certain political and social issues surrounding shell shock. My thesis examines films from the past one hundred years in order to highlight the enduring consequences of the Great War, not only for traumatised soldiers, but for families and societies too. I also look at the way cinema has used the shell shocked soldier as a particularly powerful anti-war symbol in its attempt to remove some of the condition's social stigma. Lastly, I examine the way changing representations of war trauma over the past century have been shaped by advances in psychiatric medicine and psychology and particularly by understandings about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

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*Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?  
Stroke on stroke of pain, -- but what slow panic,  
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?  
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms  
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished  
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?*

*- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.  
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.*

*Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented  
Back into their brains, because on their sense  
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;  
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh  
- Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.  
- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;  
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;  
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,  
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.*

*- Wilfred Owen, 'Mental Cases.'<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Mental Cases,' in *Poems of the Great War 1914-1918*, pp. 18-19.

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## Preface

**A**t a recent dinner with my extended family, a story was told about a teacher with whom my uncle went to school. The teacher had fought in the Second World War and had returned with what at the time was perceived as ‘shell shock.’ According to this particular tale, the boys in my uncle’s high school class knew about the man’s condition and deliberately played tricks on him. To taunt him, the boys would wait until their teacher had his back turned to the class, before dropping their heavy books on the ground. Hearing the loud, resounding thud of the books on the floor, their teacher would become startled and dive under his desk. If the story is to be believed, the teacher’s reaction to the sharp, unexpected noise was a side effect of an automatically ingrained anxiety response that was the product of his combat experience.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it was the reason for the boys labelling him ‘shell shocked.’

The prevalence of shell shocked and traumatised war veterans after the First and Second World Wars was far greater than we can imagine today. (It was probably not recognised at the time either). While my uncle’s teacher had obvious physical and psychological symptoms resulting from his combat experience, war trauma manifested itself in many forms. Due to the stigma attached to shell shock, however, many of these conditions were ignored, only to be whispered about in close circles, or within the privacy of the veterans’ family.<sup>5</sup> This was especially the case after the First World War, given that the concept of ‘shell shock’ was only recently established

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: A Handbook For Clinicians*, (Ohio, 1987), p. 12. Williams notes that Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD would become startled by loud noises.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Tyquin, *Madness and the Military: Australia’s Experience of the Great War* (Loftus, NSW: Australian Military History Publications, 2006), p. 20.



during the Great War.<sup>6</sup> In Australia, however, the shell shocked soldier was almost forgotten entirely, to be replaced by a mythologised Anzac hero originally born out of the Gallipoli legend.<sup>7</sup> And it seems that even today, the ideas of the brave Aussie digger and his adventures in the Great War still preoccupy our collective memory of the ‘war to end all wars’ and those that have followed, with our commemorative ceremonies, films and public exhibitions still revering this canonised figure.

For me, the First World War stands for something very different. My mother’s father fought on the Western Front in France and Flanders for over two years and he is the reason and the inspiration for this thesis. He survived the war. But after returning to Australia he suffered for the rest of his life from traumatic nightmares and irrational moods as a result of his prolonged combat experience. In his family’s eyes and the nation’s he was a hero, but privately he was suffering. My mother’s parents slept in separate bedrooms as a result of his violent nightmares. As a consequence when I think of Australians in the First World War, I don’t think of the Anzac heroes who have become so embedded in our national collective memory of the war. I think of my grandfather sleeping alone in a single bed in a small third bedroom, physically and emotionally alienated from his family, unable to talk about his traumatic experiences because in his day men didn’t talk about their emotions. And there were probably thousands of other returned soldiers just like him, afflicted by ‘shell shock’ or what would now be diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, sleeping in their spare rooms and suffering in silence.

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Andrews, *The Anzac Spirit* (Alexandria, New South Wales: Watts Publishing, 2004), p. 2. See also Tyquin, *Madness and the Military*, pp. 2-4.

A great many of the legacies of the First World War were not pretty or 'heroic' in conventional terms. Shell shock and war trauma were just a few of the unpleasant consequences of war that members of post-war societies preferred to ignore.

However, popular culture forms such as cinema seem to be leading the way in examining these oft silenced issues, particularly in recent years. It is my belief that cinema has tried to give a 'voice' to these shell shocked men- the teachers, the fathers, and all the others- whose embarrassment about their trauma would haunt them all their lives. For this reason, my thesis will examine the treatment of the shell shocked soldier in films about the First World War from the US, the UK and Europe, from the end of the war until the present day. Given that popular understandings of historical events and ideas are often shaped by cinema, the importance of this analysis lies in discovering how much of an impact these films may have had on raising awareness about, and removing the stigma of shell shock.

Despite my own identification with Australia's shell shocked veterans, however, I will not be looking at Australian cinema. The reason for this stems from my observation that Australian cinema has largely ignored the issue of shell shock, preferring, as has been the trend in society, to dwell instead on the heroic acts of our diggers in the Middle East during the First World War. (Think of *Gallipoli*, *40,000 Horsemen*, and *The Light Horsemen*).<sup>8</sup> Shell shock is nevertheless a universal phenomenon, and remains a significant part of World War One studies due to its long-lasting repercussions, the likes of which I have seen in my own family. I hope this study can contribute to a wider historical and social understanding of the lesser known

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<sup>8</sup> *40,000 Horsemen* (1941) Charles Chauvel (100 minutes); *Gallipoli* (1981) Peter Weir (110 minutes); *The Light Horsemen* (1987) Simon Wincer (131 minutes)

aspects of the war and their representation, and highlight just how complicated and enduring the consequences of the First World War are.

## Introduction:

# Defining ‘Shell Shock’ in the Social, Psychiatric and Cultural Histories of the Great War

*“Have you ever thought that war is a madhouse and that everyone in the war is a patient?”*

- Orianna Fallaci, Italian journalist and political interviewer.

**A**t the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, relatively little was understood about war-related mental disorders. Due, however, to the enormous number of soldiers exhibiting symptoms that hitherto had been relatively unseen on the battlefield, advances were being made in civilian and military medicine. These symptoms were the product of World War One- the first mass-industrialised war.<sup>9</sup> The effects of trench warfare on men’s bodies and minds resulted in psychiatric casualties with symptoms as diverse as loss of hearing, of sight and of speech, as well as depression, convulsions, paralysis, memory loss, and nightmares.<sup>10</sup> These men also exhibited strange behaviours. In film footage produced by the Netley hospital in England during the war, documentation of soldiers exhibiting these strange behaviours showed them employing unusual gaits, suffering from nervous twitches and speech impediments, and having physiological reactions to hearing the word

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Binneveld, (trans. John O’Kane), *From Shell Shock to Combat Stress: a Comparative History of Military Psychiatry* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997), pp. 38-46; also Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Binneveld, (trans. John O’Kane), *From Shell Shock to Combat Stress*, pp. 70-85; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, pp. 1-2.

“bomb.”<sup>11</sup> All of these physical and psychological manifestations, at first and at least in the British context, came under the umbrella term of ‘shell shock.’<sup>12</sup> Despite the discourse on nerves in Britain prior to the First World War, and the advent of the industrial revolution and the railway which produced new ideas about nervous disorders, the medical world had witnessed nothing quite like shell shock before.<sup>13</sup> The idea of the ‘shell-shocked soldier,’ however, displaying unusual physical symptoms, took hold of the public imagination.<sup>14</sup>

The term ‘shell shock’ was first coined by the British psychologist C.S. Myers in 1915, after he observed cases of soldiers who were suffering from blindness, mutism, paralysis, stupor and amnesia as a result of the shock of exploding shells.<sup>15</sup> The trench warfare and artillery shelling of the First World War produced a very specific kind of battle situation, which created a new and unique kind of trauma.<sup>16</sup> Actual physiological damage to the soldier’s body was believed to be caused by the high air pressure of exploding shells.<sup>17</sup> The *mental* state of ‘shell shock,’ however, is difficult to define. The various meanings that have been ascribed to shell shock since have come to encompass the mental, as well as physical effects of shelling and combat. Indeed, as early as 1916 the medical category ‘shell shock’ was being discredited as British doctors came to recognise the emotional strain associated with the condition.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “War Neuroses: Netley Hospital 1917” made by the Netley Hospital. Documentary segments 1-5 of 5 viewed through ‘Youtube’:  
Part 1 of 5: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AL5noVCpVKw> (accessed 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p 2, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 28

<sup>15</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>17</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p 31.

The term 'shell shock' also does not account for the different names used for similar war-related mental trauma in other belligerent countries such as France and Germany during the war. In Germany, ideas about mental illness had been an important part of medical psychiatry since the eighteenth century. Freudian ideas about hysteria and the suppression of memories were already well established, with the concept of hysteria having its roots in the factory 'accident neuroses' of the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>19</sup> During the First World War, men with war neuroses were also considered to have suffered from a similar manifestation of 'hysteria,' which, like shell shock, included symptoms such as shakes, tremors, and disorders of sight, of hearing and of gait.<sup>20</sup> German historian Paul Frederick Lerner recently noted, however, that hysteria was 'generally considered to be a female problem, more likely to affect more volatile peoples such as the French.' It was not something considered to be ordinarily seen in German men.<sup>21</sup> In France, the situation was more complicated. Although the French also diagnosed their war neurotics with 'hysteria,' debates in Britain were included in and affected the way that shell shock was dealt with in France.<sup>22</sup>

While 'shell shock' caused a stir in the medical community during the Great War, in recent years historical studies have documented a renewed interest in the field of psychiatric history.<sup>23</sup> Trends in psychology and history have begun to see 'shell shock' as an early form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with these studies suggesting that PTSD can be traced back to the First World War. The term 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' and the condition itself, was only formally recognised as a

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<sup>19</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 13; see also Lerner, *Hysterical Men*, pp. 1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Frederick Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Lerner, *Hysterical Men*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, pp. 27-28, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p 2, describes the medical debates which erupted around Britain in lecture halls and in journals, on the issue of shell shock.

mental disorder in 1980.<sup>24</sup> According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is defined as a condition in which one experiences extreme fear, helplessness or horror after being exposed to serious threat of injury or death.<sup>25</sup> An individual suffering from the condition is said to:

Have memories of the event that they relive again and again (i.e. flashbacks, nightmares, preoccupation with thoughts or images of the events of war); they avoid people and places associated with trauma, becoming distressed at cues or reminders of the experience (eg. the anniversary of the event); and they are hyper-aroused (difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, hypervigilant).<sup>26</sup>

Since the nineteen eighties insights provided by psychology into PTSD have prompted historians and medical professionals alike to re-evaluate the precursors of PTSD in order to better understand war trauma and its social and economic origins and consequences. The historian Ben Shephard suggests the reason for the recent trend towards a retrospective look at war psychiatry, explaining that, until the nineteen eighties,

...military psychiatry was a subject of deep obscurity, of interest in peacetime only to a handful of serving doctors. Then, in the 1980s, this all changed. Vietnam brought a sudden rediscovery of military psychiatry, not just by doctors working with veterans, but, for the first time, by historians...they dragged the subject back into the headlights of fashion and illuminated some aspects of it, most notably concepts of mental health before 1914.<sup>27</sup>

This renewed interest has coincided with an increased interest in war and memory in social history. Many of these new studies on war neuroses take a linear approach by tracing the origins of combat trauma back to ideas of 'shell shock' in the First World

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<sup>24</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. v.

<sup>25</sup> Priyattam J. Shiromani, Terence M. Keane, Joseph E. LeDoux (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Basic Science and Clinical Practise* (Totowa, N.J. : Humana, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Shiromani, Keane, LeDoux (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, p. v.

<sup>27</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. xx.

War, through to the development of ‘combat stress’ in the Second World War, and ending with the most recent understandings of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with a focus on Vietnam and the Gulf War. These fresh historical investigations are shedding new light on a once taboo topic which still resonates today.

Tom Williams, in his recent medical study on the psychological consequences of the Vietnam War, is one of many academics to track PTSD back to the First World War.<sup>28</sup> Williams suggests that it was the First World War which heralded the beginning of medical investigation into combat-related mental disorders, noting that during the Great War it became increasingly obvious that specific syndromes were related to combat duty, while by the end of the war, the term ‘shell shock’ became known more commonly by the name ‘war neurosis’ as understandings of the syndrome evolved.<sup>29</sup> It has been argued, however, by historian Edgar Jones that the beginnings of (British) military psychiatry and the discourse on war trauma actually began in the nineteenth century, starting with the Napoleonic Wars. In these wars, doctors recorded instances of ‘cerebro-spinal shock,’ where soldiers displayed symptoms of ‘tingling, twitching and partial paralysis.’ These symptoms are remarkably similar to those associated with shell shock.<sup>30</sup>

Part of the reason for the excitement and controversy over shell shock during the Great War, however, was that in the past, the psychologically wounded had never represented a threat to the army.<sup>31</sup> In the First World War, new battle strategies and weaponry resulted in soldiers becoming increasingly mentally and physically

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<sup>28</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*.

<sup>29</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Edgar Jones, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove, East Sussex; New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 4.



exhausted (sometimes battles lasted for days on end, and new fears regarding ‘gas shock’ were prevalent), with an enormous number of ‘shell shock’ cases being reported, taking a subsequent toll on armies’ numerical strength.<sup>32</sup> As such, the military response saw pressure put on doctors to send damaged men back to the front line (although large numbers of shell-shocked patients were never returned to the front), and the relative ignorance in the military about mental illness often resulted in shell-shock being attributed to cowardice, for which many soldiers were shot.<sup>33</sup> Only recently, in ‘Shot at Dawn’ campaigns posthumously pardoning these men, have Britain and other belligerent nations tried to rectify the injustices suffered by soldiers who were executed for desertion and ‘cowardice’ that was sometimes the result of psychological trauma.<sup>34</sup>

During the Great War, prevailing conceptions of masculinity, honour, self control and mental fortitude influenced understandings of ‘shell shock’ as a disorder equated with weakness and cowardice, which in turn served to embed the condition with its taboo status.<sup>35</sup> Those suffering from ‘shell shock’, ‘war neurosis’ and other forms of trauma were therefore often labelled as ‘shirkers’, ‘malingerers’ and ‘cowards.’<sup>36</sup> In addition, contemporary perceptions of mental illness dictated that men exhibiting signs of emotional breakdown did so as a result of hereditary factors, like weakness of

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<sup>32</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, pp. 38-46; also Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25; Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 83; Lerner, *Hysterical Men*.

<sup>34</sup> Ben Fenton, "Pardon For Soldiers Executed in the Great War," in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday August 17, 2006; see also ‘Shot at Dawn,’ <http://www.shotatdawn.info/> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2010)

<sup>35</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25

<sup>36</sup> There appears to be a consensus among historians of Britain, Australia and Germany that those diagnosed with shell-shock in the early war years carried with them the personal stigma of cowardice and lack of self-control. See Jason Crouthamel’s “War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis: Working Class Politics and Psychological Trauma in Weimar Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, April 2002) p. 23; also Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25; and Tyquin, *Madness and the Military*, p. 35.

character or degeneracy.<sup>37</sup> It was even posited by the early twentieth century geneticist R.J.A. Berry that men suffering from shell shock had smaller brains than other soldiers, suggesting that their condition was the product of inherited genetic weakness, although psychiatrists in the 1920s were beginning to see the psychological bases of war neurosis.<sup>38</sup> As a result of the contemporary medical hypotheses and popular eugenics theories about the hereditary nature of mental illness, psychologically wounded veterans and their families in both Europe and Australia struggled to receive war pensions.<sup>39</sup> Pension issues often related to the stigma attached to mental illness.<sup>40</sup> In addition to having to having negative implications for veterans' families, in Australia the stigma attached to shell shock also conflicted with the ideals of ANZAC masculinity, which equated wartime heroism with a man's psychological fortitude. Incarceration in a psychiatric institution for the treatment of war-related illnesses seemed to confirm a soldier's failure as an Anzac. Lest their shortcomings therefore bring shame upon their families, or increase the emasculation of not living up to the expectations defined by their gender and place in the ANZAC legend, those men with less obvious psychological wounds often chose to keep silent.<sup>41</sup>

Not all individuals involved in the war were silent on the matter of shell-shock, however. Writers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, as well as

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<sup>37</sup> Marina Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), pp. 159-161; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Garton, "Sound Minds and Healthy Bodies: Re-considering Eugenics in Australia, 1914-1940" in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol.26, no.103, (Oct 1994), pp. 163-181. Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2010 via <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/fullText;dn=950201768;res=APAFT>ISSN: 1031-461X, p. 175>.

<sup>39</sup> Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs*, pp. 159-161; Crouthamel, "War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis," pp. 164-170.

<sup>40</sup> Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs*, pp. 159-161.

<sup>41</sup> Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs*, pp. 159-160.

filmmakers, artists and political activists of many nations played an important role in bringing war trauma into social and political discourse. In Germany, as historians Paul Lerner and Jason Crouthamel have suggested, traumatised soldiers became a tool of the political Left to argue against the government and the upper classes who seemingly wanted to forget the war and ignore the issues of pensions for damaged soldiers.<sup>42</sup> In the cultural history of the Great War, it seems that contemporary anti-war literature was prompted by the anger on the part of the writers at the institutions, politicians, women and others who forced or encouraged young men to fight for a national cause that was sometimes perceived as unjustified or immoral. In cinema too, much on the subject of the First World War (often based on this literature) was imbued with anti-war sentiments that, through visual and often graphic images highlighted the horrendous nature of the first mass industrial war.

Cinematic representations of the Great War, like their literary counterparts, often included images of traumatised or ‘shell shocked’ soldiers. These representations are a powerful tool of the anti-war film. Throughout the twentieth century many cinematic depictions of the Great War have used the symbol of the shell-shocked soldier to highlight certain economic and social and injustices resulting from the war. Though different belligerent nations have dealt with the traumatised soldier on film in various ways, I would like to suggest that each has, in its own way, used the popular medium of cinema in an attempt to de-stigmatise shell-shock in a way that societies-at-large were unable or unwilling to do.

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<sup>42</sup> Crouthamel, “War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis,” p. 163; Lerner, *Hysterical Men*, p. 1.

Considering the recent renewed interest in the First World War in historical and psychiatric studies in the past twenty years, particularly in regards to shell-shock, it is interesting that there have been few historians who have addressed the subject of shell shock in film. In the Australian context, where new studies by Joy Damousi and Marina Larsson are leading the way in understanding the economic and social consequences of shell shock, especially within families and psychiatric institutions, it is somewhat surprising that scant attention has been paid to the cultural representations of the damaged soldiers of the Great War.<sup>43</sup> With the exception of Anton Kaes book *Shell-Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, which focuses specifically on the cinema of post-war Germany, there has been very little written on the subject.<sup>44</sup>

In light of all this it is my aim to address this largely unexplored motif of the shell-shocked soldier in cinema about the First World War. In our own time, when men are returning from Iraq and the Middle East with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder- which is the modern successor of 'shell shock' - the study of war-related psychological disorders continues to be relevant. Cinematic representation of these disorders is equally significant. As a medium of mass entertainment cinema has a wide-reaching accessibility. Its important impact on popular understandings of the past and present cannot be overstated. Cinema's ability to reach a large audience through a visual language that most can understand makes it a powerful instrument of communication, especially when it is able to broach a once taboo subject like shell shock. As a popular entertainment form, however, the cinema should be regarded with a degree of

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<sup>43</sup> Joy Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-War Australia* (Cambridge ; Oakleigh, Vic. : Cambridge University Press, 2001); Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs*.

<sup>44</sup> Anton Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, c2009).

suspicion due to its need to simplify, to dramatise, to promote a particular position, and of course to turn a profit. Nevertheless, whether as provocateur, educator, or propaganda machine, cinema's role in mediating the experiences of the First World War to a mass audience has made it significant. Cinema's importance rests in its ability as a visual medium to bring home a whole experience for the viewer in a way that is sensory and at times confrontational. By challenging the public- sometimes as early as 1918- with social issues regarding the stigmatisation and treatment of shell shocked soldiers that many would have preferred to ignore, the film medium seems to have achieved what it took the psychiatric institutions much longer to accomplish- it brought awareness about shell shock and mental illness to the general public.

Through an examination of films from France, Germany, England and America, the intention of this thesis is thus to show the way cinema uncovered the social and political issues surrounding war trauma, laying the base to remove the stigma of war-related mental illness over time. My study takes a chronological approach, in order to examine the way changing knowledge about war trauma and shell shock has been mirrored in the cinematic representation of the condition, highlighting the two-way relationship between medical and cultural history. In a case study approach, each chapter will examine a different period of the twentieth century. In grouping countries and decades in this way, similar social and political issues surrounding shell shock contemporary to each period become illuminated. In chapter one, I will be looking at the immediate post-war cinema of Germany and France from 1918-20 to show the way the war traumatised not only the soldiers who fought in it, but also had a lasting psychological resonance for post-war societies. Chapter two will examine British and American anti-war films of the period 1930-1964 to illuminate the way the films of

this era used the shell shocked soldier as a powerful anti-war tool. Chapter three examines the way developing psychiatric knowledge in the wake of the Vietnam War has not only reinvigorated cinematic interest in the First World War and shell shock, but also shaped the representation of the condition. This chapter also looks at the continuation of a dialogue in anti-war cinema which uses the shell shocked soldier both to indict the military brutalities of the First World War, and to highlight the devastating effects of returned soldiers on their families.

**Chapter One:**

**These ‘Purgatorial Shadows’: The Ghosts of War Memory  
and the Traumatized National Psyche in the Post-War  
Cinema of France and Germany, 1919-20**

*‘Nerves: you mysterious avenue of the soul, you messenger of highest desire and deepest suffering. If you fail, man is but animal. Nerves, are you not the soul itself?’*

- Robert Reinert, *Nerven* (Germany, 1919)

In 1919 Robert Reinert’s film *Nerven* (‘Nerves’) was released in Germany.<sup>45</sup> The film was concerned with the overwrought nerves of post-war Germany’s citizens, and its impact upon those at its initial screening was astonishing. According to one sensational report, members of the audience were so traumatised that several had to be hospitalised, and one woman allegedly woke at night after seeing the film and ran into the street screaming ‘Now I am going to die! Now I am going to die!’<sup>46</sup> It is difficult to imagine how a film could have had an effect so dramatic on its audience. In immediate post-war Germany, however, with a nation in the midst of revolution and struggling to come to terms with various economic and social consequences of the First World War, including dealing with its damaged soldiers, one can begin to understand how *Nerven* may have generated such a response.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Nerven* (1919) Robert Reinert (110 minutes)

<sup>46</sup> “Finstere Metropole oder Gemütlichkeit: *Nerven*, Deutschland 1919, von Robert Reinert” (“Sinister City or Comfort Zone: *Nerves*, Germany 1919, from Robert Reinert”) on Sueddeutsche.de ‘Muenchen & Region,’ <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-im-film-finstere-metropole-oder-gemuetlichkeit-1.211010-3> (accessed 8th September, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Crouthamel, “War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis,” p. 164.

The opening screenshot of *Nerven* described it as a film which ‘represents the mood of 1919 as “nervous dynamite arising in the human psyche as a result of war and hardship.”’ *Nerven* undoubtedly reflected the fear and growing unease of a nation which was traumatised by defeat in the First World War and humiliated by the terms of peace ‘dictated’ at Versailles.<sup>48</sup> Germany was at breaking point, and the war had taken its toll on the country’s nerves. Similarly in France, despite being on the ‘winning’ side, the immense devastation caused by the war to its citizens and physical landscape left a lasting imprint on the French collective memory and the national psyche.<sup>49</sup> The psychological consequences of war on the people of France and Germany were reflected in their national cinema in the immediate post-war years. In addition to addressing issues surrounding the treatment of individual soldiers traumatised by war, a defining characteristic of some of the cinema of these two nations at this time was their suggestion of a wider, more symbolic national trauma.

The grouping of German and French cinema in this chapter is therefore the result of the way both depict the mirroring of battlefield trauma with trauma on the home front during and after the First World War. I have put them together this way in order to examine the impact of the war on the national psyche. The similarities between some French and German cinema of the period 1919-20 will become apparent as both are concerned with themes of guilt, anger, war trauma, madness, and political unrest. The cinema of both these nations also reflects contemporary psychiatric and social knowledge about nerves, hysteria and shell shock. These understandings and their

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher J. Fischer, ‘National Sacrifices, Local Losses: Politics and Commemoration in Interwar Alsace,’ pp. 133-145 in Patricia M.E. Lorcin and Daniel Brewer (eds.), *France and Its Spaces of War: Experience, Memory, Image* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The lasting impact of the war on French memory is evident also in the renewed interest of French cinema in the past twenty years on the subject of the First World War. Some of these films will be discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.



representation in film tell us a great deal about the way societies dealt with and treated the traumas of war. Whether expressed in a literal manner, as in the case of *Nerven*, or the more metaphorical manifestations seen in Weimar Expressionist films, madness underlay the mood, if not the storylines, of many of the films of this era.

The morbidity and angst of much post-war Weimar cinema has historically been linked to ideas of the German national psyche traumatised by the war, and the guilt, humiliation and anger caused by post-war reparations, revolution and the failures of democracy.<sup>50</sup> German silent cinema of this period is often characterised in terms of its unique aesthetic and ‘demonic’ and depressive motifs, storylines and characters.<sup>51</sup> Debates have circulated amongst film historians as to the meanings behind these seemingly insane and sometimes archaic cinematic creations. Most studies examine the manifestation of madness in the ‘Expressionist’ genre. ‘Expressionist’ cinema was said to be distinguished by its

Unusual lighting, the stylisation of sets and acting, the Gothic-story material and fairytale motifs, angular exteriors, claustrophobic interiors, and above all, that excess of soul ascribed to all things ‘typically German.’<sup>52</sup>

Film historian Siegfried Kracauer, analysing the Expressionist films of 1920s, attributed the dark side of German Weimar cinema to this idea of a ‘German soul.’ Kracauer’s much debated study of the psychological aspects of German Weimar cinema suggested the films of the Weimar period exposed the German ‘soul’ and

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<sup>50</sup> Noah Isenberg (eds.), *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era* (New York : Columbia University Press, c2009), p. 6. See also Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After : Germany's Historical Imaginary*, p. 24, quoting film Historian Lotte Eisner in *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema*, (1969), p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 20.

revealed ‘inaccessible layers of the German mind.’<sup>53</sup> Kracauer attributed the sinister characters and chaotic scenery of Weimar films to the madness of war. The German ‘soul,’ embodied in the stylised Expressionist scenery, ‘unearthly’ lighting and gothic characters of Weimar cinema, was therefore a manifestation of the national psyche traumatised by war.<sup>54</sup>

The idea of a national trauma manifested in a nation’s cinema is apparent in Expressionist films such as Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). *Caligari* reflected a society driven mad by war in an abstract manner.<sup>55</sup> According to Anton Kaes’ study of Weimar Germany’s ‘shell shocked’ cinema (one of the few studies to address this topic), *Caligari*’s ‘historical unconscious’ represented the memory of traumatic war experience.<sup>56</sup> Kaes argues that *Caligari*, through its particular characters and narrative construction, served as an indictment of the treatment of war neurotics by psychiatric institutions. Through its disturbing motifs and Expressionist aesthetic used to portray the brutal treatment of post-war Germany’s mentally ill patients, *Caligari* has been seen to be representative of war trauma and its post-war repercussions, for both individual and nation.

The story of *Caligari* began with a young man and an old man, sitting in an eerie garden. The older man said to his younger friend ‘There are spirits all around us. They have driven me from Hearth and Home, from wife and child.’ The younger man, Francis, indicating the ghost-like figure of a woman (Jane) who passed by, replied,

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<sup>53</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2004), pp 3; 60.

<sup>54</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) Robert Wiene (71 minutes)

<sup>56</sup> Anton Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, c2009), p. 54.

‘That is my fiancé. What she and I have lived through is stranger than what you have lived through.’ The film flashed back to the strange events of the young man’s life prior to this moment. The story that unfolded told of Caligari, a magician, who travelled to fairground shows, entertaining the crowds with his ‘somnambulist’ (a sleepwalker) named Cesare. Caligari declared that his Somnambulist would ‘awaken from his death trance and...answer all your questions. Cesare knows the past and sees the future.’ Under Caligari’s hypnosis, Cesare awoke from his trance and committed murder upon a friend of Francis. He also attacked Jane while she slept, chasing her from her home and leaving her traumatised. Francis, determined to find out who murdered his friend and attacked Jane went to the prison where a man accused of his friend’s murder was being held. The accused was not Cesare, but an innocent man who had been chained to the floor of his cell. In true Expressionist style, the cell reflected the suffocating madness of the film through its claustrophobic interior and its aesthetics of sharp, angular triangles which comprised the walls of the prisoner’s cell. Indeed, the prisoner’s incarceration and nightmarish surroundings were one of the film’s many symbolic reflections of the madness and chaos of post-war Germany and its traumatised psyche.

In his search to find the man who murdered his friend, Francis also visited an insane asylum. Suspecting Cesare of the murder, he discovered to his horror that Caligari was the director of the asylum. While searching Caligari’s office, the doctors and Francis found a text on ‘somnambulism’ written by a man named Caligari in the eighteenth century. The magician and asylum director had adopted this identity. Caligari, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly insane, and began to visualise writing on the walls telling him ‘Du musst Caligari werden’ (‘You must become

Caligari'). The asylum director's identity as Caligari, and his somnambulist's crime, was soon revealed and the insane Caligari was eventually forced by his own employees into a straightjacket. The final scenes returned to the opening narrative of our storyteller Francis who revealed 'from that day on, the madman never left his cell.' However, in the film's psychological twist, we discover that it was Francis and the old man, as well as Jane, who were in the insane asylum, and that the story of Caligari was but a figment of Francis's imagination.

Anton Kaes has suggested that '*Caligari* is an aggressive diatribe against the murderous practices of war psychiatry.'<sup>57</sup> This is supported by the fact that the film's protagonists fell prey to madness and became the victims of the psychiatric institution, symbolising the victimisation of soldiers that occurred during the war at the hands of military doctors. Injured soldiers, including suspected shirkers, were often treated with painful and sometimes dangerous electroshock therapy by psychiatrists.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, many patients examined for war neurosis in Germany complained of harassment by doctors who suspected them of political subversion or malingering, an issue which became politicised in regards to pensions in post-war Weimar Germany.<sup>59</sup> *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* perpetuated the monstrous image of wartime psychiatry out of control, through its depiction of the dangerous practise of hypnosis which, pioneered by Freud in 1890s Germany, was designed to help patients uncover traumatic memories.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 53.

<sup>58</sup> Lerner, *Hysterical Men*, p. 57; Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Lerner, *Hysterical Men*, p. 219.

<sup>60</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 54.

Elaborating on the anxieties about the treatment of the war traumatised by demonic psychiatrists, Anton Kaes suggests that:

Caligari oscillates between two types of psychiatry operative in World War I: the traditional model...that became sadistic and even murderous because of unchecked authority, and the newer psychoanalytical model...that wanted to cure the patient by slowly uncovering the cause of his trauma.<sup>61</sup>

Francis's recollection of the events leading to Caligari's madness reflects the latter type of psychiatry, which used 'talking cures' to re-enact and uncover trauma. His flashbacks mirror the traumatic flashbacks of a war neurotic and his retelling of them can be seen as a 'talking cure,' a procedure which was (and still is) practised by psychiatric institutions in the treatment of trauma.<sup>62</sup> The psychiatrist in *Caligari*, however, tends to represent the former, more demonic model of war psychiatry, with its dangerous influential control over the individual patient. The film's nightmarish settings, its 'soul', and the frightening doctor Caligari suggest a more sinister psychiatry, which, abusing its power, used hypnosis as a tool to control war neurotics. This is illuminated by Dr Caligari's mad rant:

Now I shall unravel the psychiatric secrets of Caligari! Now I shall discover if it is true that a somnambulist can be compelled to perform acts that- in a waking state- he would never commit and would be repugnant to him!

The fear in post-war Germany about psychiatrists' propensity to influence patients under hypnosis reflected nineteenth century discourses suspicious of hypnotism. According to historian Andreas Killen, fairground hypnotism, the likes of which we see depicted in *Caligari*, came under fierce criticism. Killen notes that 'lay hypnotists

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<sup>61</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, pp. 49-53.

drew sizable crowds to their street corner and fairground performances.’ Due, however, to their supposed connections to outbreaks of crime, madness and suicide, public exhibitions by hypnotists were banned by the German Reich in 1895.<sup>63</sup> In *Caligari*, the mad doctor and hypnotist Caligari, and his subject Cesare, likewise become emblematic of both the fears about hypnotism and criminality in pre-war Germany, and the controlling practises of war psychiatry in post-war Germany which, in their cinematic representations, took on a demonic image.

Similar to the way *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* was concerned with the dubious psychiatric practices of electroshock and hypnosis, so too was there a concurrent discourse on cinema at this time which worried about the dangerous hypnotic effects of the moving image, including its impact on nerves.<sup>64</sup> Like fairground hypnotism, early cinema-going experiences were believed to be connected with problems of mental and physical health, such as nervousness, short-sightedness and neurasthenia, as well as crime and the perceived problem of homosexuality.<sup>65</sup> Historian Scott Curtis reiterates that concerns about cinema spectatorship stemmed from the idea that ‘cinema affects the nervous system directly without the mediation contemplation provides.’<sup>66</sup> Cinema was also believed to have a hypnotic effect, the danger of which related to the viewers’ ‘lack of impulse control, paralysis of the will, [and]

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<sup>63</sup> Andreas Killen, “The Scene of the Crime: Pyschiatric Discourses on the Film Audience in Early Twentieth Century Germany,” pp. 99-111, in Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (eds.), *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture* (England : John Libbey ; Bloomington, IN : Distributed in North America by Indiana University Press, c2009), p. 101.

<sup>64</sup> Scott Curtis, “Between Observation and Spectatorship: Medicine, Movies and Mass Culture in Imperial Germany,” (pp. 87-98) in Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (eds.), *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture* (England : John Libbey ; Bloomington, IN : Distributed in North America by Indiana University Press, c2009), pp. 94-95. See also Killen, “The Scene of the Crime: Pyschiatric Discourses on the Film Audience in Early Twentieth Century Germany,” p. 102

<sup>65</sup> Killen, “The Scene of the Crime: Pyschiatric Discourses on the Film Audience in Early Twentieth Century Germany,” p. 100.

<sup>66</sup> Scott Curtis, “Between Observation and Spectatorship: Medicine, Movies and Mass Culture in Imperial Germany,” pp. 94-95.

suggestibility.’<sup>67</sup> These superstitious theories could be used to explain the audience reaction to *Nerven*, which had the precise effects on viewers that critics of the cinema were concerned about. Not only did *Nerven* represent a nervous society, it actually exacerbated people’s nerves. After watching the film, several people were admitted to a ‘Nervenlinik’ (literally translated as ‘nerve clinic’).<sup>68</sup>

It is more likely, however, that the reaction to *Nerven* was the result of the already overwrought nerves of post-war Germany’s citizens who were both the subject of, and also the viewing audience for Reinert’s film. Seeing their very anxieties played out in front of their eyes, and coming to terms with their national ‘soul’ represented on film would surely have had an unnerving psychological resonance for the film’s first viewers. *Nerven*’s traumatic impact perhaps stemmed from the way it forced Germans to face the consequences of the First World War, highlighting a two-way relationship between war trauma and cinema. With the amount of editing and censorship that has happened since 1919, however, the original meanings have undoubtedly changed. Our twenty first century viewing of the film is very different to the experience of the audience of 1919, making it hard to determine why *Nerven* drove people mad.<sup>69</sup>

*Nerven* is an unusual film, described by one recent reviewer as the forgotten counterpart to *Caligari*, probably due to its similar themes of madness, and its reflection (albeit a more literal one) of a greater national trauma.<sup>70</sup> *Nerven* told of the lives of three characters: the factory owner Roloff, his revolutionary daughter Marja,

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<sup>67</sup> Killen, “The Scene of the Crime: Pyschiatric Discourses on the Film Audience in Early Twentieth Century Germany,” pp. 100-102.

<sup>68</sup> “Finstere Metropole oder Gemütlichkeit: *Nerven*, Deutschland 1919, von Robert Reinert”

<sup>69</sup> We are told at the beginning of *Nerven* that much of the original film has been lost or censored.

<sup>70</sup> Description of “Nerven” showing at the Zeughaus Kino at the German Historical Museum, <http://www.dhm.de/kino/kassandra.html>, (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2010)

and the teacher John. It depicted an edgy and confused post-war Germany, preoccupied with nerves and consumed by war guilt. In one early intertitle, the film warned 'beware you peoples, shaken by nervous epidemics and terror and panic.' In the opening scenes, Roloff worried about the impact on his nerves when his factory was destroyed by a machine of his own creation. This prophetically heralded doom for Roloff who had claimed his machines would take over the world. The destruction of his factory became a warning about the consequences of military arrogance and the future of a post-war world steeped in anger and resentment. Roloff lamented 'what unrest and discontent are spreading across the world. You ask for bread, they seek power.' His obscure references to a world consumed by hate and power hierarchies seem to resonate with the bitterness of post-war Germany forced to pay reparations for the war's damage. That Germany's suffering was connected to the battlefield, and was personal as well as economic, is also clear. As a man searched for his son in the mass grave of a battlefield, the film noted 'The peoples are mourning on bloody battlefields.'

Devastated by the war, the German nation's suffering manifested itself into madness. Just as Roloff's mental health deteriorated and he began to see ghosts of the dead rising to wreak their revenge on the civilian population, so too did the other people in his town become hysterical and violent in their need to find an outlet for their war guilt. The actions of Marja's gardener, who was desperately in love with her, offer a good example. After being called a 'coward' because he wanted to devote his life to her rather than the war effort, the gardener's frustration at Marja's rejection turned into temporary insanity and led him to kill a man in the street with a sledge hammer. When questioned by one of the town's citizens as to why he did it, his confused



response was ‘I don’t know.’ He was then grabbed by the angered mob of townspeople, lined up against a wall and shot by firing squad without trial. In its decision to take matters into its own hands, the mob’s actions begin to suggest a world turned mad. The mob’s rejection of the law in its handling of the murder, and its practise of shooting the gardener by firing squad (reminiscent of the army’s heavy handed practises), suggests that wartime behaviour transferred itself into civilian life and that the memory of war was causing the psychological breakdown of Germany’s citizens.<sup>71</sup>

The ideas about post-war nerves and their expression of a larger national trauma were for the most part elaborated through the character of Roloff. The breakdown of Roloff’s nerves began when his daughter Marja was believed to have been raped by the fervently spiritual teacher John. Roloff’s nerves caused him to imagine John raped Marja. Consequently he had John imprisoned. When Roloff discovered that his accusations were false, the guilt of having convicted an innocent man caused his mental deterioration. Roloff’s downward spiral to madness was mirrored in the film’s chaotic montage which showed his growing insanity. Roloff’s mother equated his psychotic state as deriving from his father’s own pathological fits of rage. ‘Hereditary taint is the doctor’s way of putting it,’ Roloff noted, incidentally illuminating contemporary psychiatric discourses also, which attributed mental illness, madness and shell shock to heredity.<sup>72</sup>

Roloff suffered from hallucinations, anxiety and irrational, uncontrolled fits of rage, symptoms which are remarkably similar to those nowadays associated with war-

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<sup>71</sup> Regarding the military’s harsh practises, see Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25 in which he notes the way the military shot perceived cowards.

<sup>72</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 161.

related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>73</sup> (This hints at the way battlefield trauma symbolically affected those on the home front). Roloff, paranoid and in a fit of rage, yelled at his wife Elizabeth ‘What are you laughing at, hussy?’ He began to imagine strangling Elizabeth. These scenes were overlaid with images of sex and street riots and the disconcerting montage of images effectively conveyed Roloff’s disturbed mind. Trying to flee the images which haunted him, Roloff jumped into a carriage and told the driver ‘Drive as fast as you can! Perhaps I can escape from these horrible images!’ He continued to believe, however, that he had actually killed his wife, and feared he was being led to his execution. Disturbing images of naked men and firing squads conveyed his unstable belief that he was being persecuted, and to the teacher John he pleaded ‘Save me! Save me! These dreadful images, which the nerve doctors call illusions, are back again!’ This recurring discourse on nerves reveals the film’s preoccupation with the lasting impact of the war on both the individual and the German national psyche. Roloff noted to John that ‘my own nerves mirror the nerves of the world. And the world’s nerves are ill.’ In this way he spoke to the wider psychological impact of the war on the German national consciousness.

Abel Gance’s film *J’accuse* (‘I accuse’) was released in France the same year as Robert Reinert’s *Nerven* was released in Germany.<sup>74</sup> According to its director Abel Gance, *J’accuse* was intended to be a searing indictment of the First World War.<sup>75</sup> ‘I had a feeling of frenzy,’ Gance said, ‘to use this new medium, the cinema, to show the world the stupidity of war.’<sup>76</sup> In representing individual trauma on both the home

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<sup>73</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> *J’accuse* (1919) Abel Gance (166 minutes)

<sup>75</sup> Kevin Brownlow, “The Waste of War: Abel Gance’s *J’accuse*.” *J’accuse: A Film By Abel Gance: The Newly Restored Original 1919 Version*. [DVD and booklet] The Flicker Alley Collection: 2008, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Brownlow, “The Waste of War: Abel Gance’s *J’accuse*,” p. 6.

front and the battlefield during the war, *J'accuse* highlighted the effect of the war on a broader level and on the French national psyche. Although *J'accuse*'s narrative differed to *Nerven*'s, the similarity of the two films is extraordinary, which surely attests to the uniformly devastating impact of the war on collective memory. *J'accuse* mirrored *Nerven* in a variety of ways, including in its visual style and its themes. Both films were preoccupied with death and fears that the ghosts of dead soldiers would return to haunt the living. Both were concerned with mothers mourning their sons in battle, and both reflected the grief and trauma affecting returned soldiers and those on the home front. Even in its medieval provincial setting, with its stone walled interiors and archaic furnishings, not to mention its symbolic use of animal omens and classical poetry, *J'accuse* identified to a degree with the Romantic and Gothic themes of Germany's Expressionist cinema, though in this case, not exclusively with *Nerven*.<sup>77</sup>

The story of *J'accuse* centred on a love triangle between a young woman Edith, her brutish older husband Francois, and the romantic poet Jean Diaz, who was in love with Edith. Both men left to fight in the war and Edith was sent to live with her parents. While there, Edith's village was occupied by German soldiers and she was raped by several of them. Edith returned to her father with the child she bore of one of the Germans, explaining through traumatic flashbacks how the situation unfolded. Still on the front, Jean became shell shocked and was discharged home, where he helped Edith care for her daughter. After returning to the front he suffered from delusions and madness. When discharged from hospital after the war, Jean led an army of dead soldiers' ghosts into the town, to investigate whether the townspeople's

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Weimar Cinema, Mobile Selves and Anxious Males: Kracauer and Eisner Revisited," in Dietrich Scheunemann (eds.) *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), pp. 33-71. P.45. Elsaesser notes the way German Weimar Cinema was preoccupied with Romantic art and fantastic literature, and that the cinema, in its reaction to modernity, thus underwent a Gothic revival.

behaviour during the war had been worthy of their sacrifices. The dead left the town, satisfied that their sacrifices had been appreciated. But Jean was no longer the man he once was. The traumas of war had killed his poetic spirit, and his final indictment was 'I accuse.'

The precise setting of *J'accuse* is never stated. One could speculate, however, that the location is meant to symbolise Alsace-Lorraine, the former French province annexed by Germany in the 1870s,<sup>78</sup> and that this contentious setting is part of the reason for film's traumatised characters. General Maria Lazare, the father of Edith in the film, reminisced about his time in the last war. 'My Alsace, and My Lorraine.' This does not necessarily signify the location of the film as Alsace-Lorraine, (although we know the town is near the German border as Edith's parents' village was occupied by the German army), but more likely represents the patriotic fervour resulting from a need to avenge the last war with Germany. Nevertheless, it seems to suggest the important place that provinces under the threat of German occupation like Alsace-Lorraine held in French memory. Edith's rape by the German soldiers in her German-occupied French village highlights the trauma suffered by the French during the war- this time by the civilians, not the soldiers-as a result of German occupation. Edith's personal trauma can be seen to parallel France's national suffering at the hands of the enemy.

Just as the post-war French government attempted to erase all German influence from the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, so too did the characters Francois and Jean try to erase the atrocities committed by the Germans upon Edith, by taking their revenge

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<sup>78</sup> See Fischer, "National Sacrifices, Local Losses: Politics and Commemoration in Interwar Alsace," pp. 133-134 on the historical details of Germany's annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and the differing ideas of regional identity among its Franco-German citizens.

upon her half-German daughter Angele.<sup>79</sup> While Francois tried to attack the child, and eventually conceded to find and kill the German who fathered her instead, the mentally unstable Jean, much to Edith's horror, taught Angele to write 'I accuse.' Jean told the girl 'I'll teach you how to become French. Then you can find a way to punish your father as he deserves.' By removing the child's German identity, and by default removing the memory of that which traumatised Edith, the two men were perhaps attempting to symbolically overcome a greater national trauma which was the result of German atrocities and occupation during the war.

Although it is unlikely that their village was literally situated in Alsace-Lorraine (Alsations fought on the German side during the war), it is possible that Jean's anxiety at Angele's half Germanic identity mirrored the confusion of Alsatian citizens about their divided loyalties in the immediate post-war, de-Germanised province.<sup>80</sup> The confusion about national identities is emphasised by Angele in one scene. When playing with the other children in the village, one of them placed a German helmet on her head and the children imitated a scene of shooting their captured enemy. Angele became distressed and ran home to her mother. Traumatized by this scene, perhaps from an awareness of her German identity, the young Angele showed the psychological confusion caused by a war in which fixed ideas of nationality were supposed to divide enemies. Edith's half-German daughter therefore represents the limbo state of dual German-French citizens in France (such as those of Alsace-Lorraine). Edith, by contrast, is a symbol of France and a pure French identity. The idea that Edith symbolises the French nation and its trauma is confirmed by an inter-

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<sup>79</sup> Fischer, "National Sacrifices, Local Losses: Politics and Commemoration in Interwar Alsace," p. 136.

<sup>80</sup> Fischer, "National Sacrifices, Local Losses: Politics and Commemoration in Interwar Alsace," pp. 133- 134.

title stating 'the cross of sacrifice, epitomising the French woman's glory' was followed by a shot of Edith, arms spread, standing in the shape of a cross before her window.

If the film demonstrates the damage the war caused to the French psyche, its title 'I accuse' makes sense, and in its underlying mood of anger, *J'accuse* differs from *Nerven*.<sup>81</sup> The difference has a lot to do with the outcome of the war. While *Nerven* reflected a great degree of personal guilt connected to a wider national feeling of culpability resulting from losing the war and paying reparations, the mood of *J'accuse* was very much one of anger and accusation. But who was the film accusing? There was obviously anger at the German army, whose demonic image was emphasised in the flashback scenes of Edith's rape. In these scenes, all we see of the Germans are the sinister looming shadows of their pickelhaube helmets in the barn. The sporadic placement of the word 'J'accuse' throughout the film, however, confuses matters. It is not only the German army who were at fault. Toward the end of the film, Jean Diaz warned those on the home front that the ghosts of the dead French soldiers would return to find out if those left at home deserved the soldiers' efforts in war. 'They will gladly go back to sleep if their sacrifice and death have served some purpose!' Jean gathered all the townspeople together and questioned them individually. To a man named Pierre, he asked '...did you run your father's business as you should have?' His question was followed by an imagined scene in which the ghost of Pierre's father appeared in their shop window, stating 'I accuse!' The ghosts of the war dead returned to accuse the nation's citizens of their wartime misdemeanours, and in this way, these 'purgatorial shadows' (to borrow the phrase from Wilfred Owen) levelled

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<sup>81</sup> The title 'I accuse' is a reference to Emile Zola's pamphlet against the French government and the French army's anti-Semitism during the controversial Dreyfus court martial affair in nineteenth century France. Noted in Brownlow's, "The Waste of War: Abel Gance's *J'accuse*," p. 4.

their accusations at the society-at-large that made no sacrifice in the war but reaped the benefits of the sacrifices of others.

On a broader level, the film was also accusing those governments who sent the nation to war, evident in the film's pacifist and anti-war sentiments. The director Gance achieved his anti-war message in a number of ways including using real battlefield footage to show the horror of the trenches, and depicting the psychological damage caused by the violence of war, both on the battlefield and the home front.<sup>82</sup> In his discussion of *Nerven*, Anton Kaes notes that the film 'illustrates how secondary trauma spreads like a contagious disease, ravaging individuals, families and entire communities.'<sup>83</sup> The same idea can be applied to *J'accuse*. In addition to Edith's traumatic experience of rape, other women in the film, such as Jean's mother, also become powerful symbols of war's harrowing effects on a nation's citizens, and illuminate the parallels between battlefield trauma and home front (i.e. 'secondary') trauma. In an early inter-title, which is superimposed with sinister dancing skeletons, the film stated "war kills as much the mothers as the sons." This sentiment is remarkably similar to one seen in *Nerven*, with its opening image of a mother's distress as she imagined her son dying in battle. Juxtaposed with an image of a mass of bodies on the battlefield is the intertitle: 'Mother, thousands of miles from home your son is dying!' Jean's mother in *J'accuse* was likewise so distressed by fear for her son that she eventually died from worry and fatigue. The death and fatigue of the battlefield thus resonated equally on the home front, signalling the broader suffering, both physical and psychological, of the French nation, as a result of war.

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<sup>82</sup> Brownlow, "The Waste of War: Abel Gance's *J'accuse*," pp. 4-6. Brownlow notes that Gance was mobilised into the army as cinematographer and used real battle footage in *J'accuse*.

<sup>83</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 39.

Jean became a voice of anti-war protest also. In portraying Jean's madness as resulting from his combat experience, it has been argued that Gance was using trauma as a particularly potent anti-war tool. The academic Leslie K. Hankins suggests that *J'accuse* dazzled with its 'fierce anti-war critique in its powerful depiction of the shell-shocked poet/soldier as social critic.'<sup>84</sup> Certainly Jean's deteriorating mental condition speaks to pacifist ideas of the futility and destructive nature of war. Jean himself blamed his condition, which affected his sensitive poetic nature and his ability to write, on the war. 'Nightmares...dreams, life, war...the dead...and the living,' he cried. 'I don't know anymore! I accuse!'

Jean's accusation in *J'accuse* that the war caused his decline was invariably the same reason given in *Nerven* for the psychological edginess of Weimar Germany's citizens. Although historian Gregory Thomas suggests post-war France saw no mass outbreak of psychological disorder, its films like *J'accuse*, as well as those of Germany, certainly suggested the war had a significant impact on the national psyche.<sup>85</sup> The films of Germany and France mentioned above were immensely preoccupied with recent memories of the war, memories which manifested themselves in the trauma suffered by the films' protagonists. The psychological devastation caused by the First World War to these two nations was represented also in their films' preoccupation with violence. Violence in *Caligari*, *Nerven* and *J'accuse* was enacted in the form of murder, rape, hypnosis, shooting by firing squad, the vicious practices of wartime psychiatry, and the symptoms of shell shock. In Weimar cinema especially, violence

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<sup>84</sup> Leslie K. Hankins, "Abel Gance's *J'accuse* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: Re-reading a Modernist Novel by the Light of the Silver Screen." *J'accuse: A Film By Abel Gance: The Newly Restored Original 1919 Version*. [DVD and booklet] The Flicker Alley Collection: 2008. P. 15.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas quoted in: Edgar Jones, book review of Gregory Thomas's *Treating Trauma of the Great War: Civilians and Psychiatry in France: 1914-1940* in *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 73, no. 4 (October, 2009), pp. 1363-1364.



took on a particularly sinister character which, as Kracauer suggested, represented Germany's national psyche or 'soul' in the post-war world.<sup>86</sup> The First World War therefore left a deep psychological scar on the citizens of Germany and France, not only on those shell shocked on the battlefield, but also those left to rebuild the nation afterwards. The representation of shell shock, nerves and war trauma, and their resonance in the post-war world, thus also became the cinema's most powerful anti-war symbols.

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<sup>86</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 3.

## Chapter 2:

### **‘Mental Cases’ and ‘Simple Soldier Boys’: The Shell Shocked Soldier as Anti-War Symbol in British and American Films about the First World War, 1930-64.**

*I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.*

*In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.*

*You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye,  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.*

- Siegfried Sassoon, "Suicide in the Trenches"<sup>87</sup>

**I**n his recent study on the representation of the psychological consequences of war in Weimar cinema, Anton Kaes posed the important question "What part do movies play in making trauma visible?"<sup>88</sup> The answer, I would argue, is a significant one. In the years between 1930 and 1964, a number of films produced in the USA and Britain about the First World War were particularly concerned with the representation of shell shock and war neuroses, and as such, played an important role in conveying the war's darker, more confrontational elements. These films were also imbued with a far

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<sup>87</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, 'Suicide in the Trenches,' in *Poems of the Great War 1914-1918* (Penguin Books, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>88</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 2.

stronger anti-war sentiment than the earlier films mentioned in chapter one. During the period 1930-64, the so called 'mental cases' and 'simple soldiers,' who had powerfully conveyed the psychological horrors of warfare in the poetry written during the war, became an important tool of cinema. These figures became voices of protest against war and the injustices suffered by shell shocked soldiers at the hands of the military.

Hollywood's dominance of the film industry at this time accounted for America leading the way in the (anti) war film genre, and many French and German books about the war were adapted into Hollywood films during this period.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, however, Britain also produced one of the most accusatory films about the First World War. Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1964) used the symbol of the simple shell shocked soldier to attack the military's derision of war-related mental traumas and its shooting of shell-shocked soldiers.<sup>90</sup> These two nations used the film medium not only to make trauma visible, but more importantly, to politicise and criticise the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers during the First World War, an issue which, in the wake of the Second World War, and with the coming of the Vietnam War, was still extremely relevant.

When most people think of movies about the First World War, the first thing that comes to mind is Lewis Milestone's classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>91</sup>

Milestone's film was not the first American film to deal with the First World War. As

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<sup>89</sup> On Hollywood's monopoly of the film industry and the war film genre, see Stuart Klawans, "How the First World War Changed Movies Forever," *New York Times*, published November 19, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/19/movies/film-how-the-first-world-war-changed-movies-forever.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> *King and Country* (1964) Joseph Losey (86 minutes)

<sup>91</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) Lewis Milestone (138 minutes)

early as 1918, Charlie Chaplin's silent slapstick comedy *Shoulder Arms* depicted (albeit in a humorous way) the boredom and restlessness experienced by soldiers in the Western Front trenches.<sup>92</sup> (Interestingly, the particular curious gaits employed by Chaplin's own characters in his films are remarkably similar to the unusual ways of walking witnessed in shell shocked soldiers in film footage from First World War hospitals).<sup>93</sup> Nor was *All Quiet* the first anti-war film to come out of Hollywood. In 1925, King Vidor's film *The Big Parade* told the story of a returned soldier who, maimed and disillusioned, represented the World War One generation.<sup>94</sup> *All Quiet* was perhaps the first US film, however, to address the psychological consequences of the First World War on soldiers, and to use this representation as part of an indictment of the war, igniting the aforementioned dialogue on shell shock in American cinema.

In the 1930s, Erich Maria Remarque's German trilogy of anti-war novels was adapted into popular Hollywood films. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, released in 1930, was followed by *The Road Back* in 1937 and *Three Comrades* in 1938.<sup>95</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front* was an attack on the High Command and the generals, teachers and parents who, in 1914, sent teenage boys to their deaths. It emphasised the universality of soldiers suffering and the shared desires and hopes of all people, regardless of nationality. As the historian Modris Ecksteins noted, the film's positive reception in France in 1930 was a sign that the film 'brought home to audiences the similarity of war experiences in all armies,' thereby conveying its pacifist message.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Shoulder Arms* (1918) Charles Chaplin (46 minutes)

<sup>93</sup> See footage taken from the Netley Hospital in England, "War Neuroses: Netley Hospital 1917."

<sup>94</sup> Klawans, "How the First World War Changed Movies Forever," p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> *The Road Back* (1937) James Whale (97 minutes); *Three Comrades* (1938) Frank Borzage (100 minutes).

<sup>96</sup> Modris Ecksteins, "War, Memory and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*" in *Central European History* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 63.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* used the depiction of the mental strain experienced by the young men in the trenches to highlight an anti-war stance. The psychological impact of war was embodied in the character of Franz Kemmerich. His exhaustion at the constant artillery bombardments eventually drove him to escape into No Mans Land in order to avoid the growing restlessness of his comrades' dugout, only to then be shot by the enemy. Recently historians have noted how psychological breakdown on the battlefield during the First World War was often related to the increased duration of battles and the futility of the immovable stalemate. This resulted in both physical exhaustion and mental unease connected to the feeling of powerlessness of 'waiting for an impersonal death.'<sup>97</sup> Kemmerich's condition represented the nervous anxiety experienced by many soldiers fighting in the tense and deadly, but often boring, Western Front trenches. Kemmerich's physical wound and eventual death suffered as a result of his mental breakdown was important in symbolising the tragic impact upon young life that was the product of the war on the Western Front. This young traumatised soldier illuminated Remarque's criticism of the war, and became an early messenger of the anti-war pacifism of the 1930s.<sup>98</sup>

The post-war years saw a flowering of fervent literary and cinematic movements against militarism.<sup>99</sup> Remarque's novels fell into this pacifist movement. Lesser known and somewhat less didactic was his second novel, *The Road Back*, which was adapted for the screen by director James Whale, himself a veteran of the First World

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<sup>97</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, pp. 33-41; Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>98</sup> On 1930s pacifist cinema, see Andrew Kelly's "The Brutality of Military Incompetence: 'Paths of Glory' (1957)" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, Vol. 13 Issue 2, (Jun 1993), Accessed via <http://ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=u fh&AN=9511060890&site=ehost-live> (5<sup>th</sup> September, 2010), pp. 1-15

<sup>99</sup> Joanna Bourke, "Remembering War", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, no 4 (Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, 2004), pp 473-485. (480)

War.<sup>100</sup> Although less concerned with the psychological consequences of war than *All Quiet*, there were nevertheless references in the film to war asylums, as the soldiers went to visit their incarcerated friend after the war. The asylum was almost seen as a normal consequence of war, as the boys' casual conversation about visiting their institutionalised friend suggested it was customary post war for everyone to have a friend in a mental hospital.

Of the three Remarque adaptations, *Three Comrades* was the most vocal in its criticism of the perceptions of war trauma in post-war Germany. The film, which told the story of three boys who went to war and came home together, lamented the way the war had destroyed the youths' sense of permanence and security, leaving them in a world which did not understand their sacrifices, and where they no longer felt a sense of belonging or purpose.<sup>101</sup> Gottfried, the film's spokesperson, bemoaned, 'I wish we were somewhere on earth where the two could go together: living, and being a man.' *Three Comrades*, like *All Quiet*, also railed against the older generation on the home front who sent young men to war but showed no sympathy for the psychological damage it caused. In one of the film's earliest scenes, the clear divide between the expectations and misconceptions of the older generation and the reality of war is made abundantly clear through one conversation that took place in a bar:

Older man: "What Germany needs is order!"

Gottfried: (*rising angrily*) "Stop that!"

Older man: "Oh sit down! You shell-shocked boys give me a pain with your hysterics!"

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<sup>100</sup> 'James Whale filmography,' <http://www.fandango.com/jameswhale/filmography/p116539> (accessed 1st October, 2010)

<sup>101</sup> Hans Wagener, *Understanding Erich Maria Remarque*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, c1991), p. 49.

Gottfried, the voice of discontent and disillusionment in the film, took particular offence to the older gentleman's implication that soldiers' efforts in the war were not appreciated at home, and that to voice disagreement against the old establishment was to be considered 'hysterical.' *Three Comrades* reflected the contemporary ideas which connected shell shock and hysteria to character weakness, although one must be wary of the usage and appropriation of the English term 'shell shock' in the film as the precise term was not used by Germans.<sup>102</sup> The treatment and perceptions of mental illness in Germany at this time had become a contentious issue, used by the film to criticise those on the home front as well as contemporary social understandings of mental illness.

*Three Comrades* completed Remarque's anti-war trilogy and joined the ranks of other pacifist films of the 1930s. These films denounced those who sent young men to fight for a senseless cause, which had devastating effects on soldiers that those at home could never properly comprehend. The historian Pierre Sorlin has warned, however, that

When speaking of the 1930s we must beware of anachronism. Everywhere, since 1945, films have denounced the errors, sometimes the crimes, of High Command and depicted the futility of some war-actions. A film like 'King and Country' was unthinkable in the 1930s.<sup>103</sup>

Sorlin's suggestion that the pacifist cinema of the 1930s was not as scathing in its criticism of the military High Command as the later cinema of the fifties and sixties seems somewhat unjustified. In a literal sense, perhaps the films of the 1930s were

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<sup>102</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25; on linguistic issues see Jay Winter, "Shell Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, 2000), pp. 7-12. (8)

<sup>103</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies: 1939-1990* (New York : Routledge, 1991), p. 27.

less vocal in expressly criticising the High Command, but certainly in their depictions of the horrors of war and its psychological consequences they revealed their discontent. The best film to accuse the High Command, however, was written in the 1930s but not adapted to film until the 1950s.<sup>104</sup> Andrew Kelly notes that this was partly due to the fact that Paramount studios in the late 1930s ‘were reluctant to make an avowedly anti-war film in a climate “...seething with the spirit of aggressive nationalism.”’<sup>105</sup> Stanley Kubrick’s 1957 film *Paths of Glory* denounced the errors of the French military command during the First World War. It used issues of desertion and ideas of cowardice to attack the prejudice and injustices caused by those at the top of the military ranks.<sup>106</sup> *Paths of Glory*, however, was seen to have missed the pacifist boat. *Time Magazine* commented

Made 20 years ago, [the film] might have found a sympathetic audience in a passionately pacifist period, might even have been greeted as a minor masterpiece. Made today, it leaves the spectator often confused and numb, like a moving speech in a dead language.<sup>107</sup>

The reason for the cynical response to *Paths of Glory* related to its appearance during the Cold War, at a time when the world was more concerned with inter-continental ballistic missiles and the threat of atomic nuclear destruction.<sup>108</sup> In this context, the film’s tribulations about the First World War seemed irrelevant. Nevertheless, *Paths of Glory* received much praise, including a rave review from *Variety* magazine, who claimed it was ‘a starkly realistic recital of French army politics.’<sup>109</sup> If the film did seem out of place in the 1950s, it was more relevant than ever in the wake of the

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<sup>104</sup> Kelly “The Brutality of Military Incompetence: ‘Paths of Glory,’ pp. 1-15

<sup>105</sup> Kelly “The Brutality of Military Incompetence: ‘Paths of Glory,’ p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> *Paths of Glory* (1957) Stanley Kubrick (87 minutes)

<sup>107</sup> *Time Magazine*, December 9, 1957, quoted in Andrew Kelly’s “The Brutality of Military Incompetence: ‘Paths of Glory’ (1957),” p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Kelly, “The Brutality of Military Incompetence: ‘Paths of Glory’ (1957),” p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> Kelly, “The Brutality of Military Incompetence: ‘Paths of Glory’ (1957),” p. 5.



Second World War. More importantly, it passionately brought issues regarding the shooting of soldiers for shell shock, desertion and 'cowardice' to the attention of film audiences, continuing the trend of anti-war cinema to use trauma in its indictment of soldiers' unjust treatment at the hands of the military.

The ironically titled *Paths of Glory* told the story of a French army regiment lead by Colonel Dax on the Western Front in 1916. The film's drama centred on the impossible mission that Colonel Dax's soldiers were forced to carry out, which would invariably lead to the death of most of his men. The men, who realised it was a suicide mission to try to capture the 'ant hill' that the megalomaniacal Commanding Officer General Paul Mireau thought it necessary to take, fell back in battle and refused to advance on the hill. Mireau, furious at the breach of orders and perceived mutiny of the French troops, ordered that each regiment surrender ten men to be shot as an example that the military would not tolerate disobedience. In the end, three men were chosen to die, and despite his best efforts, Dax's protest in court about the 'mockery of human justice' that condemned these men was not enough to prevent their execution.

*Paths of Glory* was interested in the connections between desertion and ideas of cowardice, and the way the military's heavy hand unjustly committed men to die by firing squad. It was also concerned with the stigma attached to shell shocked soldiers perceived as cowards. In one of the opening scenes, in the French trench, General Mireau inspected the troops. When questioning the men on their readiness for battle, he came across a soldier who refused to answer him. A fellow soldier told the General, 'he's a bit shell shocked, Sir!' The General was enraged by this confession,

claiming, in a scene remarkably similar to one in the World War Two film *Patton* in 1970, that 'I beg your pardon, there is no such thing as shell shock!'<sup>110</sup> The General repeated his question of 'have you got a wife?' to the shell shocked soldier, and was disgusted when the man broke down in front of him. 'Get a grip on yourself!' he ordered. 'You're a coward!' Hitting the shell shocked soldier, he ordered the sergeant to 'arrange for the immediate transfer of this baby out of my regiment. I won't have our brave men contaminated by it!'

In Franklin Schaeffer's World War Two epic *Patton*, in a scene which reflects the real life occurrence, General Patton attacked a shell shocked soldier in much the same manner.<sup>111</sup> While visiting a military hospital in Sicily, the infamous Patton came across a soldier suffering from the shakes. 'What's the matter with you?' Patton asked the man. The man replied 'It's my nerves Sir. I just can't stand the shelling anymore.' Patton, furious at what he perceived as rank cowardice, hit the man around the head with his glove so that the man's helmet fell off, and retorted angrily,

Your nerves? Well hell, you're just a goddamn coward...I won't have a yellow [bellied] bastard sitting here crying in front of these brave men who've been wounded in battle...I won't have these sons of bitches afraid to fight stinking up this place of honour. You're going back to the front my friend...either that or I'm going to stand you up in front of a firing squad!

From these two scenes it is suggested that ideas of shell shock in both wars were associated with cowardice and weakness, and that psychological breakdown was neither tolerated nor understood by the military command. In the First World War, we know that men suffering from shell shock were often viewed by the military as

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<sup>110</sup> *Patton* (1970) Franklin J. Schaffner (172 minutes)

<sup>111</sup> 'George S. Patton, Jr,' [http://www.conservapedia.com/George\\_S.\\_Patton,\\_Jr.](http://www.conservapedia.com/George_S._Patton,_Jr.) (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2010)

‘malingerers’ and ‘cowards’ and were stigmatised for lacking the psychological fortitude of heroic soldiers who died for their country.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, in the British army, those soldiers perceived as unwilling or incapable of fighting were viewed as cowards, to be shot if necessary.<sup>113</sup>

Similar to General Patton, the authority figures in *Paths of Glory* were more than happy to place perceived ‘cowards’ in front of a firing squad to teach them a lesson. This is emphasised only too well in a conversation between Colonel Dax and General Mireau:

Gen. Mireau: ‘Colonel Dax, I’m going to have 10 men in each regiment tried under penalty of death for cowardice...they have skim milk in their veins instead of blood...latitude is one thing, insubordination is another.’

Col. Dax: ‘Don’t you see, Sir? They’re not cowards if they didn’t leave the trenches, it must have been impossible.’

Gen. Paul: ‘They’re scum, Colonel. The whole rotten regiment. A pack of sneaking, whining, tail-dragging Curs.’

Col. Dax ‘Why not shoot the entire regiment?’

Colonel Dax, much like Gottfried in *Three Comrades*, acted as the film’s moral compass by arguing against the military’s controversial policy of having deserters shot by firing squad. Tragically in *Paths of Glory* the three men on trial were picked at random to set an example. In France, as with all other belligerent nations during the war (with the exception of Australia), men tried for desertion and cowardice were often shot by firing squad.<sup>114</sup> As historian Nicholas Offenstadt illustrates, however,

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<sup>112</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25; and Tyquin, *Madness and the Military*, p. 35.

<sup>113</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25.

<sup>114</sup> Peter A. Pedersen, "Shot at Dawn: The Australian Experience," <http://www.shotatdawn.info/page38.html> (accessed 25th August, 2010);

we need to be careful in our examination of the criticism that men were shot to set an example. Offenstadt warns that the idea of shooting soldiers as an example to others has perhaps been misappropriated and used too generally in post-war discourse to apply to those regarded as having been unjustly shot by the military.<sup>115</sup> He also notes that only a small percentage of those shot at dawn in the French army were mutineers.<sup>116</sup> We must remember, then, when analysing films like *Paths of Glory* to question whether these films exaggerate historical detail in favour of presenting their anti-war polemic.

*Paths of Glory* nevertheless is a moving indictment of the unjust practises of the military during the First World War. The characters in the film account for its emotional impact, which makes the film's anti-war message so effective. In the final scenes leading to the three soldiers' executions, the fears expressed by the men about dying humanise the issues surrounding death by firing squads. This serves to make the final executions unbearable for the viewer. The night before the executions, the men spent their last hours in a dank, sparse cell, pondering what could have been. Their mental state at this point was highly unstable. Private Paris broke down in front of Colonel Dax, remarking 'It's just occurred to me, funny thing, I haven't had one sexual thought since the court martial...it's pretty extraordinary, isn't it?' He then began to cry hysterically. Similarly, another private, picked for execution because he was believed to be a 'social undesirable,' cried to the priest sent to give the men their last rites. 'Why do I have to die, father?' he pleaded. 'I haven't done anything. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'll never see my wife again.' The men's vulnerability before their

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Nicholas Offenstadt, "Shot at Dawn: French Executions" <http://www.shotatdawn.info/page34.html> (accessed September 12, 2010)

<sup>115</sup> Offenstadt, "Shot at Dawn: French Executions"

<sup>116</sup> Offenstadt, "Shot at Dawn: French Executions"

fate evokes sadness and anger in the viewer, who feels outraged that these men, picked at random by the war generals, had to die at the hands of the same uncaring generals. The generals' detachment from the battlefield is highlighted by their ignorance of the realities of battle and their ironic insensitivity to the faults of human nature.

Possibly the most moving anti-war film to be made about a soldier on trial for his life, is Joseph Losey's 1964 British film *King and Country*. Emotional instability in the face of danger, and desertion, form the basis of this tale about a simple soldier, lower class Private Arthur Hamp, court-martialled for being absent without leave from the battlefield. The film's narrative centres around Hamp's 'court' trial, which was really a small makeshift panel of military officers and doctors assembled to assess, in the space of several hours, whether Hamp's offence was worthy of the death penalty. Captain Hargreaves, as Hamp's defence lawyer, set out to prove that the Private was suffering from shell shock when he absented himself from the Front. The military's response was anything but sympathetic. Joseph Losey's film is important for the way it highlights understandings about cowardice, desertion and shell shock in the British army during World War One. Furthermore, it reflects the discourse on 'nerves' in Britain during the war, and the complex understandings about the variety of mental conditions resulting from trench warfare. In this way it is perhaps the most valuable film made about shell shock in the Great War during this period, for the dialogue it created between medical and cultural history and its fierce criticism of British military medicine.

*King and Country*'s sombre narrative opened with a long panning shot of a war memorial, whose heroic high relief figures glow on screen. It is a stark contrast to the depressing footage that followed, showing a rained-out battlefield and the fleshless skeleton of an old corpse left on the field. In his small, rat-infested cell on the battlefield, the protagonist Private Hamp was questioned by his lawyer, Captain Hargreaves, about his life before the war. When asked about his relationship with his wife, Hamp replied despondently in his lower class vernacular 'she got took up with someone else.' Hargreaves saw this as 'mitigating circumstances' and 'an understandable reason' for Hamp's desertion. In his recent study about psychological breakdown in combat, historian Ben Shephard noted that soldiers' concerns about their wives' infidelities in their absence was a potential factor in soldiers' breakdowns.<sup>117</sup> Although Private Hamp could not say whether he thought his wife's infidelity influenced his desertion, Hargreaves used this point at Hamp's trial to argue for his depleted mental state:

How could a man responsible for his actions do such a hopeless, desperately hopeless thing as this man. When they found him he was trying to walk home to England. Might as well have tried to kill a German trench single-handedly.

*King and Country* also acknowledged that men sometimes committed acts of self-harm in order to be exempted from fighting. In this way, the film's story of desertion and punishment was more complex than that of *Paths of Glory*, which attributed the blame for the soldiers' punishment entirely to the High Command, rather than to the soldiers themselves. In *King and Country*, Private Hamp admits that 'some of the lads had tried it [self-harm] on themselves' and that he and Willy 'was thinking of trying it once but it wasn't long after that Willy's number came up.' Private Hamp is thus not

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<sup>117</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. xviii.

an angelic figure used by the film to create a good and evil dichotomy between the ordinary soldier and the elite High Command. He is an endearing character, nevertheless, who, perhaps because of his complexity, becomes an even more powerful symbol of the issues surrounding military law and psychiatric medicine during the First World War.

The film's contention lies in the opposing ideas about the definitions of shell shock and how and why they may be used in cases of desertion to exempt a soldier from the death penalty. Captain Hargreaves attempted to argue at the trial that Private Hamp was not responsible for his actions because of his mental condition. The panel of judges, on the other hand, had trouble understanding the connection between mental breakdown and the excuse for desertion, highlighted in one particular argument in the film:

Hargreaves: 'I submit that the prisoner absented himself at the time, when, because of his mental health, he was not fully responsible for his actions.

Officer: 'Mental health, Captain Hargreaves? Do you mean that the prisoner is a lunatic?'

Hargreaves: 'No Sir.'

Officer: 'Or mentally deficient?'

Hargreaves: 'No Sir.'

Officer: 'There must be hundreds of thousands of men who are in an unhappy mental state but who have not absented themselves from their duty.'

The Officer's lack of sympathy or comprehension of the excuse that Private Hamp was mentally ill when he deserted reflects the almost universal stance of the militaries of the First World War. All had a low tolerance for desertion and claims of shell shock.<sup>118</sup> This is well demonstrated in the interview which took place between Hargreaves and the military doctor assigned to assess private Hamp's condition in

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<sup>118</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25.

preparation for the trial. When questioned about why he ignored Hamp's claims of not being able to sleep, and overlooked his bouts of shaking, the doctor started an argument with Hargreaves which reiterated the military's assumptions about cowardice and the manner in which soldiers fake illness:

Hargreaves (HG): 'You simply didn't believe him. What didn't you believe?'  
Doctor: 'Damn Charlie, I knew what he was after.'  
HG: 'Did this man lie to you? And if so, what did he say?'  
Dr: 'I knew what he wanted. To be sent down the line.'  
HG: 'Did he say so?... Did he ask to be relieved from duty?'  
Dr: 'Not in so many words he didn't.'  
HG: 'And how long did this interview last?'  
Dr: '5 minutes, 10 minutes.'  
HG: 'And after that you lost interest in the matter.'  
HG: 'What did you expect me to do? I haven't the time for one's emotional problems...I talked to him man to man. I told him to pull himself together!'

This is followed by a discourse on shell shock which suggests the military's intolerance and ignorance of the condition and again, its supposed connection to 'cowardice':

HG: 'What are the symptoms of shell shock?'  
Dr: 'Shell shock is a different matter altogether.'  
HG: 'Does the term "shell shock" have an exact medical meaning?'  
Dr: 'Yes of course it has.'  
HG: 'And a five or ten minute examination is quite sufficient time, in your estimation, to judge whether a man is or is not suffering from shell shock?'  
Dr: 'It is not my job to maintain a bedlam. You expect me to leave wounded soldiers to die while I cross-question cowards?'  
HG: 'What I'm asking is, is there not a borderline...?'  
Dr (*interrupting*): 'This is not a borderline case of anything. This was a case of cold feet. Miserable funk!'

It is quite clear that the film was railing against the military's front line doctors whose lack of psychiatric training led them to misdiagnose mental conditions, and when, under pressure from the army, to send men back to the front. (**footnote**) Similarly to



*Paths of Glory*, however, we need to be wary of assuming that the sufferings of Private Hamp in the film represented the treatment of all shell-shocked men or of all deserters. It is easy for viewers to forget that they are watching a fictional film, (especially when it so starkly mirrors reality as does Losey's film) and to forget that a single fictional representation should not shape understandings of complex historical issues. While *King and Country* has an important anti-war point to make, using the simple-minded and somewhat traumatised soldier of Hamp to do so, we must remember that the majority of men actually hospitalised for shell shock in the British army never returned to the front line.<sup>119</sup>

The shooting of shell shocked men certainly *did* occur during the war, however. In a famous case, Private Harry Farr was shot in 1916 for failing to go up to the front with the ration party he was assigned to. It was well known that he was suffering from shell shock, and it had been reported several times in the past that he was 'sick with nerves.'<sup>120</sup> (Similarly in *King and Country* the doctor notes Hamp 'complained of nerves'). The controversy surrounding the case related to the fact that his medical condition was never properly acknowledged by the court martial proceedings. Even more controversial was the fact that the British military had double standards for different classes of men (a class divide which is hinted at in *King and Country*). In the same year as Farr's execution, a Sergeant named Brocr was released home to England on the basis that he was '...simply tired out, and wants prolonged change in England among friends...' In the past ten years, Farr's story has become famous as his daughter has sought a posthumous pardon for her father to remove the shame and

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<sup>119</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. 25; Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 83.

<sup>120</sup> "Shot at Dawn: Shell Shocked and Shot," <http://www.shotatdawn.info/page13.html> (accessed September 12, 2010)

indignation felt by her family.<sup>121</sup> It is easy to see the similarities between Farr's case and the story of Private Hamp in *King and Country*. While Hamp may not have been directly based on the real private Harry Farr, his unjust death, at the hands of the unsympathetic military, resonates with real life events which add weight to their fictional representation in films like *King and Country*.

Tom Courtenay's portrayal of private Hamp makes the story of *King and Country* so believable and ultimately so devastating. In his role as an uneducated, low ranking private in the British army, with his common language and distant gaze reminiscent of the '500 yard stare,' it is hard not to sympathise with him as a man so utterly unable to change his fate. His particular manner of describing things, such as the time he got blown into a shell hole and 'was bobbing up and down in the mud, like an egg boiling in water,' gives him an endearing sweetness and a real quality. He is reminiscent of both Private Farr and Siegfried Sassoon's 'simple soldier boy.' It is this quality that is so much more powerful in conveying the complexities of soldiers' experiences of war than didactic characters like *Paths of Glory*'s Colonel Dax. Private Hamp can thus be seen as a symbol of the indictment of war, whose representation as a traumatised soldier victimised by the High Command attempted to remove the stigma attached to ideas of cowardice and shell shock in the First World War.

The question remains, however, as to why this film was necessary in the 1960s. The First World War was well in the past, and had been overtaken in scope (and soon, in

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<sup>121</sup> "Shot at Dawn: Shell Shocked and Shot"

cultural representation also) by the Second World War.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps the issues of the film had been revitalised by the Second World War, or even more particularly the beginning of the Vietnam War had renewed filmmakers' interests in the consequences of war for soldiers and the significance of the pacifist film. Did the film have the same impact in Britain as *Paths of Glory* had in France? There *Paths of Glory* was banned because of its anti-war message at a time when France was at war with Algeria.<sup>123</sup> It is possible to speculate that *King and Country* marked the end of one prolonged era of pacifist films about the First World War that began in the 1920s and ended with the most prolific in 1964 with *King and Country*. While British and American films' indictment of the Great War and their use of the shell shocked soldier as anti-war tool continued in war films after this period (and not just in those about The First World War), the Vietnam War inevitably changed everything. Therefore 1964 marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. The knowledge about war trauma that came in the wake of Vietnam forever changed the way 'shell shock' and war trauma were defined, not only in terms of medical treatment, but also in cinematic representation.

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<sup>122</sup> Modris Ecksteins, "The Cultural Impact of the Great War" (pp. 201-212) in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.) *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), p. 202.

<sup>123</sup> Kelly, "The Brutality of Military Incompetence: 'Paths of Glory' (1957)", pp. 6-7.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Regeneration:**

### **Cinema's Renewed Interest in the First World War and Shell-Shock after Vietnam**

**O**n the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 1917, the young poet and soldier Wilfred Owen arrived at Craiglockhart military hospital, just outside of Edinburgh. While fighting in France during the First World War, he was diagnosed with shell-shock after soldiers reported his acting strangely in the wake of a battle.<sup>124</sup> Craiglockhart hospital was well-known for treating officers of the British army who were suffering from war-related trauma.<sup>125</sup> The story of Wilfred Owen's shell shock and the Craiglockhart hospital were the subject of Gillies MacKinnon's 1997 film *Regeneration*.<sup>126</sup> Since the Vietnam War, shell shock has become a renewed subject of interest in cinema, with *Regeneration* being one of many films in the past twenty years to bring shell shock back onto the silver screen. In the same way as the First World War has come back into historical and psychiatric discourse since the 1980s, so too has cinema picked up on this trend, evident in the multitude of films made about the Great War in recent years. The Vietnam War has arguably played the greatest role in revitalising interest in the First World War. As noted earlier by the historian Ben Shephard, the Vietnam War and the discoveries in psychiatric medicine that succeeded it brought war psychiatry back into the historical spotlight, re-energising First World War studies as

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<sup>124</sup> Robert Wilde, "Wilfred Owen,"

<http://europeanhistory.about.com/od/poetrysongsofww1/a/biowowen.htm> (accessed 6th August, 2010)

<sup>125</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>126</sup> *Regeneration/Behind the Lines* (1997) Gillies MacKinnon (114 minutes)

a result.<sup>127</sup> This reinvigoration of interest in shell shock and the First World War has been paralleled in cinema.

A number of films made about the Great War since the 1980s have shown an interest in the social consequences of the First World War. They represent the physically and psychologically damaged soldier in order to highlight issues surrounding the treatment of the war traumatised by psychiatric institutions, families and society-at-large. These films continue to raise awareness about and de-stigmatise shell shock by indicting the military's brutal treatment of shell shocked soldiers, deserters, and self-mutilators. Figures like Wilfred Owen in *Regeneration*, whose own personal trauma is captured hauntingly by the downward spiral to mental illness of the characters in his poetry, continue to represent an indictment of both the war and the treatment of war neurotics. Recent depictions of trauma have also become more complex, mirroring the increased understandings about war trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in contemporary psychiatric discourse. Perhaps most importantly, cinema has begun to properly address the effects of returned shell shocked on their families in a way that has hitherto been ignored, although this aspect still has a long way to go. Issues relating to the domestic violence inflicted by traumatised men on their wives and families, who were the so-called 'secondary victims' of their veteran's unstable behaviour, have largely been ignored in World War One cinema.<sup>128</sup>

In the past twenty years, France has produced some of the best films about the First World War and the trauma suffered by the individual and the nation. This recent wave of French cinema has illuminated the way the Great War is still firmly embedded in

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<sup>127</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, p. xx.

<sup>128</sup> On 'secondary traumatisation' see Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath*, p. 113.

the French national psyche. In 1989 Bertrand Tavernier's *La Vie et Rien d'Autre* (*Life and Nothing But*) told the story of the search in the 1920s for the body of an unknown soldier to be placed for commemoration under the Arc d'Triomphe in Paris.<sup>129</sup> The film was a reminder of the war that had devastated the French landscape and population seventy years earlier. According to historian Maarten Pereboom,

Bertrand Tavernier's *Life and Nothing But* is about the attempt, both personal and collective, to assimilate a traumatic experience while getting on with the business of life. It is not about World War I itself but rather its memory, which resonates throughout the countryside of northern France.<sup>130</sup>

Much in the same way as did *J'accuse*, *Life and Nothing But* used the First World War to highlight that the war not only traumatised those fighting in battle, but also those left to pick up the pieces after it was over. Through the narrative of a woman searching for her husband missing in battle, the film examined the prolonged grief experienced by post-war societies, and the lasting consequences of war on both individuals and nation. It thus illuminated the way the war has lived on in French memory.<sup>131</sup>

The film's regeneration in the 1980s of the French memory of war can be seen to parallel one of the recurring themes in recent French cinema about the First World War: the amnesiac soldier struggling to regain his memory after shell shock. The recent French film, *A Very Long Engagement*, told the story of Mathilde, a young French woman searching after the war for her fiancé who disappeared under suspicious circumstances during the war. The couple were eventually reunited but

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<sup>129</sup> *La Vie et Rien d'Autre/Life and Nothing But* (1989) Bertrand Tavernier (135 minutes)

<sup>130</sup> Maarten L. Pereboom, "Life and Nothing But by Bertrand Tavernier" in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 97, No. 4 (The University of Chicago Press, October 1992), p. 1153.

<sup>131</sup> Pereboom, "Life and Nothing But by Bertrand Tavernier", p. 1153.

Manech, her fiancé, suffered from amnesia and did not remember Mathilde. Unlike *Random Harvest*, however, Jeunet's film is also about the French military's treatment of shell shocked soldiers and those who committed acts of self-mutilation. In this way it is more like *King and Country* in the continuation of a dialogue on the military's handling of mentally unstable soldiers, also highlighting the universality of soldiers' experience and military brutality regardless of nationality.

*A Very Long Engagement* followed Mathilde's search for her fiancé Manech. The adventures of Manech and four of his comrades were told to Mathilde by men who knew the soldiers during the war. Early on we learn that Manech and four other men of his regiment were sentenced to die for committing acts of self-mutilation which they believed would reprieve them from their service duties. Manech shot himself in the hand to get out of the trench after repeatedly experiencing anxiety under the circumstances of trench warfare. As punishment, he and the other four condemned men were to be thrown over the trench and into No Man's Land and left to fend for themselves. Mathilde discovered that her fiancé and his four comrades had been pardoned for their crime by President Poincare, but the pardon was torn up.

Mathilde's difficulty with the French military bureaucracy began as she attempted to uncover the files on the men's trench, known as trench 108 or 'Bingo Crepuscule.' The files for 'Bingo' were missing in the archives, but Mathilde found them hidden in a different place and stole them. Reading through the files she learned of the mens' death sentences.

Mathilde's search for her fiancé is a poignant account of the way that soldiers and civilians suffered as a result of war and at the hands of the military. Her discovery of

the concealment of the files on Bingo Crepuscule suggested an underhanded cover up by the French military that feared public criticism of its unsympathetic handling of emotionally unstable soldiers. Mathilde's awareness of the deviant acts of both military and soldiers is highlighted in certain amusing moments of the film where she probed different people for information regarding her husband's whereabouts. For instance, Mathilde went to the office of her influential uncle to demand access to the war archives. She entered her uncle's office in a wheelchair to elicit his sympathy, and upon leaving the building folded away the wheelchair to the astonishment of an elderly couple waiting for the lift. 'It doesn't only happen in Lourdes' she told them matter-of-factly, hinting at the frequency with which injury was simulated during the war.<sup>132</sup>

Joining the league of recent French cinema which depicts the suffering of physically and psychologically damaged men from the Great War, their reception by their families and the public, and their treatment in war hospitals is Francois Dupeyron's *La Chambre des Officiers/The Officer's Ward* (2001).<sup>133</sup> Dupeyron's film told the narrative of Lieutenant Adrien Fournier, who was badly wounded at the outbreak of the war when a shell landed near him in a field, killing the other officers in his company. Adrien was transferred to the empty ward reserved for officers in a military hospital, where he remained until the end of the war. For the first few months of his stay, his badly damaged face was bandaged and he was unable to speak as he awaited facial reconstructive surgery, considered at the time 'a world first.' While in the hospital, he befriended other badly wounded officers and an injured nurse,

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<sup>132</sup> Tyquin, *Madness and the Military*, pp. 34-35. Tyquin notes that malingering and self inflicted wounds were common during the war, albeit in the Australian context.

<sup>133</sup> *La Chambre des Officiers/The Officer's Ward* (2001) Francois Dupeyron (135 minutes)



Marguerite, who likewise were struggling to come to terms with their injuries and the way these injuries had drastically altered their lives and relationships.

*The Officer's Ward* offers a complex picture of the consequences of both the physical injuries caused by war, and the subsequent emotional and psychological impact on the injured soldiers and their families. Although Adrien managed to overcome his depression, despite an initial suicide attempt, others in the film were not so lucky. As the war continued and the officers' ward filled up, Adrien noticed a new patient sneak away to the toilet one night. Suspicious, Adrien followed him into the bathroom and found the young man trying to hang himself in the toilet cubicle. The two men struggled as Adrien tried to convince the young man that his life was worth living. 'You're alive!' he cried. 'The Krauts didn't kill you, so don't do it to yourself...the war's still on in your mind but it's over!'

In its representation of the plethora of psychological conditions resulting from combat, *The Officer's Ward* is probably one of the most harrowing films to deal the deep psychological scars caused by the war. Arguably a greater acceptance and understanding of war trauma in recent years has allowed this emotion to be conveyed. As early as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, however, fictional representations of war trauma expressed the immense vulnerability and emotional weakness of men under prolonged combat stress, in a way that rarely existed in social discourse. In this way, cinema continues to be groundbreaking in its capacity to bring attention to, create acceptance for, and remove the stigma of male mental illness that was the result of the First World War.

*The Officer's Ward* demonstrated the horrendous impact of war on human bodies and minds. The men traumatised in the film could not forget the war in their minds, nor could they ignore the negative ways in which their injuries had changed their lives. As a consequence some hoped to end the pain by ending their life. In one of the most heartbreaking moments in the film, an officer took his life after his family reacted badly to his injuries. While not terribly injured, the officer's bandaged face was nevertheless a source of fear for his family. Prior to being reunited with wife and children, the officer expressed concern about what his family would think of him. His fear turned out to be well founded. Upon seeing his father in his diminished state, the officer's young son backed away at the sight of him and yelled 'You're not my father.' His wife also covered their daughter's eyes to hide her from the image of her father. Ashamed and hurt by his family's response to his disfigurement, the officer was later heard crying in the ward. In the night, several nurses found him dead with his wrists cut.

It was not only the injured men in *The Officer's Ward* who broke down. The friends and family of Adrien were emotionally affected by his disfigurement, particularly his mother. When he arrived home, his family were silent, tip-toeing around the discussion of his injury, but his mother, distraught, burst out 'It's nothing! We'll get used to it!' and ran from the room to hide her tears. The family of the injured nurse, Marguerite, were less caring. Upon her return, her family were having a party. Her entrance was barely noticed. Her brother remarked callously about the marks on her face 'are you going to stay like that?' The insensitivity of Marguerite's family, as well as the reaction of Adrien's mother to his appearance, reflects the lack of understanding by those on the home front about the extent of damage caused by war.

*The Officer's Ward* showed the difficulties suffered by those injured in war attempting to return to normal life in a society unused to dealing with physically and psychologically wounded veterans.

The shell shocked soldier's turbulent return to civilian life is also depicted in *The Return of the Soldier* (1982) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1997).<sup>134</sup> Both films showed the struggles of Englishmen returning from the war with shell shock. In both films, the men's wives also suffered emotionally in their attempts to adjust to life with their traumatised husbands. In *The Return of the Soldier*, Kitty Baldry, the wife of the shell shocked Captain Chris Baldry, found this particularly difficult. When visiting her husband in hospital for the first time after the war, she saw him having a fit of anxiety in which he began to hallucinate and did not know who she was. In his state of madness, her attempts to tell him she was his wife were met with the cry 'Go away, bloody woman...cock and bull story!' Her distress at seeing her husband in such a condition, and the heartache of being treated like a stranger, offered a moving portrait of the way shell shock affected the loved ones of a shell shocked soldier. Similarly in *Mrs Dalloway*, the traumatised veteran Septimus had a strained relationship with his wife Rezia. Although he doted on her lovingly, his recurring hallucinations and memories of the war, which affected his personality, inevitably made her feel increasingly isolated from him.

In *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Return of the Soldier*, the presence of shell shocked soldiers in society was shown to elicit varying responses and reflected contemporary medical and social perceptions of the condition. Similar to those in *The Officer's Ward*, the

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<sup>134</sup> *The Return of the Soldier* (1982) Alan Bridges (99 minutes); *Mrs Dalloway* (1997) Marleen Gorris (97 minutes).

characters of these two films were unsure how to deal with the very public presence of the war's damaged soldiers. In *The Return of the Soldier*, a group of high society men who had evidently not seen combat during the war voiced the opinion that there should be 'sea cruises for the crippled,' an idea so crass it sounds derogatory.

Likewise in *Mrs Dalloway* it was again the social elite who proposed ridiculous solutions for how to cure (i.e. remove from the public view) England's shell-shocked men. One woman suggested that shell shocked men could be sent to Canada for a new life. This solution was thought to be 'excellent for mental disturbance.' These fanciful ideas of the elite unfortunately showed no comprehension of or empathy for the realities of life after war for shell shocked men and their families. It is through Rezia, and her embarrassment at people watching Septimus' public breakdowns, that the sufferings of returned soldiers and their partners are successfully conveyed.

The discord between social understanding and acceptance of disfigured and traumatised ex-soldiers and the experiences of the men themselves is mirrored also in the military's expectations of its soldiers and the soldiers' actual capacities to endure combat. In *The Officer's Ward*, Adrien was visited in hospital by a minister of parliament. At this time, his face was still heavily bandaged and he could not speak. The minister congratulated Adrien on his bravery and asked 'ready to get back to the front? We need men like you.' Certainly the minister was trying to improve Adrien's spirits by suggesting he should get well soon. This wishful thinking may also have reflected France's need to increase the number of men fighting on the field, yet it highlights the ignorance of wartime governments about the long-term effects of combat on soldiers which made them utterly unable to return to battle. It is a theme which was dwelled upon more seriously in Gillies MacKinnon's film *Regeneration*.

*Regeneration* is an angry indictment of both the war and the British military's treatment of shell shocked soldiers. As one of the most comprehensive films about the First World War in recent years to look at the discord between the military's war aims and soldiers' experiences of war, it argued against the psychiatric practises used in the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers and the inherent class prejudices in the British army during the war. While *The Officer's Ward* alluded to the military's concern with sending physically injured men back to war, *Regeneration* was an attack on the military's need to return the war's psychological casualties to the front line. The historian Edgar Jones has noted that 'The desperate need to treat psychiatric casualties in order to return them to active duty led to a re-evaluation of the role and status of psychiatry.'<sup>135</sup> Indeed this elevated status and responsibility given to war psychiatrists, and their manipulation by the military, is but one of the many issues under critique in MacKinnon's excellent study of shell shock.

Craiglockhart hospital, well known for its exclusive treatment of shell shocked officers of the British army during the war, was the setting for *Regeneration*.<sup>136</sup> The film's dramatic narrative began with Wilfred Owen walking through a misty forest. Following a trail of mutilated animals and distorted, gurgling cries, as if in a nightmare, Owen discovered their source. Naked and covered in blood he found a man huddled, terrified, and shivering in the forest's clearing. The disturbed soldier, Captain Burns, shared the grounds of Craiglockhart hospital with prominent war writers like Owen as well as Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, and the film's

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<sup>135</sup> Edgar Jones, book review of Gregory Thomas's *Treating Trauma of the Great War: Civilians and Psychiatry in France: 1914-1940* in *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 73, no. 4 (October, 2009), pp. 1363-1364. P. 1363.

<sup>136</sup> Binneveld, (trans. John O'Kane), *From Shell Shock to Combat Stress*, p. 117.

spokesperson, William ‘Billy’ Prior. These men were under the care of Dr William Rivers, the famous anthropologist and neurologist, who was under pressure from the military to return the men to combat.<sup>137</sup> Rivers, exemplar of psychiatric medicine during the Great War, was interested in discovering how and why men suffered from shell shock, and in doing so, discovering new ways to treat them.<sup>138</sup> Although he was invariably a tool of the military sent to find out which men were faking neurosis, his sympathetic approach to the treatment of his shell shocked officers uncovered the complexities of the condition as well as the underlying assumptions about the way different classes of men responded to trauma.

In recent psychiatric histories of the Great War, historians such as Ben Shephard and Jason Crouthamel have noted the way that soldiers suffering from trauma, not only in the British but also German armies, were perceived differently depending on class.<sup>139</sup> While officers were said to suffer from ‘neurasthenia’ - a nineteenth century middle class neurosis- lower class privates were believed to suffer from ‘shell shock’ or ‘hysteria.’ As such, the different meanings ascribed to these conditions meant that these different classes of men received different care, an issue with which *Regeneration* takes umbrage.<sup>140</sup> In the case of Germany, historian Jason Crouthamel notes that while the lower ranking soldiers suffering from trauma were believed to be ‘shirkers’ (i.e. deliberately avoiding combat), officers were diagnosed with ‘organic nervous disorders.’<sup>141</sup> Officers were not only perceived to be more honourable, they also received other privileges. Films such as *The Officer’s Ward* merely hinted at the

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<sup>137</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 116.

<sup>138</sup> Binneveld, *From Shell Shock to Combat Stress*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>139</sup> Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, pp. 8-9; Crouthamel, “War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis: Working Class Politics and Psychological Trauma in Weimar Germany,” p. 166.

<sup>140</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 86.

<sup>141</sup> Crouthamel, “War Neurosis Versus Savings Psychosis,” p. 166.

favourable treatment of officers over ordinary soldiers, as Nurse Anais tells Adrien  
'It's quiet up here [in the officers' ward]. Downstairs we're running out of space.'

*Regeneration*, by contrast, makes a bold moralistic attack on the evident class divide.

In his role as one of the voices of moral outrage at the practices of war psychiatry (Sassoon was another moral spokesperson, but more against the war in general), second Lieutenant Billy Prior attacked the British class system to highlight the problematic assumptions about class-based war neuroses. Prior was in a prime position to make such an attack because despite his officer status, he was not from an upper class background. Prior's argument with Dr Rivers shows the absurdity and hypocrisy of dividing shell shock symptoms according to rank:

Prior: 'Something you said has been bothering me. You said officers don't suffer from mutism.'

Rivers: 'That is right. Officers tend to suffer from stammering. It's the lower ranks who suffer from mutism.'

Prior: 'Why?'

Rivers: 'We don't know. Even the dreams of officers- and believe me I've studied thousands- tend to be more elaborate than those of other ranks.'

Prior: 'I'd rather have their dreams than mine.'

Rivers: 'How do you know? You don't remember yours.'

Prior: 'I refuse to believe General Haig's dreams are more elaborate than those of the lowest rank. All those noodle brained dim wits who think they're born leaders if god give 'em a birth right over others.'

Rivers: 'Well you've certainly conquered your mutism Mr Prior. Interesting isn't it that you're one of the few people here who doesn't stammer.'

Prior: 'I think its even more interesting that you DO.'

Prior's anger at the ingrained hierarchies of British society and their replication in the army was justified considering the lenient treatment shown to officers in the film. For instance, Officer Sassoon's repeated refusal to withdraw his pacifist statements against the war was met with a proposal that he be declared shell shocked in order to exempt himself from criticism from the parliamentary House of Commons. Sassoon

was urged to convince a hospital board that he was thereby not responsible for his statements, or otherwise return to the front line to avoid punishment. The inherent double standard of the military, and the leniency with which Sassoon's refusal to revoke his statements was met (although he eventually rejoined the war of his own accord) speaks to the class prejudices within the British military. It seems those in charge wanted to keep Sassoon out of the war, because of his high profile and defamatory statements. A lower ranking and lesser known private would have received no such favours.

Histories of First World War psychiatry have recorded the way that in cases when claims of war neurosis were perceived to be used in defiance of military duty they became a tool used by doctors to regulate the deviant behaviour of soldiers.<sup>142</sup> The mistrust of *ordinary* soldiers, and the cruel practices of electroshock therapy used to catch those soldiers perceived as unwilling to get well is provocatively conveyed in *Regeneration*. Whilst in London, Dr Rivers observed an English doctor, Yealland, force a soldier suffering from mutism to receive electroshock currents in his mouth which were supposed to cure him. (It is probably that Dr Yealland was meant to represent the real life German doctor, Fritz Kaufmann, who pioneered the use of electroshock therapy in First World War psychiatry).<sup>143</sup> Dr Yealland told Rivers he did not normally have people watch his treatments because he did not want a 'sympathetic audience,' hinting at his violent methods. Yealland strapped his patient, Callan, into a chair disturbingly similar in appearance to the electric chair and warned him 'I expect you to behave like the hero you are...I will lock the door when the orderlies have gone. You will speak before you leave. There is no other way out.'

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<sup>142</sup> Kaes, *Shell-Shock Cinema*, p. 14.

<sup>143</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 108.



(Similarly, Kaufmann believed his methods would cure the patient in one session and it was ‘a matter of being cured whether one liked it or not.’)<sup>144</sup> When the first round of electroshock therapy failed to revive Callan’s speech, the doctor refused to let his patient leave or have a drink of water. Attempting to scare Callum into speaking again, he prepared to apply an electrical charge to Callan’s larynx, warning that this time it would be more painful. Callan, terrified, finally managed to utter a few words.

When Rivers recounted this episode to Sassoon, he noted sadly ‘The only thing that was important was getting [Callan] back to the front. He wasn’t a man, he was a fighting unit.’ Rivers’ obvious distress and the London doctor’s cruel methods offer an effective condemnation of the practises of war psychiatry and the military’s disregard for damaged soldiers’ emotional needs in its rush to boost its military strength. These images offer insight into the lesser known cruelties occurring during the war and have historical significance because they parallel real-life incidents. In France in 1916 a soldier by the name of Baptiste Deschamps, wounded at the front, was on trial for assaulting his neurologist Clovis Vincent. Deschamps assaulted Vincent after the doctor attempted to forcefully use electroshock therapy on him.<sup>145</sup> Vincent believed he had the right, much as the doctor did in *Regeneration*, to have the same relationship to and power over his patients as an officer to his soldiers.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, Deschamps was viewed by Vincent’s supporters as a ‘malingerer, fearful wimp who refused to do his duty.’<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Binneveld, *From shell shock to combat stress*, p. 108.

<sup>145</sup> Marc Roudebush, “A Patient Fights Back: Neurology in the Court of Public Opinion in France During the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), pp. 29-38.

<sup>146</sup> Roudebush, “A Patient Fights Back,” pp. 29; 32.

<sup>147</sup> Roudebush, “A Patient Fights Back,” pp. 29- 38.

In *Regeneration*, the issue of cowardice, whether in regards to psychiatric treatment or the battlefield, was also taken up by Billy Prior as another platform from which to launch his anti-war critique. *Regeneration*, like *King and Country* mentioned in chapter two, used the young shell-shocked soldier shot for 'cowardice' as an important anti-war focus. In one of his talks with Dr Rivers, Prior passionately recounted an episode in which a sixteen year old soldier broke down during combat and was tied to a post on the battlefield at daybreak, presumably to be shot by the enemy. The story of this young man is reminiscent of the military's treatment of the soldiers in *A Very Long Engagement*, and Prior's anger stemmed partly from the fact that the young man tied to a post was only sixteen. (Indeed the film's DVD cover uses the iconic 'Shot at Dawn' image of a man being tied to a post on the battlefield). In the British army, four men who were shot for desertion and cowardice during the war were only seventeen.<sup>148</sup> The anger reflected in *Regeneration* may therefore stem from the reality of the military's harsh treatment of young soldiers unsympathetically labelled as cowards.

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In recent years, British, American and European cinema has done much to shed light on shell shock and desertion. In addition to using the shell shocked soldier to illuminate the injustices of the military, the recent cinema of these nations has come a long way also in shaping understandings of combat trauma. Recent cinema about the First World War has inevitably been influenced by the medical understandings about war trauma that have come to light in the wake of the Vietnam War. Knowledge of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its symptoms has accounted for the

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<sup>148</sup> Ben Fenton, "Pardon For Soldiers Executed in the Great War," in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday August 17, 2006.

greater complexity in the representation of shell shock in recent films about the Great War. As understandings of the psychological factors which cause men to break down in battle grow, so too are these symptoms shown in the cinema, which mirrors medical advances by using its properties of sound, flashback and montage to convey a multitude of newly understood psychological states.

In films such as *Regeneration*, current medical knowledge about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder appears to have played a role in the way trauma is represented. Understandings about PTSD are reflected in the complex and varied reactions of the men at Craiglockhart hospital when memories of traumatic events are relived. In Shiromani, Keane, and LeDoux (eds.) study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is noted that PTSD sufferers have ‘memories of the event that they relive again and again (i.e. flashbacks, nightmares, preoccupation with thoughts or images of the events of war).’<sup>149</sup> In *Regeneration*, Owen continued to relive the terror of war in his waking state. While he read his newly written poem ‘Dulce et Decorum est’ to himself, his description of the horror of seeing the man in the poem suffering from gas inhalation reminded him of Burns’ traumatic episodes.

*Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling*

Burns’s shivering, bloody figure huddled in the woods reappeared in Owen’s memory.

*And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime. –  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.*

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<sup>149</sup> Shiromani, Keane, LeDoux (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, p. v.

The images of Burns were superimposed with scenes from the battlefield, creating a nightmarish arrangement of images which juxtaposed Burns' suffering with the wider sufferings of those in the trenches.

*In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning...*<sup>150</sup>

As Owen's poem reawakened traumatic memories, he appeared to suffer from 'secondary trauma' - that is, Burns' shell shock was affecting his own mental state.<sup>151</sup> Rivers likewise found himself to be shell shocked by his patients, and stayed up late at night to delay going to bed. (Avoidance of sleep and the fear of the nightmares it will bring is another symptom of PTSD.)<sup>152</sup> Sassoon also found himself reliving the war in both sleeping and waking states, telling Dr Rivers that his nightmares continued when he awoke, and he saw the men of his battalion surrounding his bed.

Tom Williams' study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder suggests that memories of the battlefield play a role in the daytime thoughts of combat veterans, and that veterans' obsessive episodes are also triggered by common experiences that remind veterans of the war zones.<sup>153</sup> Williams elaborates that:

A few combat veterans find the memories invoked by some of these and other stimuli so uncomfortable that they will actually go out of their way to avoid them. When exposed to one of the above or other stimuli, a very small number

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<sup>150</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Dulce et Decorum est,' in *Poems of the Great War 1914-1918* (Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 30-31.

<sup>151</sup> Anton Kaes and Joy Damousi both discuss the idea of 'secondary trauma' - that is, the way those around the traumatised veteran begin to be psychologically affected also. See Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, p. 39; Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath*, p. 113.

<sup>152</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 12.

<sup>153</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 12.

of combat veterans undergo a short period of time in a dissociative-like state.<sup>154</sup>

The term 'dissociation' is used in psychology and psychiatry to mean

A perceived detachment of the mind from the emotional state or even from the body. Dissociation is characterized by a sense of the world as a dreamlike or unreal place and may be accompanied by poor memory of the specific events, which in severe form is known as dissociative amnesia.<sup>155</sup>

This dissociative state is represented in *The Officer's Ward*. When Adrien returned to his family at the end of the film, his physical and psychological scars from the war were all but healed. During a game of hide and seek with the children of the family, the garden became shrouded in mist and Adrien stopped, confused. Hearing a horse whinnying in the distance and imagining the whistling of a shell, Adrien fainted. He fell into a temporary dream-like dissociative state, and his repressed memories of battle came back to haunt him when his surroundings triggered reminders of the battlefield.

According to Shiromani, Keane, and LeDoux (eds.) study, 'learned alarms occur during exposure to situations that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.'<sup>156</sup> In *Mrs Dalloway* Septimus also suffered from dissociative symptoms triggered by 'learned alarms' and memories of the war. While in the middle of a park with his wife Rezia, he began to re-experience the death of his friend Evans, the memories of which continued to traumatise him throughout the film. His distress in the park began when he heard a plane flying overhead, the sound of which seemed to

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<sup>154</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 13.

<sup>155</sup> "Definition of 'Dissociation,' on 'MedicineNet.com', <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=38857> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2010)

<sup>156</sup> Shiromani, Keane, LeDoux (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, p. 6.

trigger his hallucinations. Thereafter he began to act strangely. The sound of a child crying became intensified in his anxious mind. ‘The world is clambering ‘kill yourself! Kill yourself!...No one kills from hatred!’ he mumbled. Suddenly the bloodied figure of his dead friend Evans began to walk toward him in the park. ‘Evans, don’t come!’ he yelled, echoing the film’s opening scene in which he saw Evans die. In the park, the figure of Evans exploded, as if hit again by a shell, and Septimus’s hallucinations ended.

Bill Condon’s 1998 film *Gods and Monsters* also showed the way that memories of the First World War continued to haunt soldiers long after combat was over.<sup>157</sup> In Condon’s film, the elderly director James Whale (who in real life made *Frankenstein* and adapted Erich Maria Remarque’s war novels *Three Comrades* and *Journey’s End* into films) suffered from traumatic memories of the First World War. Whale explained the difficulty he had in his old age of forgetting the war. ‘Our whole generation was wiped out by that war’ he said. ‘It is digging itself up. There is nothing in here now to take my mind off it.’ In one scene at George Cukor’s party, Whale’s flashback to the war and his subsequent dissociative state were triggered by the flash from photographers’ cameras. He was reminded of the flashes of gunfire on the battlefield. A montage of images ensued to recreate Whale’s traumatised memory. Men caught in the wire on the battlefield were superimposed with images of the bride of Frankenstein from Whale’s film. Whale’s fictional monsters and his own inner demons combined. The cinematic use of montage and flashback in this scene mirrors the symptoms of Whale’s condition and his own personal ‘post-traumatic’ symptoms. When the film’s montage of horrific images ended, Whale stood in the garden at the

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<sup>157</sup> *Gods and Monsters* (1998) Bill Condon (105 minutes)

party, still staring into the distance. In his dissociative state, his memories continued long after the film's flashbacks ended. In the garden, an image of his former lover, a young soldier from the war, appeared in front of him. Whale believed the young man was really there in the garden. It was only his young gardener Clayton who was able to shake him from his traumatic remembrance.

Captain Baldry in *The Return of the Soldier* likewise suffered from similar traumatic re-experiencing symptoms. While in bed one night, he began to imagine another man in his room. 'It was a wonderful summer' he told the man. Suddenly the other man appeared as an emaciated rotting corpse and Captain Baldry heard the sound of shell whistling and imagined his window being blown apart by the explosion before the nightmare ended. His traumatic nightmares and hallucinations which manifested themselves in his sleep resonate with post-traumatic symptoms in our current psychological discourse. The sufferings of Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway* also reflect many of the symptoms of PTSD. The guilt Septimus experienced from not being able to help his friend Evans, his inability to grieve for Evans, and his fear and that the murders he committed during the war would be viewed in post-war society as terrible crimes reflects again recent understandings of PTSD.<sup>158</sup> Given that *Mrs Dalloway* was written in 1925, however, and that the film's narrative does not deviate greatly from author Virginia Woolf's story, it therefore reflects symptoms that were evident at the time and believed to be manifestations of shell shock.<sup>159</sup> Dr Bradshaw believed Septimus' symptoms stemmed from 'delayed shell shock.' He hesitated to say that

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<sup>158</sup> Williams (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*, p. 79.

<sup>159</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, edited with an introduction and notes by David Bradshaw (Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2000)

Septimus was mad, preferring to diagnose Septimus as 'lacking a sense of proportion.'

*Mrs Dalloway* suggests that Virginia Woolf's contemporaries understood more in the 1920s about shell shock than social and cultural histories of the war would perhaps have us believe. Why then are representations of trauma more complex in recent cinema than in films from before Vietnam? Or is it that psychology has given us a new way of reading these films? Certainly the advances in psychiatric knowledge in the past thirty years have played a role in the representation of more elaborate depictions of war trauma and shell shock in recent films about the First World War. Cinematic depictions of shell shocked soldiers nowadays reveal complex understandings of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, suggesting a relationship between cultural and psychiatric history. In addition to creating more elaborate depictions of the psychological traumas of war, cinema since the 1980s has also come a long way in addressing the effects on families of damaged veterans. This became evident in the examination of *A Very Long Engagement*, *The Officer's Ward*, *The Return of the Soldier* and *Mrs Dalloway*. It is an issue which earlier cinema largely neglected, and which is so relevant because it resonates with the many real-life struggles of war veterans and their families. One can, nevertheless trace a dialogue, beginning in the earliest silent films up to the recent twenty first century films about the Great War, which continues to use the treatment of shell shock, both socially and medically, as an important anti war tool.



## Conclusion

*'The war may be over but there's still the echo of it.'*  
- Hugh, in *Mrs Dalloway*.

**I**n 2001, an Australian veteran of the First World War named Ted Smoat was interviewed by Ray Martin for a program called “100 Centenarians: the Children of Federation.” Recorded by the National Library of Australia as part of an oral history project, the program interviewed a number of Australians who had lived through various social, cultural and political developments of the twentieth century. In his interview, the 103 year old Ted discussed his experience of the Great War and shell-shock. Significantly, he described still suffering from the psychological effects of the war in his old age, such as during a twenty-one gun salute held in his honour in 2000: ‘The first shot- I went to dive for the ground...and [with] every shot, I was getting further and further into a fit. That was last year- incredible!’<sup>160</sup> Ted’s anxiety at the sound of guns being fired would today be associated with a prolonged form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>161</sup> More importantly, however, the fact that he suffered from prolonged trauma from a war fought more than eighty years earlier powerfully highlights the continued relevance of the First World War in social, historical and psychiatric discourse today.

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with Ted Smoat on Peter Rubinstein (director’s) “100 centenarians: the children of Federation,” [episodes 26-55], recorded as part of an oral history project at the National Library of Australia, and broadcast by Raywise Media Networks (2001) with the assistance of the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. Interview with Ted Smoat (1:34 minutes) accessed through the National Film and Sound Archive (Sydney office), on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>161</sup> Ted’s anxiety response is reminiscent of the ‘learned alarms’ mentioned in PTSD studies. See Shiromani, Keane, LeDoux (eds.), *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, p. 6.

Precisely what I have tried to do in this thesis is to demonstrate the continued importance of the First World War and shell shock to historical and cultural studies. My aim has been to contribute to historical discourse new insights into the social and cultural understandings of shell shock. In order to do so, I have examined a largely untraversed historical field of inquiry, that is, cinema which deals with the Great War's traumatised soldiers and civilians. The study of early films like *J'accuse* and *Nerven* is particularly imperative because these films are somewhat inaccessible to mass modern day audiences. In addition to the fact that silent cinema is often only viewed by a select group of people interested in the genre, forgotten films like *Nerven* are hard to find. The important issues to do with war trauma that these films address should not be allowed to fade into obscurity, making historical inquiry into these films essential. As early as 1919, at a time when war psychiatry was still in its relative infancy and manifestations of 'shell shock' were stigmatised and misunderstood, a film like *J'accuse* revolutionised the use of the shell shocked soldier to highlight the senselessness of war. Like *Nerven*, it also illuminated how deep the lasting psychological wounds of the war were on post-war society. The importance of these films to the history of the Great War cannot be overstated.

Following the trend of this early cinema, films throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries have continued to use representations of shell shock and war trauma to highlight the senselessness of the First World War. American and British films of the period 1930-64 found the shell shocked soldier to be a particularly powerful symbol for criticising the war, as well as the military's treatment of mentally unstable soldiers. Didactic films like *Paths of Glory* and *King and Country* used the issues of shell shock and desertion to attempt to remove the stigma attached to soldiers shot at

dawn. In portraying the instability, vulnerability, and humanity of soldiers unjustly on trial for their lives, these films had the emotional force to powerfully and very publicly condemn cruel military practices about which the general public would otherwise probably have been unaware.

With the developments in the field of psychology in the wake of the Vietnam War, and particularly the understandings about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder since the 1980s, representations of shell shock have inevitably also become more complex. As highlighted by the films in this thesis, cinematic representations of shell shock have paralleled psychiatric understandings of war trauma contemporary to the films' time. For that reason, the psychological states conveyed in films like *Regeneration* were more multifaceted than those of earlier films like *King and Country*. Indeed, cinema has the advantage of having a variety of techniques at its disposal which are able to vividly convey the complex mental states of people suffering from shell shock.

Flashback, montage, editing- all have been effectively used to mirror the psychological states of disturbed soldiers in the cinema about the First World War. This is particularly the case in recent years, as the knowledge about what makes men break down in war has become more advanced and more socially accepted.

Whether cinema has helped to create that acceptance is difficult to say, but the mass medium's accessibility, and its propensity to shape popular understandings of history, gives it the power to convey the lesser known issues of war to a wide audience. In this way, cinema has been able to shed light on important consequences of the First World War such as shell shock, which, although it may have been uncomfortable for past audiences, sorely needed to be addressed. Recent films such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *The*

*Officer's Ward* also began to focus on issues to do with the emotional affects on families of physically and psychologically damaged veterans. In creating an awareness of hitherto largely unrepresented issues, such as the suffering of families, these films helped to remove the stigma and silence once surrounding shell shock. *Regeneration* was also particularly persuasive in its attempt to remove the stigma attached to psychological breakdown in war, using emotive and starkly realistic depictions of soldiers' trauma and the horrors of war to argue that anyone was capable of breakdown, regardless of military rank. Gillie's Mackinnon's extraordinarily comprehensive study of shell shock in *Regeneration* showed that the First World War is far from forgotten. The echoes of the war still resonate in the twenty first century, and cinema, being the enduring medium that it is, has kept the memory of shell shock and the Great War alive.

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*Patton* (1970) Franklin J. Schaffner (172 minutes)  
*The Road Back* (1937) James Whale (97 minutes)  
*Shoulder Arms* (1918) Charles Chaplin (46 minutes)  
*Three Comrades* (1938) Frank Borzage (100 minutes)

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*La Vie et Rien d'Autre/Life and Nothing But* (1989) Bertrand Tavernier (135 minutes)  
*The Light Horsemen* (1987) Simon Wincer (131 minutes)  
*Mrs Dalloway* (1997) Marleen Gorris (97 minutes)  
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