

# *La Vie et rien d'autre: Remembering the Aftermath of the First World War and the Unknown Soldier*

Shane A. Emplaincourt

---

As for the rest, they are now just names without faces or faces without names.

—Philip Caputo<sup>1</sup>

---

## Prologue: Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, 11-11-1918

*Mourir le 11 novembre 1918, c'est mourir deux fois.*<sup>2</sup>

—Général Alain Fauveau

Shortly after 05h00 on the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1918, the Armistice was signed in Wagons-Lits Co. carriage 2419D in the Rethondes clearing of la Fôret de Compiègne, "[...] but officials held out six hours out of a sense of poetry—the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1918."<sup>3</sup> That six-hour delay would come at the rather unpoetic cost of 11,944 casualties on both sides of the Western Front, more than 944 than those suffered on D-Day, the sixth of June, twenty-five years later. Joseph Persico adroitly compares those untimely losses in the following: "The men storming the Normandy beaches were fighting for victory.

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War: The Classic Vietnam Memoir—40<sup>th</sup> Edition* (New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2017), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated, all translations are mine. "To die on 11 November 1918 is to die twice." Alain Fauveau, *Mourir le 11 novembre 1918, c'est mourir deux fois: le dernier fait d'armes du 415<sup>e</sup> régiment d'infanterie contre la garde prussienne à Vrigne-Meuse, Ardennes* (Charleville-Mézières: Éditions Terres ardennaises, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Adamson, "Hitler in War, Merkel in Peace: a Train Car for History," *AP News*, 7 November 2018, accessed 20 March 2020, <https://www.apnews.com/45ed2aad6c7a4261a92339db16fd3a79>.

Men dying on Armistice Day were fighting in a war already decided.”<sup>4</sup> At 10:59:30 in Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, fifteen kilometers from Douaumont, Doughboy Henry N. Gunther is the last known soldier of the Great War to have died on the battlefield, *le dernier mort à la dernière minute*.<sup>5</sup> Thirty seconds later, the First World War was over. Thus, those final seconds of the eleventh hour are not only one last grim testimony, but they also represent a microcosm that punctuates the Great War’s unprecedented violence and its resulting mass death and devastation in France: out of the total population, 3.4% of the men were killed compared to 3% in Germany, 1.9 % in Austria-Hungary, 1.6 % in Great Britain and Italy, and 1.1% in Russia.<sup>6</sup> Of particular significance for *la Grande Nation* was that half of all the corpses were categorized as either missing or unidentifiable. With the centennial anniversary of the Unknown Soldier and France’s post-World War I reconstruction era, Bertrand Tavernier’s depiction of 1920 France in his award-winning *La Vie et rien d’autre* (*Life and Nothing But*, 1989)—an avant-garde tapestry of the antagonism between monumental history and living memory regarding *les disparus*, or the missing, and the unidentifiable dead—make his film the subject of this essay.

---

<sup>4</sup> Joseph E. Persico, *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918 World War I and Its Violent Climax* (New York: Random House, 2004), 378-379.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Goldschmidt, “11 novembre 1918: le dernier mort à la dernière minute,” *RTL*, 24 August 2018, accessed 29 December 2019, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/debats-societe/11-novembre-1918-le-dernier-mort-a-la-derniere-minute-7794107638>.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Chesnais, *Les Morts violentes en France depuis 1826: Comparaisons internationales* (Paris: P.U.F., 1976), table n° 58, 183.

## Introduction: Director-Producer Bertrand Tavernier

“Je songe aux morts que nous avons laissés là-bas, à demi ensevelis. Le même sort ne m’est-il pas réservé? La Mort est acceptable, certes, mais cet oubli, cet abandon, cet anonymat?”

—Gabriel Boissy<sup>7</sup>

Bertrand Tavernier’s name may not appear on the list of the likes of Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, or Rohmer, but, a decade after the end of la Nouvelle Vague, “Martin Scorsese who participated in the genesis of *Round Midnight* (1986) and who also plays a villainous nightclub owner in the film flatly declares that Tavernier is ‘the leading director’ among the younger group of French film makers”—‘one who is most continuously producing interesting films.’”<sup>8</sup> Emily Zants also praises him as “[. . .] one of those rare masters who can change our prejudices between the beginning and end of a film. Rimbaud wrote poetry ‘to change the world.’ Tavernier has never been so pretentious. He just changes spectators one after another. He unsettles them because he undermines the hierarchical power structure, violating the causal narrative conventions that support it.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Found in Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Le Soldat inconnu vivant: La guerre, la mémoire, la mort* (Paris: Hachette littératures, 2002), 76. Adam Nicolson’s translation: “I dream of the dead that we left back there, half-buried. Will I end up the same way? Death is acceptable, certainly, but this oblivion, this abandonment, this anonymity?” See “A living ghost from the trenches whose plight confused a nation riven by grief,” *The Telegraph*, 16 January 2005, accessed 29 December 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3635054/A-living-ghost-from-the-trenches-whose-plight-confused-a-nation-riven-by-grief.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Eva Hoffman, “After the New Wave, Tavernier,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 8 December 1985, accessed 29 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/magazine/after-the-new-wave-tavernier.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Zants, *Bertrand Tavernier: Fractured Narrative and Bourgeois Values* (Lanham, Maryland, and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 1.

Born in Lyon—just like the motion picture itself with the Lumière brothers' *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895)—in 1941 to a father who abetted anti-Nazi highbrows and published a wartime resistance journal with the belief that “words are as important and as lethal as bullets and that writers (and therefore filmmakers) had real responsibilities to their audience in this regard,”<sup>10</sup> Tavernier developed an ethical outlook early in his career as a screenwriter, believing that he had “[...] a moral responsibility to be faithful both to his characters and to his art.”<sup>11</sup> Influenced by some of the most gifted filmmakers such as John Ford (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1940), William Wellman (*Wings*, 1927), Jean Renoir (*La grande illusion*, 1937), Jean Vigo (*Zéro de conduite*, 1933), and Jacques Becker (*Casque d'or*, 1952), teenage Tavernier wished to follow in their steps. As early as his first production, *L'Horloger de Saint-Paul* (1973), which won the *Prix Louis-Delluc* (best film and best first film of the year), Tavernier—“[...] widely considered to be the leading light in the generation of French filmmakers who launched their careers in the 1970s in the wake of the New Wave”<sup>12</sup>—has showcased a gamut of protagonists in a wide spectrum of genres in a number of award-winning films, such as a nineteenth-century serial killer in *Le Juge et l'assassin* (1976), a colonial police chief in a West-African village in *Coup de torchon* (1981), an impressionist painter in *Un dimanche à la campagne* (1984), a jazz saxophonist in *Autour de minuit* (1985), a medieval knight in *Béatrice* (1987), World War I soldiers in *La Vie et rien d'autre* (1989) and *Capitaine Conan* (1996), the imaginary daughter of d'Artagnan in *La Fille d'Artagnan* (1994), a couple wanting to adopt a baby in Cambodia in *Holy*

---

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Tavernier interviewed by Richard Phillips in 1999, *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*, edited by Lynn A. Higgins, T. Jefferson Kline (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 134.

<sup>11</sup> Bertrand Tavernier interviewed by Richard Phillips in 1999, *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

*Lola* (2004), and a New Orleans police detective in *Dans la brume électrique* (2009), just to name a few.

President of l'Institut Lumière since its establishment in 1982, historiophile Tavernier initially found his inspiration to co-write and to shoot *La Vie et rien d'autre* from his boyhood curiosity, i.e., wondering who was resting in the tomb of the Unknown Soldier under l'Arc de Triomphe. The idea for making a film about him had been germinating for many years; however, it was after reading Didier Daeninckx's *Le der des ders*<sup>13</sup> (*A Very Profitable War*, 1984) that he began to undertake the project seriously. In the novel's setting—the immediate aftermath of *la der des ders*<sup>14</sup>—protagonist veteran René Griffon turned private detective discovers upon reading a corporate diary in a doctor's office waiting room that a journalist had spent several months visiting institutions caring for the gravely wounded and the "malheureux rendus fous ou amnésiques par la durée des combats. Un an après l'armistice où on dénombrait encore des centaines d'anciens combattants non identifiés."<sup>15</sup> Piqued by the story, Tavernier discovered in *Le Quid* that there were actually 350,000 *disparus* in 1920.

In an interview with *Cinéaste*, he explains to film critic Karen Jaehne that he first wished to portray that boyhood inquisitiveness about *le Soldat Inconnu* when he scripted *Vers minuit* (*Round Midnight*, 1986) where, in a clip that was never shot, protagonist jazz legend Lester Young, looking down at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, reads, "Here lies the Unknown

---

<sup>13</sup> Abbreviation for "*le dernier des derniers*," or the last of all soldiers.

<sup>14</sup> Abbreviation for "*la dernière des dernières*," or the last of all wars.

<sup>15</sup> Didier Daeninckx, *Le der des ders* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984), 21. Translation: "unfortunate ones who went mad or became amnesiacs due to the duration of combat. One year after the armistice, they were still counting hundreds of unidentified veterans."

Soldier. 1914-1918," and comments, "Not only is he unknown but he is very young."<sup>16</sup> Tavernier adds that he mentioned his interest in the subject to Jean Cosmos who had scripted the telefilm *La Dictée* (1984) that also treated the topic, and, as a result of their mutual interest and inquisitiveness, they began researching *le Soldat Inconnu*.<sup>17</sup> Tavernier was under the impression that the search for the Unknown Soldier took many months; however, it was Cosmos who discovered that it took only four days.<sup>18</sup> After two years of collaboration and countless revisions, they created a scenario that portrays the reviviscence of post war-ravaged France by featuring the struggles of cynical Major Dellaplane (Philippe Noiret) tasked to identify all 350,000 *poilus disparus*,<sup>19</sup> of aristocrat Madame Irène de Courtil (Sabine Azéma) attempting to find her MIA husband, and of young primary school teacher Alice Vallier (Pascale Vignal) doing exactly the same but for her fiancé.

In a scant landscape of First World War motion pictures since 1945, the few directors who have elucidated the ramifications of the Great War's unprecedented violence include Stanley Kubrick and Joseph Losey with "shot at dawn" in *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *King and Country* (1964) respectively and Dalton Trumbo with quadruple amputee Joe Bonham in *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971). By producing *La Vie et rien d'autre* in 1988, Tavernier paved the way for other French directors to depict that sub-genre of *la Grande Guerre*, namely François Dupeyron with the disfigured in *La Chambre des officiers (The Officers' Ward, 2001)*; Jean-Pierre Jeunet's

---

<sup>16</sup> Bertrand Tavernier, Philippe Noiret, and Karen Jaehne, "La Guerre n'est pas Finie: An Interview with Bertrand Tavernier and Philippe Noiret," *Cinéaste*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1990), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Tavernier, Philippe Noiret, and Karen Jaehne, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Francine Laurendeau, "Bertrand Tavernier," *Séquences*, No. 143 (novembre 1989), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Missing French soldiers. Like "Doughboy" and "Tommy," *Poilu* is an affectionate term for the French infantryman of the Great War.

with self-mutilation in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (*A Very Long Engagement*, 2004), François Ozon with survivor's guilt in *Frantz* (2017), and Albert Dupontel with war memorial scams in *Au revoir là-haut* (*See You Up There*, 2017). Because the film industry was not interested in investing in what it considered to be a depressing historical World War I documentary, Tavernier's first obstacle was to secure financial support and a distributor, which, given his long-standing reputation, proved strangely difficult. However, Hachette Première producer René Cleitman was the only one who grabbed the opportunity while the director scrounged for monetary backing, and long-time friend, colleague, and award-winning actor Philippe Noiret also committed to his fifth project with the director. During the last two freezing months of 1988 in Lorraine, Tavernier, Cosmos, and their crew quickly shot the film; their efforts were not done in vain, for the audience loved it. With nine César nominations, it won best actor (Philippe Noiret) and best music (Oswald D'Andréa), as well as BAFTA for best foreign film.

After more than four decades of Second World War motion pictures dominating theaters, the significance of the release of *La Vie* in 1989 lies not only in reviving the influence of the "*Urkatastrophe*," or the original catastrophe, on the twentieth century but also in bringing an awareness to the incommensurable subject of the MIAs and a nation in mourning, as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker explain in the following:

For eighty years, historians of the Great War overlooked the long, painful scars of grief that followed after the conflict was over. True mass deaths were recorded (not without difficulty), but the bereavement, the mourning process went unrecorded. It was as if historians thought that simply stating the number of dead, breaking them down into categories by age, year and military unit, was

equivalent to acknowledging the scale of the catastrophe. They put the catastrophe into a demographic context but not into the equally important context of collective grief.<sup>20</sup>

Great War film scholars and historians laud *La Vie*: for example, Laurent Véray argues that the picture contributes immensely to our understanding of the war's aftermath and "*l'impossible deuil*,"<sup>21</sup> or impossible mourning, and that, because of its success, the Great War's unanswered questions continue to be of interest today.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Andrew Kelly also praises it as "one of the finest films about this period."<sup>23</sup> Thus, within the framework of selected sequences and scenes, the purpose of this essay is to examine and analyze how Tavernier, through his narrative about the missing and the search for the Unknown Soldier, succeeded in making a *sine qua non* Great War film by capturing the ineffable weight of the dead of a lost generation on a grief-riven nation in the war's aftermath.

---

<sup>20</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, translation by Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 174.

<sup>21</sup> See Laurent Véray, *La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 2008), 183.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 126.



## The Setting: The Western Front 1920

“There is nothing left of Louvemont. No little stone houses. No barns.  
No town square with its fountain. Nothing.”

—Donovan Webster<sup>24</sup>

By the end of August 1914, 279,000 French soldiers were dead, and by Christmas, 1,000,000 men on both sides. From the onset, the war immediately became a war of position, stalemate, and attrition. Moreover, unlike in previous wars, the enormous explosion of violence during the first confrontations of 1914 “[...] lengthened spectacularly, going from a few hours to several weeks or months. [...] Battles were transformed into a series of sieges in open countryside, during which the besieged could re-supply freely, receive transport reinforcements and build new lines of defence (as the French did at Verdun in 1916, and the Germans on the Somme in the same year).”<sup>25</sup> Those battles of annihilation lasted ten and five months respectively. Half of the French men aged twenty to thirty-two at the war’s onset were dead when it concluded;<sup>26</sup> hardly a family in the nation of forty million was not touched by the war’s ravages. When it was finally over on 11 November 1918, of the 1,349,000 who had died, half died without a trace; they literally vanished. Without a body, there was no grave, and with no grave, the relatives had no place where they could mourn. This is the predicament in which de Courtil and Alice find themselves.

---

<sup>24</sup> Donovan Webster, *Aftermath: The Remnants of War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 63.

<sup>25</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), xiv.

In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, Jay Winter explains that, due to this new form of warfare and the firepower of the weaponry, many of the dead bodies just disappeared:

It was impossible for these men's bodies to be put in graveyards that could be found later on and identified because of the backward and forward movements in the early phase of the war and the repeated artillery bombardment when the war became static. These cemeteries were simply targets. And those who were buried with some note as to who was buried there simply vanished.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, the culture of mourning was forever changed, which Winter explains in the following:

"I think the link between The First World War and the present times is the cult of names. The names were the things that mattered. The names are all that mattered. [...] It is a way of bringing the bodies back home in a metaphorical sense of the term. Those names defined families that were empty, that had absences."<sup>28</sup> And for Tavernier's protagonist Major Dellaplane, a character inspired from "The Officer in Charge of the Dead" in Philip Caputo's memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977), that is all that matters.

With mass death came mass destruction—so much so that by 1919 the French government designated 1,200 non-adjacent square kilometers of eastern France as *la Zone Rouge*: an area judged too physically and environmentally damaged for human habitation.

---

<sup>27</sup> Jay Winter, "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning," interview by Birgit Görtz, *Deutsche Welle*, 18 November 2013, accessed 27 May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/world-war-i-created-new-culture-of-mourning/a-17233945>.

<sup>28</sup> Jay Winter, "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning," interview by Birgit Görtz.

Between 1914-1918, more than 700 million artillery and mortar rounds were fired on the Western Front<sup>29</sup> where *Le Service du Déminage* (Demining Service) "estimates 1,000 artillery shells fell per square meter of battleground."<sup>30</sup> In that band of scorched earth, "[c]ities and towns in the armies' path were reduced to jagged rubble, forests and farms to charred ruins. 'This is not war,' a wounded soldier among Britain's Indian troops wrote home from Europe. 'It is the ending of the world.'"<sup>31</sup>

A century later, 42,000 acres still have no residents and only limited is access allowed.<sup>32</sup> Designated as *villages morts pour la France*, names such as Bezonvaux, Beaumont-en-Verdunois, Cumières-le-Mort-Homme, Fleury-devant-Douaumont, Moussy-sur-Aisne, etc., these *villages mémoires*, or no-longer-there villages, are still the sites of those macabre acronyms born out of the First World War: UXO or UO (live unexploded ordnances), UXB (unexploded bombs), and ERW (explosive remnants of war). Because of their toxic decomposition combined with the hundreds of thousands of human and animal cadavers strewn across the landscape, these areas have been designated as forbidden grounds, and it will take several hundred years for them to be safe. The term verdunization, referring to the chlorination of drinking water, was a procedure first tested during the siege of Verdun in September 1916 when corpses and poisonous metals rendered the water unsafe. In one of the Grézaucourt scenes, the camera lens captures the water contamination problem by focusing on a cart with large uppercase red letters "*EAU POTABLE*" showing that drinkable water had to be supplied from elsewhere. The name

---

<sup>29</sup> Adam Hochschild, xii.

<sup>30</sup> Donovan Webster, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Hochschild, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Stuart Thorton, "Red Zone," National Geographic, 1 May 2014, accessed 27 May 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/red-zone/>.

*Zone Rouge* is never mentioned in the film, but Tavernier meticulously depicts it throughout the movie.

### The Establishing Sequence: La Côte d'Opal and L'Hôpital Militaire N° 45

"Erst das Lazarett zeigt, was Krieg ist."

—Paul's observation in Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues*<sup>33</sup>

Like the ceiling over the English Channel, there is an ominous impression from the moment the reels roll that immerses the audience in what immediate post Great War Western Front France must have been like. Reminiscent of both Eugène Boudin's oil canvas of *Berck, les dunes par gros temps* (1890) and John Lavery's "Cemetery, Etaples, 1919," the October 1920 wide-angle establishing sequence opens with a Fordian long shot *in medias res* showing a Saint Vincent de Paul nun shepherding a single-leg amputee wearing his 14-18 *bleu-horizon* greatcoat as they ride horses on the wide beach between Fort Mahon and Cap Griz-Nez. As the credits roll, we hear César-winner Oswald d'Andréa's dissonant forte almost as if attempting to evoke the voices of the dead: a measured dirge that reverberates throughout the film, accentuating the aftermath's gravity. Strong and loud, this strident music could be best described as heavy and somber and, at times, grating. As the nun repeatedly tells the disabled veteran, "Redressez-vous, redressez-vous," or "straighten up, straighten up" (01:55-02:03),<sup>34</sup> he falls off his horse but quickly remounts without assistance, an allegory of a nation's resolution to pick up the pieces

---

<sup>33</sup> "A hospital alone shows what war is." Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, translated by A. W. Wheen (Toronto, ON: Little, Brown & CO., 1929), 266.

<sup>34</sup> All time stamps are from *La Vie et rien d'autre*, directed by Bertrand Tavernier (Kino video, 1989).

and carry on. At the same moment, we are also introduced to lead character Parisian aristocrat de Courtil being chauffeured in her father-in-law's Hispano-Suiza H6<sup>35</sup> by André who drives alongside the two equestrians to inquire about the location of l'Hôpital Militaire N° 45 with hope of finding her MIA husband François there. Opening with a demobilized amputee is reminiscent of Lubitsch's haunting overture in *Broken Lullaby* (1932) based on Maurice Rostand's play *L'homme que j'ai tué* (*The Man I Killed*, 1930). It was the director's only melodrama antiwar movie from the sound era which also marked the end of Hollywood's cycle of First World War films.<sup>36</sup>

As the nun points to an imposing beach-front building, two flash jump cuts occur: first, a hospital in the distance, and second weathered wooden crosses in a small cemetery fronting the facility. During the nineteenth century, it was here that l'Hôpital de l'Assistance Publique de Paris sent scrofula-stricken (cervical tuberculosis) orphans to be cured in the iodine-rich Channel water. The success of the maritime cure experiment led to the establishment of l'Hôpital Maritime de Berck in 1861. As l'Hôpital N° 45 during 1914-1918, it gave priority to thousands of Tommies, and twelve kilometers away the Etaples Military Cemetery is the largest Commonwealth Graves Commission cemetery in France. In the past decade, fashionable Berck-Plage has been a choice setting for several movie directors such as Jean-Jacques Zillbermann's *La vie* (2014), but none of them quite succeed in matching the art of Tavernier. As in Lavery's *plein-air* canvas, it is all there: the littoral, the dunes, the cemetery, the wooden crosses, and the

---

<sup>35</sup> The Hispano-Suiza H6 was a Spanish-Swiss luxury car whose engine was based on the company's World War I airplane engines. It was first introduced to the public at the 1919 *Salon de l'Automobile à Paris*.

<sup>36</sup> "Broken Lullaby AKA The Man I Killed," *HFA*, 2 July 2017, accessed 30 May 2020, <https://harvardfilmarchive.org/calendar/broken-lullaby-aka-the-man-i-killed-2017-07>.

benevolent women. In three minutes, the director establishes the tone for the movie and then proceeds to take us inside the hospital where Major Dellaplane is attempting to identify both the dead and the amnesiacs.

Wearing his uniform and an apron, the major, just having finished photographing a cadaver, asks an amnesiac who has that “thousand-yard stare” if he can remember anything—his name, his age, whatever—but gets no response; however, his assistant Rougeaud says that he sometimes sings a lewd song or “Tantum ergo,” which prompts them to believe he might be a dirty-minded priest. He orders the other assistant, Tréville, to make note of that and then frustratingly exclaims his eager search for any kind of clue: “J’ai besoin de signes, moi, mon vieux! De cicatrices, de verrues, de tatouages. Le ‘Tantum ergo,’ c’est une espèce de tatouage!”<sup>37</sup> (0:4:05-0:4:12). Tavernier has effectively introduced the officer in charge of the dead and missing as a meticulous detective paying close attention to and recording the smallest details. Taking a pause, the major pensively looks out the window, notices de Courtil entering the hospital, and resumes his work, explaining that he photographs both the living and the dead: “Les morts, ça ne bouge pas, et les vivants, ça parle, en principe!”<sup>38</sup> (0:4:15-0:4:23). He continues by defining a *disparu*: “[...], c’est un type qui peut être ou mort ou vivant ou moitié moitié; c’est-à-dire un cul-de-jatte, un sourd, un aveugle, ou un amnésiaque, comme ton copain là, où même seulement un déserteur”<sup>39</sup> (0:4:27-0:4:45). He ends his harangue by stating his *raison d’être*: “Et moi, je les ai tous sur les bras, les disparus! Alors, je les photographie, je les classe, j’enquête, je fouine! Et de

---

<sup>37</sup> “I need signs! Scars, warts, tattoos. The ‘Tantum ergo’ is a like a tattoo or sorts!”

<sup>38</sup> “The dead don’t move, and the living talk, in principle.”

<sup>39</sup> “A MIA is someone who may be dead, or alive, or half half—a legless, a deaf, a blind, or an amnesiac, like that guy there, or even simply a deserter.”

temps en temps, j'arrive à mettre un nom sur une figure, une figure sur un nom, et ça fait un disparu de moins"<sup>40</sup> (0:4:43-0:4:59). A dedicated man of principle nearing the end of his career and a bit rough around the edges, Dellaplane well represents a pre-war officer as we see in the ensuing scene when Madame de Courtil barges in on him.

Under the black cloth of his camera, the major, hoping to jar the amnesiac's memory, is singing a few salacious lyrics from the bawdy song "La Digue du cul,"<sup>41</sup> "En revenant de Nantes / de Nantes à Montaigu / la digue la digue / De Nantes à Montaigu / la digue du cul / [...] Je rencontre une belle / [...] qui dormait le cul nu"<sup>42</sup> (0:5:00-0:5:20), as de Courtil, letting herself in the in the room unnoticed, says, "Excusez-moi" (0:5:21). She is ignored until Trévisse interrupts his superior who angrily asks him, "Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, non de dieu!"<sup>43</sup> (0:5:25). Indignant, she exclaims again, "Excusez-moi," to which he infuriatingly retorts, "Mais on frappe, Madame!"<sup>44</sup> Now also infuriated, she shouts back, "J'ai frappé à dix portes sans trouver personne, Monsieur!"<sup>45</sup>, to which he yells, "Mais on frappe onze fois!"<sup>46</sup> (0:5:25-0:5:35). The two are equals in their temperament: determined, obstinate, stubborn, and short-tempered. As she exits the room, slamming the door behind her, the unperturbed amnesiac unexpectedly starts singing,

---

<sup>40</sup> "And I'm in charge of all the MIAs! So I photograph them, I file them, I investigate, I snoop around! And from time to time, I am able to put a name to a face or a face to a name, and that makes one less MIA."

<sup>41</sup> The song was published in a collection of songs in the first edition of *Fleurs du Mâle* (1922) by the Cercle des Sciences at l'Université de Bruxelles. For more details, see Pierre Enckell, *Anthologie des chansons paillardes* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> "Coming back from Nantes / From Nantes to Montaigu / The dike the dike / From Nantes to Montaigu / The dike of the ass / I meet a pretty lass / who slept bare-ass."

<sup>43</sup> "What, goddamnit?"

<sup>44</sup> "But you knock, Ma'am!"

<sup>45</sup> "Sir, I knocked on ten doors, and nobody answered!"

<sup>46</sup> "Then knock eleven times!"

“En revenant de Nantes” (0:5:45-0:5:50); Dellaplane has just succeeded in jarring the victim’s memory and concludes that he is definitely a priest.

## A Living Unknown Soldier

“I don’t even know who I am.”

—amnesiac Charles “Smithy” Rainier<sup>47</sup>

Following their less than amicable introduction, de Courtil examines one of Dr. Mortier’s amnesiacs in the asylum ward. If seemingly trite at first, this clip holds particular significance in that the patient in question very much resembles Anthelme Mangin<sup>48</sup> who, throughout the interwar years, was known as “*le soldat inconnu vivant*,” or the living unknown soldier, until his death in 1942. Mangin’s incredibly tragic story began when he was reportedly seen wandering on the quai of the Lyon-Brotteaux train station 1 February 1918:

[...] 65 savagely traumatised soldiers [had been] sent back to France by Germans, but his paper work was missing and so, in that sense, he also remained missing. He would become the living dead, the walking embodiment of the guilt and grief that engulfed France over the next twenty years. He was a form both of hope and

---

<sup>47</sup> Ronald Colman as Charles “Smithy” Rainier in *Random Harvest*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy (M-G-M, 1942).

<sup>48</sup> His real name is Octave Félicien Monjoin.



conscience. If this dead man were living, might not others be? Were the lost not lost?<sup>49</sup>

When asked his name, he babbled, "Anthelme Mangin," the one who "some called the only free man, as he was without a past, without memory, without hatred, without identity or family. More often, though, he was called the last vestige, the last prisoner of the Great War."<sup>50</sup> To Lyonnais Tavernier, Mangin's twenty-four-year *via crucis* from one asylum to another should not be unfamiliar.

The look and the behavior of Mortier's patient not only evinces Mangin's muteness but also his gestures, such as his hand gently reaching for de Courtil's arm: "He either maintained his blanked-out silence or fingered their [would-be family members'] lace collars or buttons with mild curiosity."<sup>51</sup> The long dolly shot of de Courtil and the nurse walking the asylum's long narrow corridors reinforces the feeling of forgottenness. This two-minute clip poignantly captures the desperation of more than 300 families who, during the interwar years, claimed Mangin as their own, even if they barely recognized him: "[...] la douleur est telle que la ressemblance ne compte plus. On se dit qu'il a dû changer."<sup>52</sup> Concluding that he is not François, the cantankerous de Courtil takes Mortier's advice to travel to l'Hôpital de Vétrille near Verdun

---

<sup>49</sup> Adam Nicolson, "A living ghost from the trenches whose plight confused a nation riven by grief," *The Telegraph*.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Eve Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: a Story of Grief and the Great War*, 1-2.

<sup>51</sup> Adam Nicolson, "A living ghost from the trenches whose plight confused a nation riven by grief," *The Telegraph*.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchant, "Au moins 300 familles ont réclamé le soldat inconnu vivant," *Libération*, 11 novembre 2002, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2002/11/11/au-moins-300-familles-ont-reclame-le-soldat-inconnu-vivant\\_421273](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2002/11/11/au-moins-300-familles-ont-reclame-le-soldat-inconnu-vivant_421273).

while Dellaplane is also called to Verdun where he has just been assigned the ludicrous task of finding an unidentifiable corpse who must definitely be French; he will be *le Soldat Inconnu*. Believing all 350,000 missing can and should be identified, he vehemently refuses to follow General Villerieux's orders; however, the rebellious yet loyal officer succumbs and accepts. With a seamless cut, Tavernier introduces the third protagonist: schoolteacher Alice Vallier who has just lost her teaching position to a young returning veteran. In order to continue her search in the area for her missing Charles, she must seek other employment.

### Into the Heart of *la Zone Rouge*

"Almost eighty years after the Siege of Verdun, the battlefields here remain so unnatural looking that astronauts can see them from hundreds of miles up."

—Donovan Webster<sup>53</sup>

Fordian disciple Tavernier best captures *la Zone Rouge* scenes in the nearly destroyed village of Vétrille-Grézacourt<sup>54</sup> where the action unfolds in the Valentin restaurant and on Abel Masclé's live bomb-littered field. Similar to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's subjects in "De strijd tussen Carnaval en Vasten" ("The Battle Between Carnival and Lent," 1559), Tavernier's tableau, likewise, shows his lead characters surrounded by an array of post-war survivors: old and young, from opportunist sculptors to Algerian soldiers, and from true-blue veterans to *restaurateurs*. The director explains that, much like John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) or *My Darling*

---

<sup>53</sup> Donovan Webster, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Filmed at Thonnance-les-Moulins (Haute-Marne). See Centre de recherche sur les médiations, "La Vie et rien d'autre," *Les Bobines de l'Est*, accessed 7 July 2020, <http://lesbobinesdelest.com/la-vie-et-rien-dautre/>.

*Clementine* (1946), the key to achieving realism lies not only in choosing authentic locations, accurate weather, and time of the year in the case of *La Vie*, but also in how to properly cast secondary roles, particularly what he defines as *l'enracinement des personnages dans le décor*,<sup>55</sup> or the attachment of the characters to the setting and landscape. It is those characters that contribute to enriching the picture.

By opening the sequence with a diametrically trenchant close-up of the Parisian in her luxury sedan and of Abel Masclé tilling his field, the director also depicts the poles of the social stratification. Here, the withered, gaunt farmer—wearing his 1914 *bleu-horizon* greatcoat with a hand-rolled cigarette on his right ear—is pushing his plough as the Persheron is pulling. Suddenly, the blade strikes a buried helmet. Annoyed, he picks it up, throws it aside, and says, “Il en remontera donc toujours de ces engeances!”<sup>56</sup> (0:16:30-0:16:38). As he watches the Hispano-Suiza slowly driving by in the distance, he puts the cigarette in his mouth, lights it, and grumbles to his horse:

Tu vois vieux gars, ça c'est du Parisien, et du riche! Note, on est bien comme on est, parce que ces plaqués de Parisiens, ils ont peut-être bien la vie facile mais c'est bien tous des cocus. Si je te disais, en perm', leurs bonnes femmes, combien j'en ai arrangées! Seulement dame, la chaude-pisse, tu l'avais en prime, la chaude-pisse!<sup>57</sup> (0:16:40-0:17:18)

---

<sup>55</sup> Francine Laurendeau, 44.

<sup>56</sup> “This stuff will always keep coming up!”

<sup>57</sup> “Ya see there, ole boy, that's Parisian, and rich, too! Just know, we are just fine as we are; those coward Parisians may have it easy, but they're all cuckolds. If I were to tell you how many of their wives I did while on leave! [chuckles] But hell, the clap was what ya got as a bonus.”

In 1914-1918, Paris may not have been very far away from the Western Front, but for some Parisians, the Western Front was. Next, the plough strikes a large buried shell. First, he yells to his nephew, "Jeannot! Je suis sur du gros! Du 220, je crois bien. Je vais essayer de détacher le cheval, sinon il va bouger d'un moment à l'autre. Cours vite vers les démineurs et dis-leur de venir aussitôt!"<sup>58</sup> (0:17:30-0:17:40), and then he whispers to the horse, "Ho, bouge pas, petit. A pas peur, Vieux Gars, a pas peur, le tout c'est de rien remuer. Voilà, doux, doux"<sup>59</sup> (0:17:40-0:18:00).

Meanwhile, with a cross cut inside the restaurant, Alice, in the midst of desperately asking Valentine for a job, leaves the door open, allowing the viewers to observe the action outside. Remindful of Ford's legendary doorway scene in *The Searchers* (1956), the open-door technique in this case lets them "multi-task," i.e., not only follow conversations in the forefront but also follow the drama unfolding in the background outside: Jeannot runs into Alice, alerts her of the unexploded bomb, grabs her bicycle, and pedals away to find the *démineurs*. In a panoramic shot, all the characters suddenly stop moving when they hear a distant loud explosion. The horse must have moved. Tavernier drew inspiration for this scene from the history of the Masclé property which was contiguous to the famous Hannequin farm<sup>60</sup> where a till struck an undetonated bomb, volatizing everything—the farmer, the team of horses, and the plough. According to legend, the dead soldiers concealed in the ground haunted the collective

---

<sup>58</sup> "Jeannot! This is a big one! A 220, I think. I'm gonna unharness the horse; otherwise, he's gonna move any second. Quick, run and get the deminers and tell 'em to come right away!"

<sup>59</sup> "Easy now, don't move. Don't be afraid, ole boy, don't be afraid, the main thing is don't move. There ya go, easy, easy."

<sup>60</sup> See Jean Cosmos, *La Vie et rien d'autre: roman* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1991), 24.

consciousness;<sup>61</sup> protesting, they screamed vengeance by attacking post-war survivors—a ghostly theme well captured in Gance's "return of the dead" in *J'accuse* (1919). His indelible scene, which became a striking leitmotif in art and in literature throughout the interwar years, was a result of mass death. The consequences of the weapons of mass destruction unleashed in 1914 still hold contemporaneity to this day: teams of *démineurs* continue to unearth unexploded bombs; every year since 1946, the *Département du Déminage* has been recovering about 900 tons of unexploded munitions; 630 *démineurs* have died handling them; and "thirty-six farmers died in 1991 alone when their machinery hit uncollected shells."<sup>62</sup> No other sequence in the film better captures the devastation and the hazards of *la Zone Rouge*. The segment which comes full circle with a close-up of de Courtil's face in the Hispano-Suiza en route to Grézaucourt represents superb cinematography on the part of César recipient Bruno de Keyser (*Un dimanche à la campagne*, 1984) who explains his craft in the following:

You have to stick to the story. The main job of a cinematographer is not to light sets, it's to understand the story that he is shooting and to try to serve it. From there on, the rest is simple. The photography comes next. We don't light sets, we light emotions. The photography is a success when you've understood the story and that you've done it justice. With literature, each reader imagines something,

---

<sup>61</sup> See Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Le Soldat inconnu: La guerre, la mémoire, la mort*, 24-25.

<sup>62</sup> Donovan Webster, 19.

but in the cinema, we impose our vision of a set, so we've got to get it right. If we've gotten it right, we've almost succeeded.<sup>63</sup>

Those scenes within scenes with the drama taking place in the background illustrate not only brilliant photography but also a complete understanding of the script. Similar to Bruegel's genre paintings of everyday life portraying ordinary people diligently engaged in communal activities, de Keyser and his crew project in a collective vision the *sequelae* of the Great War's aftermath: folks trying to rebuild among ruins. The end of this sequence also marks the moment when all three protagonists come together: first, Dellaplane strongly advises Alice to quit searching for her fiancé; second, if no words are exchanged, we are made aware that de Courtil is attracted to him and he to her—in her sedan, she “spies” on him via her compact mirror in which she sees that he, too, is looking intently at her; and third, Alice—now a waitress *chez les Valentin*—develops a friendship with de Courtil when she brings tea to her.

---

<sup>63</sup> Excerpt from chosen parts of a discussion with Bruno de Keyser on the occasion of the screening of *In the Electric Fog* on 5 April 2011 at the Ciné-Club of the Ecole Louis-Lumière. See “Death of Director Bruno de Keyser, BSC,” *La Lettre AFC* n° 299, 6 juillet 2019, accessed 6 June 2020, <https://www.afcinema.com/Death-of-director-of-photography-Bruno-de-Keyser-BSC.html?lang=fr>.

## The Altar of the Dead

“One feels, in this terribly hurrying age and roaring place, as if one were testifying in the desert . . . the waves sweep dreadfully over the dead—they drop out and their names are unuttered.”

—Henry James<sup>64</sup>

When André and de Courtil arrived at the Vétrille Hospital, a butler at the gate informed them it had been reconverted to a château. For the weary Parisian, that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. After having roamed France and navigated the byzantine military bureaucracy for two years, she stormed into the *Bureau de recherche et d’identification des militaires tués et disparus*,<sup>65</sup> demanding immediate special attention.<sup>66</sup> There, inside a makeshift prefecture,<sup>66</sup> Dellaplane patiently explained to her that he would treat her case equally, dedicating the same amount of time—not more, not less—to it as to the other 350,000. He proceeds to inform her that François had died on 26 September 1918—probably the result of friendly fire—and that his father was a war-industrialist turned collaborator. Not totally convinced because of hearsay, the distraught widow decided to go back to Grézaucourt the next day, hoping that one of the objects found on 100 recently discovered bodies in the Tunnel de Buzancy may belong to her husband. With no accommodations nearby, she has no choice but to spend the night “*chez l’habitante*,” or in a private home, where a grieving mother is willing to offer a room.

---

<sup>64</sup> See Sarah Kennedy, *T.S. Eliot and the Dynamic Imagination* (Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press 2018), 196.

<sup>65</sup> Office for the search and identification of soldiers killed and missing.

<sup>66</sup> Filmed at Verdun (Meuse). Centre de recherche sur les médiations, “La Vie et rien d’autre,” *Les Bobines de l’Est*.

There, a middle-aged Mme Henneson, wrapped in a black wool shawl and holding an oil lamp in semi-darkness, softly tells de Courtil, "La chambre de mon autre fils est un peu plus grande mais aussi un peu plus froide"<sup>67</sup> (0:43:34-0:43:38), to which she replies, "Ça ira"<sup>68</sup> (0:44:39). The hostess in mourning kindly invites her to share dinner and offers to bring a jug of warm water up to her room. Visibly humbled, she graciously refuses, and Mme Henneson leaves, gently closing the door.

Now alone in the modest un-heated room imbued with loss and yearning, de Courtil is looking at herself introspectively in the oval dressing table mirror with the reflection of a framed graphite photograph of one of the hostess's two dead sons hanging on the floral wallpaper. The Jamesian room is conspicuously evocative of Walter Hölderlin's in *Broken Lullaby* (1932), of Pierre LeBlanc's in *Paradis perdu* (1940), and of Julien Davenne's in *La Chambre verte* (1977). With a Wellesesque low-key lighting and interplay of mirrors, de Keyser has taken the viewer inside Henneson's house—one that represents those of the entire nation where nearly every home had an "altar of the dead" room—and captures a pensive de Courtil who is beginning to see the Great War as she never knew it. The notion of letting go of the past and looking toward the future has begun to germinate.

With a cutaway *chez les Valentin*, Alice is posting a photograph of her fiancé Charles Férou on a bulletin board devoted to the missing; those photos are, in fact, authentic, provided by the Mayor of Verdun during filming in 1988.<sup>69</sup> Saddened by seeing such a young *veuve*

---

<sup>67</sup> "My other son's room is a bit bigger but also a bit colder."

<sup>68</sup> "This will do."

<sup>69</sup> For twelve years after the war, locals came to his mother's café and pinned their photographs on the wall. See Bertrand Tavernier, "John Ford and the Red-Skins: An interview with Bertrand Tavernier," *Positif*, No. 343.



*blanche*<sup>70</sup> hoping against hope to find her fiancé, Valentine—reiterating Dellaplane’s earlier advice but more like a mother—recommends that she accept his disappearance and move on. Overhearing the conversation, Dellaplane offers her a job as a letter writer for *l’amicale des combattants*; she gladly accepts, thus marking her anagnorisis. However, she will nonetheless go to Grézaucourt the next morning, more out of curiosity and charity than anything. Alice is now letting go of the past, i.e. Charles, and embracing the future, i.e. young painter Julien.

It is also at the same moment that the self-absorbed widow experiences her own anagnorisis. Unable to sleep, de Courtil, with her long black hair and her bare left arm over the pulled-back covers, is staring into the darkness and appears vulnerable. Sentient of her apathy, she begins to feel empathy; the aristocrat has taken the first step on her road to Damascus. As for Mme Hennesson, she not only represents mourning mothers of a grief-riven nation but also all of those who lost several sons. The recurrence of loss deepens the pain of bereavement. For example, General Castelnaud, a senior commander at Verdun, lost three, and politician Paul Doumier lost four;<sup>71</sup> it was not uncommon during the war for parents to die apparently from psychosomatic causes. The war memorial of La Forêt-du-Temple in the le département de La Creuse, e.g., bears the name of Emma Bujardet, who, according to her death certificate, “died of grief” after losing three sons.<sup>72</sup>

---

(September 1989), interviewed by Eric Derobert and Michel Sineux, translated by T. Jefferson Kline, and reprinted in *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 95.

<sup>70</sup> A fiancée who has lost her soldier fiancé.

<sup>71</sup> Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

The shock of mass loss was difficult to process during the inter-war years, as Jay Winter explains: "The link between the First World War and later on is the subject of how to configure a void, how to configure a family when the father isn't there."<sup>73</sup> And as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker further expound, "[...] what was especially cruel for people bereaved by the Great War was that they lacked the bodies of those who had died,"<sup>74</sup> and "[i]n France, *half* of all the corpses were missing or unidentifiable bodies."<sup>75</sup> Winter cites Renoir as the *cinéaste* who perhaps portrayed that loss better than any other:

That is why *Le [sic] Grand [sic] Illusion* matters. [...] There is a widow without her husband, without her brothers, with just her daughter. That is all she has. How do they configure the loss that she has to live with? No one had any answers to it and it is the notion that the names are the things that mattered. And that is the link between 1914 and the more recent catastrophes.<sup>76</sup>

More than eighty years after *La grande illusion*, *La Vie* matters because it is the first film to address the nexus between the weight of the dead, the missing, and the Unknown Soldier. As Lubitsch, Gance, and Truffaut, with their indelible scenes of "the altar of the dead," Tavernier's *chez l'habitante* exemplifies and encapsulates the too-often ignored personal bereavement and

---

<sup>73</sup> Jay Winter, "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning," interview by Birgit Görtz.

<sup>74</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 215.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>76</sup> Jay Winter, "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning," interview by Birgit Görtz.

grief that lingered and was felt for generations. With little said but much implied, it is one of the film's most memorable pivotal scenes.

In the two sequences that follow, Tavernier further illustrates the eschatological *Zone Rouge* of 1920 by showcasing a buried Red Cross train containing 100 dead *poilus* and lethal chlorine canisters in a collapsed tunnel at Grézeaucourt where desperate families come to hopefully identify a loved one. It is in one of these clips that, as a character in development, a softened de Courtil confesses her love to a disarmed Dellaplane unable to express reciprocity all while Alice and Julien's relationship blossoms. Also, the "detective" major discovers that Alice's Charles Férou and Irène's François de Courtil are one and the same and dead; however, out of respect, he does not inform them. Obsessed with replacing numbers with names, "the officer in charge of the dead" now has two less names and one less body on his list.

### **La Citadelle de Verdun: Selecting the Unknown Soldier**

In peace, sons bury their fathers, but in war, fathers bury their sons.

—Herodotus (1.87.4)<sup>77</sup>

Just as no one was prepared for mass death in 1914, no one was prepared for mass mourning. The notion of honoring an unknown soldier was first mentioned by François Simon on 26 November 1916, but it was not officially adopted until 19 November 1919 following *le défilé de la Victoire*<sup>78</sup> on Bastille Day, for on that day, "[w]hat had started as a victory celebration turned

---

<sup>77</sup> See G. S. Kirk, Richard Janko, and Mark W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary / Vol. 4, Books 13-16* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 127.

<sup>78</sup> Victory Parade.

into a somber moment of mass mourning.<sup>79</sup> Twenty-four hours before celebrating victory, guards kept watch over an empty coffin at the foot of the cenotaph in honor of the dead at l'Arc de Triomphe. The following day, detachments from all of France's allies participated in the Victory Parade lead by a thousand disabled veterans—some in wheelchairs—and *gueules cassées* (smashed faces)<sup>80</sup> as hundreds of thousands of bereavers silently passed by the cenotaph. Five days later during the Victory Parade in London, the British mourned similarly to the French as they passed as closely as possible to the unoccupied casket, “[a] symbol of the void left behind by the millions of lost soldiers. The dead stole the day of glory from the survivors.”<sup>81</sup>

The first part of the dénouement begins at the Citadelle de Verdun<sup>82</sup>—a casemate—at 15h00 on 10 November 1920 (1:57:10-2:02:01) when viewers see for the first time the only authentic historical figures in the movie: André Maginot—Minister of War and Pensions—and Auguste Thin, a twenty-one-year-old private second class of the 132<sup>nd</sup> infantry regiment. The son of a *poilu disparu*, a *pupille de la Nation*,<sup>83</sup> and a member of *la Légion des Mille*,<sup>84</sup> he is charged with selecting *le Soldat Inconnu*. Also inside the citadel's crypt are others from his regiment, civilian officers, a journalist, Major Dellaplane with “thorn-in-his-side” General

---

<sup>79</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22.

<sup>80</sup> To view portions of the *défilé de la victoire 14 juillet 1919*, see “Les Fêtes de la Victoire: hommage aux morts,” *Deutsches Filminstitut*, accessed 19 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPxivTAB1uE>.

<sup>81</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 195.

<sup>82</sup> Filmed at Verdun (Meuse). Centre de recherche sur les médiations, “La Vie et rien d'autre,” *Les Bobines de l'Est*.

<sup>83</sup> An orphan of a veteran.

<sup>84</sup> The Thousand Legion.

Villerieux, and, per Maginot's instructions, women in mourning representing the mothers and widows of the fallen. Before them are two rows of four oak coffins draped in the tricolor in which lie eight unidentifiable French soldiers exhumed from the eight regions where the deadliest battles had unfolded. Initially, nine bodies from the sectors of Flandres, Artois, Somme, Marne, Chemin des Dames, Champagne, Verdun, Lorraine, and Alsace had been selected but in one of them, not a single exhumed body was, without doubt, a *poilu*. In the following interview, Tavernier explains that part of Noiret's award-winning performance as a period character lies not only in his acting skills and first-hand knowledge from his father who had fought at Verdun but also in wearing his father's boots and medals:

I knew immediately he [Noiret] would be my main character. [...] I wanted to give him the role of an officer, while giving play to all that is free and anarchic in his personality. I also thought that talk of war and violence would have much greater force when spoken by someone who'd experienced it. And Noiret was personally involved, since he had memories of his father who'd fought at Verdun. In the film he used props that belonged to him: the cane, which had belonged to a soldier from Grenoble, and the medals he wore, that his father had earned.<sup>85</sup>

If considered a minor detail, it is the sort that not only gives credibility to an actor in period films but also immeasurable realism to the entire production. In the repertoire of Great War motion pictures, those details are worth recalling: fifty years earlier, Jean Gabin playing good, honest

---

<sup>85</sup> Bertrand Tavernier interviewed by Eric Derobert and Michel Sineux in 1999, *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*, 94.

Lieutenant Maréchal donned war-wounded Renoir's aviator uniform in *La grande illusion* (1937); in 1942, war-crippled veteran Ronald Coleman took on the memorable role of amnesiac Charles "Smithy" Rainier in *Random Harvest*; and in 1957, Adolphe Manjou, also a war-wounded veteran, superbly played the despicable Major General Georges Broulard in *Paths of Glory*. Just as Dirk Bogarde (1921-1999)—who grew up in post-Treaty of Versailles Britain and whose father served at la Somme, Passchendaele, and Caporetto—was the ultimate guilt-ridden Captain Hargreaves in *King and Country* (1964), Noiret (1930-2006)—who also vividly recalled how the war had marked his dad—was the consummate actor to play uncompromising Major Dellaplane. Like Maréchal, Broulard, and Hargreaves, Dellaplane is Tavernier's archetypal protagonist. Manjou as Broulard—his penultimate role—was sixty-seven years old, and George Macready as Brigadier General Paul Mireau was fifty-eight, just like Noiret as Dellaplane in 1988, a defining moment marking the end of actors with a living memory to authentically play those leading Great War roles. Likewise, with the passing of those actors, the Seventh Art has also lost that *transmission de la mémoire*.

Handing a bouquet of red and white carnations to Thin, Maginot explains in the following speech how the private is to select the coffin:

Soldat, voici un bouquet de fleurs cueillies sur les champs de bataille de Verdun, parmi les tombes des héros morts pour le Pays. Vous déposerez ce bouquet sur un des huit cercueils. Ce cercueil sera celui du Soldat inconnu que le peuple de France accompagnera demain au Panthéon et à l'Arc de Triomphe. Suprême hommage, le plus splendide que la France ait jamais réservé à l'un de ses enfants, mais qui n'est pas trop grand lorsqu'il s'agit de celui qui doit symboliser et

immortaliser la vaillance du soldat vainqueur, dont le sacrifice anonyme et le  
heroïsme surhumain pour sauvegarder la Patrie, le Droit et la Liberté.<sup>86</sup> (1:58:20-  
1:59:25)

The young Thin first passes by the four coffins on the right, turns to the left, passes the fifth, and stops at the sixth to place the bouquet. Witnessing this ceremony—a deception, the antithesis of the mission he was initially assigned—Dellaplane, unable to contain his anger, whispers to Villerieux that it is a scandalous subterfuge designed to make a nation remember only one at the cost of forgetting 1,400,000, to which the general crossly replies, “Vous êtes un scandale” (02:00:22). Perhaps Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker best explain the reason for the officer’s anger at this point in the following: “The cult of the Unknown Soldier was the Great War’s commemorative invention *par excellence*, and a gift to posterity bestowed by war’s brutalisation: anonymity guaranteed everyone’s heroism and allowed everyone to be mourned. These tombs became altars of the homeland.”<sup>87</sup> Unvexed, the indefatigable Dellaplane irately ripostes to his superior with his latest progress report: 51,000 newly identified in two month’s time!

---

<sup>86</sup> Jean-Bernard Lahausse and Romain Sertelet, “Discours du Mois—Novembre 2012—André Maginot le 10 novembre 1920,” *Verdun—Meuse*, 6 November 2012, accessed 25 June, 2020, <http://verdun-meuse.fr/index.php?qs=fr/ressources/discours-du-mois---novembre-2012---andre-magi>. Translation: “Soldier, here is a bouquet of flowers gathered from the battlefield of Verdun, among tombs of the heroes who died for the Country. You shall place it on one of the eight coffins. This coffin will be the one of the Unknown Soldier, which the people of France will accompany tomorrow to the Panthéon and to the Arc de Triomphe. Supreme homage, the most splendid that France has ever given to one of its children, but which is not too great for the one who symbolizes and immortalizes French valiance of the victorious soldier, whose anonymous sacrifice and superhuman heroism saved the Country, Justice, and Liberty.”

<sup>87</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 196.

Exacerbated with the subordinate officer's impertinent obsessiveness, Villerieux finally retorts:

"Vous êtes un maniaque" (2:00:36)!

As the brief formalities close, the journalist asks Thin how he selected the sixth coffin, and the soldier explains his logic in the following: "J'appartiens au 132<sup>e</sup> corps. J'ai additionné les numéros: trois et deux, cinq, et un, six, et puis mon régime est au sixième corps"<sup>88</sup> (2:01:21-2:01:30). Turning to a miffed Dellaplane, the journalist then asks if it is true that no one knows the identity, to which the major sardonically replies, "C'est mon oncle"<sup>89</sup> (2:01:57). The unwavering officer in charge of the missing has not only not changed but is also even more cynical than he was four days earlier, and the hypocrisy of this ceremony most likely prompted his retirement. Commemorating an unknown soldier soon became an international ritual beginning with Washington, Brussels, and Rome in 1921, followed by Prague, Belgrade, Warsaw, and Athens in 1922.

### Final Sequence: The Secret and the Letter

A director lives for the last five minutes of his movie, because that's where he makes his statement. And that's the part of the movie the studio always wants to change, so they can make it *their* statement.

—Sam Fuller<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> "I belong to the 132<sup>nd</sup>. Three plus two equals five plus one equals six. And my regiment is part of the sixth corps."

<sup>89</sup> "He's my uncle."

<sup>90</sup> Sam Fuller quoted in Joseph McBride, *Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made "Mostly" Painless* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 54-55.



The end of the search for the Unknown Soldier conveyed a sense of resolution and a turning point for a nation in mourning. With a cut, the camera moves from a cavernous ceremony to the heavily damaged Vézille-Prin train station where de Courtil and Alice say affable goodbyes, probably 11 November 1920. This scene is the most suspenseful shot of the film's mystery, for we wonder if de Courtil will discover the truth about her unfaithful husband, and if Alice will discover the truth about her unfaithful fiancé; it is also one that shows an almost filial bond that had quickly developed between the two in the span of four days. As a token of friendship, Irène gives a necklace containing her husband's portrait to Alice, but before handing it to her, she removes the picture; thus, she unknowingly safeguards the secret that François and Charles are the same beloved soldier. Only a few meters away, Julien, holding his bicycle, is waiting for Alice to join him. When she does, he turns the bicycle 180 degrees, and the young couple walk away arm-in-arm to start their future together, a metaphor for Tavernier's chosen title *La vie et rien d'autre* which was inspired by Paul Eluard's verse: "Il ne faut pas de tout pour faire un monde il faut / Du bonheur et rien d'autre"<sup>91</sup>—a paean to regeneration and a "*hymne à la vie*."<sup>92</sup>

Seamlessly flash forwarding to January 1922, the wide-frame transition first shows a gentleman farmer Dellaplane strolling among his *vignobles* as he reads in a warm voice over his response to a letter he has received from de Courtil, marking his anagnorisis. A flash-cut of the overcast Channel at Berk-sur-Mer reminds us of their stormy beginning at l'Hôpital Militaire N° 45. Then, another cut shifts to sunny skyscrapers of New York where a made-up, coiffed à la

---

<sup>91</sup> "You do not need everything to make a world all you need is happiness and nothing but." See Paul Eluard, *Poésies: Choies Et Présentées Selon L'ordre Chronologique* (Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1959), 300.

<sup>92</sup> "La Vie et rien d'autre," *La Cinémathèque de Toulouse*, accessed 29 June 2020, [https://www.cineregent.fr/medias-pages/lycee/la\\_vie\\_et\\_rien\\_dautre\\_dossier\\_documentaire\\_jzsl72-20181128-192537.pdf](https://www.cineregent.fr/medias-pages/lycee/la_vie_et_rien_dautre_dossier_documentaire_jzsl72-20181128-192537.pdf).

Cleopatra in a long white lace dress where the resilient, transformed de Courtil, in her luxurious baroque hotel-apartment overlooking Central Park, quietly absorbs every word of the letter which opens with, "Bédarieux, 6 janvier 1922. Irène, très chère Irène. Votre lettre m'a donné une grande joie [...]"<sup>93</sup> (2:04:15-2:04:39). Short of Beethoven's addressing his *Unsterbliche Geliebte*, or his immortal beloved, there are few warmer epistolary salutations in the French language. This is only the second time that the major addresses de Courtil by her first name; however, in professing his love to her now, he does not use the familiar "tu," for it was not part of the mores at that time: "Il suffisait que je murmure les trois mots dont vous me lanciez le défi, et je me suis tu. Aujourd'hui, je les crie cent fois par jour, de toutes les forces qui me restent, souhaitant qu'ils passent la formidable étendue qui nous sépare. Je vous aime. Oui, je vous aime. A jamais"<sup>94</sup> (2:05:50-2:06:12). Recognizing that she may find this declaration of love a bit humorous, he nonetheless finds comfort in it, for it makes him feel alive. Since their abrupt fallout a year earlier, he has retired to his family *terroir*, and he invites her, without any expectations, to join him, and he is willing to wait forever, as expressed in his dry sense of humor and never-ending mania with numbers: "Je n'attendrai pas plus de cent ans. Mettons cent-un ans"<sup>95</sup> (2:07:15-2:07:20).

In the post-scriptum, he apologetically adds one last statistic, further illustrating his obsession with figures—a result of trying to identify all 350,000 missing—by calculating how long the three-hour Victory Parade down the Champs-Élysées would have lasted had all the

---

<sup>93</sup> "Irene, dearest Irene. [long pause] Your letter brought me immense joy [...]"

<sup>94</sup> "All I had to do was murmur the three words that you challenged me to say, but I remained silent. Today, I shout them a hundred times a day, with all my strength, hoping that they will bridge the great distance that separates us. I love you. Yes, I love you. Forever."

<sup>95</sup> "I will not wait for you more than 100 years. Let's say 101 years."

dead replaced the living: “[...] j’ai calculé que dans les mêmes formations de marche et de vitesse réglementaires, le défilé des pauvres morts de cette inexpiable folie n’aurait pas duré moins de onze jours et onze nuit”<sup>96</sup> (2:07:35-2:07:48), strange coincidental figures: 11-11. The ghastly P.S. suggests that filmophile Tavernier scripted what Gance shows in his 1922 re-edited version of *J’accuse* as Winter explains in the following: “[...] Gance took film footage of this event [Victory Parade] and added another element to it. While the living soldiers defiled through the Arc de Triomphe, the army of the dead marched *above* it, in every sense *au dessus de la mêlée*.”<sup>97</sup> By expressing his love to Irène—albeit fourteen months late—Dellaplane’s anagnorisis is complete in the final words of his letter: “Pardonnez-moi cette précision accablante. A vous ma vie”<sup>98</sup> (2:07:49-2:07:55). In the original script, their relationship was over in 1920, but because there was a genuine mutual attraction, Cosmos and Tavernier, upon further reflection, decided to do a Balzacian prolepsis,<sup>99</sup> allowing the viewer to see how their relationship unfolds fourteen months later with the flash-forward to 1922 where they are now separated by the Atlantic but joined by their love for each other. With the weight of the dead and the missing beginning to lift four years after the Armistice and a year after the ceremony of the Unknown Soldier, *l’homme de 1913* was finally able to reciprocate de Courtil’s love in the dawn of the roaring twenties. Ending a film with a flash-forward is rare and difficult, especially outside the genre of science

---

<sup>96</sup> “I calculated that, given the same speed and marching formations, the parade of those who tragically died in this inexpiable madness would not have lasted less than eleven days and eleven nights.”

<sup>97</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 22.

<sup>98</sup> “Forgive me for this depressing preciseness. Yours forever.”

<sup>99</sup> Bertrand Tavernier interviewed by Eric Derobert and Michel Sineux in 1999, *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*, 94.

fiction, and Tavernier and Cosmos sublimely utilize it, making the film's dénouement a pièce de résistance.

In spite of mixed reviews because of its lack of resolution, the open-ended finale is emotionally convincing because, as Tavernier explains, "the real movie—as in real life—is about how there is no end. [...] Every time Irène or Dellaplane try to come together, the demands of history come between them. Their relationship is built on frustration."<sup>100</sup> In analyzing *Casablanca's* last scene, David Thomson observes that, in Arthur Edeson's cross-cut close-ups of Bergman and Bogart on the foggy tarmac, "[...] no love is stronger than the type that endures separation, frustration, or problem."<sup>101</sup> Likewise, de Keyser cogently conveys the same kind of emotional power in *La Vie's* last scene via the cross-cuts between Dellaplane's soft voice in France and the close-ups of a shimmering de Courtil six thousand kilometers away in New York. The cinematographer could have used a split screen, but that would have been less effective. Like the intercuts of Bergman and Bogart, those of Azéma and Noiret are the most enduring images of *La Vie*. As the sequence and the film come to an end amidst rows of vine stakes like the wooden crosses in the cemetery of the opening sequence, Tavernier as director, writer, and producer not only made *his* statement but did so without worrying about the studio wanting to make *its* statement.

---

<sup>100</sup> Bertrand Tavernier, Philippe Noiret, and Karen Jaehne, "La Guerre n'est pas finie: An Interview with Bertrand Tavernier and Philippe Noiret," 12.

<sup>101</sup> David Thomson, "Casablanca: The story of a scene," *The Guardian*, 16 October 2010, accessed 2 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/16/casablanca-closing-scene>.

## Conclusion

The last day of the war provided a chilling closure. The ending, in its ferocity, bloodiness, and uselessness, contained the entire war in microcosm. The fighting went on for the hollowest reasons: no one knew how to stop it. Graveyards were the chief legacy of World War I.

—Joe Persico<sup>102</sup>

In the military cemetery of Vrigne-Meuse, eighty kilometers from a memorial in Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, one of the crosses bears the name "TREBUCHON Augustin 415<sup>o</sup> RI MORT POUR LA FRANCE le 10 11 1918." However, he actually died from a bullet to the head at 10h50 on 11 November. Just as Doughboy Henry Gunther was the last soldier of all armies to perish in the last seconds of the Great War, Trébuchon was the last known *poilu* to die. Their deaths as well as all the others occurring in the dying minutes of the war is a testimony to how deeply entrenched the culture of violence had become. As Raf Casert observes, "Augustin Trébuchon is buried beneath a white lie. [...] For the French who lost up to 1.4 million troops, it was perhaps too poignant—or too shameful—to denote that Trébuchon had been killed on the very last morning, just as victory prevailed."<sup>103</sup> In fact, all the *poilus* who died on the eleventh bear on their headstone the date 10 November, indicating how the country which suffered the most was unable to confront the nightmare at its conclusion.

The obstinacy and obsessiveness with which Dellaplane goes on about putting a name to all of those who had disappeared into nothingness brings awareness that it was a way, the only

---

<sup>102</sup> Joseph E. Persico, 389.

<sup>103</sup> Raf Casert, "In the final hours of World War I, a terrible toll," *AP News*, 8 November 2018, accessed 6 July 2020, <https://apnews.com/1fa30471966c41efac92767a824061c5>.

way, to return them to the living, and for the mourners—being able to hear their names, being able to see their names inscribed, being able to touch their names—it meant everything. For Yale University undergraduate art major Maya Lin, who in 1981 “[...] brought the American dead of the Vietnam War back into American history, [...]”<sup>104</sup> it was Sir Edwin Lutyens’ Thiepval Memorial to the Missing in la Somme with its 72,337 names that became her inspiration for the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial in Washington, D.C., a legacy of the *Urkatastrophe*.

To Tavernier and Cosmos’s credit, *La Vie* does not delve into graphic violent flashbacks; however, the undercurrent of the hecatomb of 1914-1918 is ubiquitous, and, as a result of their meticulous archival research and creative imagination, the duo not only weave a credible fictitious romance set in *la Zone Rouge*, but they also illustrate through Irène de Courtil, Alice Vallier, and Mme Hennesson the very real and often overlooked mourning women as victims of war. From the moment they become acquainted, they create an immediate amity and even a sort of kinship bond. In the aftermath, for hundreds of thousands of widows and mothers, it was a way and a process to come to terms with bereavement; however, their shared collective grief was “theirs and theirs alone.”<sup>105</sup>

In spite of a César, d’Andréa’s original score does not elevate the narrative; in fact, the jagged motif with the percussions that dominate the mournful soundtrack—which *Variety* describes as “une belle musique”<sup>106</sup>—would have been better adapted to a 1914-1918 movie. But, since *La Vie*’s setting is post Armistice, a *Dona Nobis Pacem* motif would have been more

---

<sup>104</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> See Jay Winter, “Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War,” in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>106</sup> Len, “Les qualités plastiques exceptionnelles,” *Variety*, 30 août 1989.

fitting to capture the communal mourning in peacetime. Following the deaths of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy<sup>107</sup> and the 9/11 tragedy, conductors turned to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, for it embodies common grief in a way that few other musical pieces do: "With its sweeping opening chords that claw their way out of darkness, it's become the semi official music of mourning."<sup>108</sup> Appearing in numerous movies including *Elephant Man* (1980) and *Platoon* (1986) for its enduring effectiveness, Barber's *Adagio for Strings* communicates to audiences in ways visuals cannot, and its choral composition, the *Agnus Dei*, would have been a more suitable way to give a voice to the dead in *La Vie*.

As Jean Cosmos explains in *Après le film, voici le livre*, little information was available in the archives about the MIAs, but he did discover that there actually was one person assigned to identifying all the missing and dead. Thus, the two constructed a narrative between the official documents and anecdotes while also relying on the accounts of a handful of surviving civilians and veterans, and Winter lauds their realistic portrayal of the aftermath in the following: "His [Tavernier's] account of the mixed cast of characters surrounding postwar commemorative work is remarkably close to reality"<sup>109</sup>—an approbation that placed his film among the few motion pictures in *l'Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne.

In April 2004 at the Conference on World Affairs in Boulder, Colorado, Roger Ebert noticed that, after having shown Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of The Game*, 1939) on a Monday, several viewers were disappointed; however, after they watched the film "a shot or

---

<sup>107</sup> Barber's *Adagio for Strings* with documentary images of JFK's funeral, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCcT1Ts8bpo>.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted by Noah Adams, "NPR 100: Barber's *Adagio for Strings*," *NPR*, 13 March 2000, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2000/03/13/1071551/barbers-iconic-adagio-for-strings>.

<sup>109</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 86.

even a frame at a time [for fives day], they embraced it with a true passion. On Monday, we looked at it. By Friday, we had seen it.”<sup>110</sup> *La Vie* is one those films. In 1988, Tavernier and Noiret were teaming together for the fifth time for good reason, for it proved to be another fruitful collaboration; not only did Noiret earn a well-deserved César for best performing actor, but it also brought them to “[...] the pinnacles of their careers, which are very high indeed.”<sup>111</sup> However, less publicized for the success of the production is the unmentioned behind-the-scenes contribution of the still-living *Ceux de 14*,<sup>112</sup> i.e., those who had fought in the war.

Florence Green, a member of the Royal Air Force and the last known survivor of the Great War, died 4 February 2012 at age 110, a pivotal moment marking the abrupt end of that living memory, and, without it, all that is left is, “[...] the poetry and prose, the paintings, photographs and the films, and it is this art which continues to mold the conscience and the imagination.”<sup>113</sup> Like a *grand cru* appreciating with time, *La vie et rien d'autre* continues to give us new insights. Andrew Kelly adroitly stresses the significance of war films such as such as Gance's *J'accuse*, Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Renoir's *La grande illusion*, and Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*—to name a few—in the following:

---

<sup>110</sup> Roger Ebert, *Awake in The Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert* (Chicago and London: The University Press of Chicago, 2006), 440.

<sup>111</sup> Kevin Thomas, “Tavernier and Noiret: Soldiers of fortunes: film director and actor join forces in *Life and Nothing But* to trace the fate of 350,000 French Troops after World War I,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 November 1990, accessed 12 July 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-02-ca-3829-story.html>.

<sup>112</sup> “Those of 14.” *Ceux de 14* is a collection of war stories by Maurice Genevois and was first published by Editions G. Durassié Cie in 1949.

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War*, 3.



In the end it comes down to the fact that the outcome of the First World War was not victory, or glory; it was slaughter and waste. [...] At a time when warfare and genocide have re-emerged, at the end of the most violent of centuries, there is a continuing need to remember and to warn. In the absence of personal witnesses, [...], the arts provide this service. And as the most popular of the arts, the cinema reaches the widest audience. Out of thousands of films made about the war, only a few can be described as classics. [...] where cinema exists, this most disastrous of wars, this appalling waste of a nation's youth, will never be forgotten. It is a memorial—and an ever-present warning—as fitting and as honourable as any that grace a village, town or city.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, thirty years after its release and one hundred years after the inauguration of *le Soldat Inconnu*, Tavernier's *La vie et rien d'autre*, with its coded canvas of reconstruction and reviviscence in the ineffable landscape of *la Zone Rouge*, is a culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant motion picture and a contribution to the Great War film essentials.

---

<sup>114</sup> Andrew Kelly, *Filming "All Quiet on the Western Front": 'Brutal Cutting, Stupid Censors, Bigoted Politico'* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 165.

## Epilogue

The past isn't done with us. Ever, ever, ever.

—Lin-Manuel Miranda<sup>115</sup>

On 3 February 2019 at the Calbee snacks factory in Hong Kong, what was supposed to be a *pomme de terre*, or a potato, in a potato shipment originating more than 10,000 kilometers away, perhaps from the fields of the Hannequin farm, turned out to be a “bomb de terre.” Coated in mud, the German U.D./U.X.D. laid in a century-old battlefield and was accidentally collected during a potato harvest. According to Superintendent Wilfred Wong Ho-hon, it was unstable “[...] because it had been previously discharged but failed to detonate”<sup>116</sup>; therefore, a team of *démineurs* disposed of the 1-kilogram 8-cm-wide hand grenade by packing it in a drainage ditch where they destroyed it. Having defused three large Second World War bombs in 2018, the Hong Kong bomb squad was not unfamiliar with disposing of munitions, but finding a “bomb de terre” was a first.

In the modern imagination, that peculiar bit of news may seem interesting, even acidly amusing, but it is a stark reminder of the emblematic and ever-present legacy of the First World

---

<sup>115</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “‘The past isn’t done with us,’ Says *Hamilton* Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda,” interview by Terry Gross, *NPR*, 29 June 2020, accessed 9 July 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884592985/the-past-isn-t-done-with-us-says-hamilton-creator-lin-manuel-miranda>.

<sup>116</sup> David Chazan, “Bomb de terre: Unexploded First World War grenade found in French potato shipment,” *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2019, accessed 30 June 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/03/bomb-de-terre-unexploded-first-world-war-grenade-found-french/>.

War's unprecedented violence because, as Adam Hochschild writes, "[...] we live in a world that was so much formed by it and by the industrialized total warfare it inaugurated."<sup>117</sup> After 11 November 1918, nothing would ever be the same, and Major Dellaplane's sedulous mission is yet to be accomplished and will probably never be. For example, on 13 July 2018, "[...] the bodies of 125 World War One soldiers were discovered entombed in a perfectly preserved German trench system 101 years after they were killed."<sup>118</sup> In 2009, in northern France, again, close to the Belgian border, in that infamous apocalyptic "mythical trench landscape of the Great War,"<sup>119</sup> the remains of six British soldiers were discovered. Of the six, two were unidentifiable.

The Great War shall not cease to resonate, for the legacy of the Unknown Soldier is etched in stone in countries around the world and commemorated each 11 November, whether it be, for example, with the changing of the guard at Arlington or with the rekindling of the eternal flame at 18h30 in Paris. Of the poets honoring all the unknown fallen, Melvin B. Tolson perhaps extols them best in "The Unknown Soldier":

I was a minuteman at Concord Bridge,  
I was a frigate-gunner on Lake Erie,  
I was a mortarman at Stony Ridge,  
I fought at San Juan Hill and Château Thierry,  
I braved Corregidor and the Arctic Sea:

---

<sup>117</sup> Adam Hochschild, xiii.

<sup>118</sup> Kelly-Ann Mills, "Bodies of 125 WW1 soldiers found entombed in perfectly preserved trench 101 YEARS after their deaths," *The Mirror*, 13 July 2018, accessed 30 June 2020, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/bodies-125-ww1-soldiers-found-12910413>.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 321.

The index finger brings democracy.

[...]

I am the Unknown Soldier: I open doors

To the Rights of Man, letters incarnadine.

These shrines of freedom are mine as well as yours;

These ashes of freemen yours as well as mine.

My troubled ghost shall haunt These States, nor cease

Till the global war becomes a global peace. (v. 1-6 and 37-42)<sup>120</sup>

**Shane A. Emplainscourt** earned his Ph.D. in Romance Languages at The University of Alabama in 1998 and joined the French faculty at The University of North Georgia in 2015. Since 2014, his research has been dedicated to commemorating the centennial anniversary of the First World War, and his last five critical essays appear in previous issues of *WLA*.

---

<sup>120</sup> Melvin B. Tolson, "The Unknown Soldier," *Rendezvous with America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1944), 34.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Noah. "NPR 100: Barber's *Adagio for Strings*." *NPR*, 13 March 2000. Accessed 20 July 2020.  
<https://www.npr.org/2000/03/13/1071551/barbers-iconic-adagio-for-strings>.
- Adamson, Thomas. "Hitler in War, Merkel in Peace: a Train Car for History" *AP News*, 7 November 2018. Accessed 20 March 2020. <https://www.apnews.com/45ed2aad6c7a4261a92339db16fd3a79>.
- Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane and Annette Becker. 14-18: Understanding the Great War. Translation by Catherine Temerson. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.
- "Broken Lullaby AKA The Man I Killed." HFA, 2 July 2017. Accessed 30 May 2020.  
<https://harvardfilmarchive.org/calendar/broken-lullaby-aka-the-man-i-killed2017-07>.
- Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War: The Classic Vietnam Memoir—40th Edition*. New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2017.
- Casert, Raf. "In the final hours of World War I, a terrible toll." *AP News*, 8 November 2018. Accessed 6 July 2020.  
<https://apnews.com/1fa30471966c41efac92767a824061c5>.
- Centre de recherche sur les mediations. "La Vie et rien d'autre." *Les Bobines de l'Est*. Accessed 7 July 2020.  
<http://lesbobinesdelest.com/la-vie-et-rien-dautre/>.
- Chazan, David. "Bomb de terre: Unexploded First World War grenade found in French potato shipment." *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2019. Accessed 30 June 2020. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/03/bomb-de-terre-unexploded-first-world-war-grenade-found-french/>.
- Chesnais, Jean-Claude. *Les Morts violentes en France depuis 1826: Comparaisons internationales*. Paris: P.U.F., 1976, table n° 58.
- Cosmos, Jean. *La Vie et rien d'autre: roman*. Paris: Librairie générale française, 1991.
- Daeninckx, Didier. *Le der des ders*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984.
- "Death of Director Bruno de Keyzer, BSC." *La Lettre AFC*, n° 299, 6 juillet 2019. Accessed 6 June 2020,  
<https://www.afcinema.com/Death-of-director-of-photography-Bruno-de-Keyzer-BSC.html?lang=fr>.
- Ebert, Roger. *Awake in the Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Eluard, Paul. *Poésies: Choiesies Et Présentées Selon L'ordre Chronologique*. Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1959.
- Enckell, Pierre. *Anthologie des chansons paillardes*. Paris: Éditions Balland, 2012.
- Fauveau, Alain. *Mourir le 11 novembre 1918, c'est mourir deux fois: le dernier fait d'armes du 415e régiment d'infanterie contre la garde prussienne à Vrine Meuse, Ardennes*. Charleville-Mézières: Éditions Terres ardennaises, 2018.
- "Les Fêtes de la Victoire: hommage aux morts." *Deutsches filminstitut*. Accessed 19 March 2019.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPxivTAB1uE>.
- Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Genevois, Maurice. *Ceux de 14* (Paris: Editions G. Durassié Cie, 1949).
- Goldschmidt, Samuel. "11 novembre 1918: le dernier mort à la dernière minute." *RTL*, 24 August 2018. Accessed 29 December 2019, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/debats-societe/11-novembre-1918-le-dernier-mort-a-la-derniere-minute-7794107638>.
- Görtz, Birgit. "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning." *Deutsche Welle*, 18 December 2013. Accessed 26 November 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/world-war-i-created-new-culture-of-mourning/a-17233945>.
- Higgins, Lynn A. "Introduction." *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- Hochschild, Adam. *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

- Hoffman, Eva. "After the New Wave, Tavernier." *The New York Times Magazine*, 8 December 1985. Accessed 29 December 2019  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/magazine/after-the-new-wave-tavernier.html>.
- Kelly, Andrew. *Cinema and the Great War*. London; New York: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front: "Brutal Cutting, Stupid Censors, Bigoted Politico."* London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.
- Kennedy, Sarah. *T. S. Eliot and the Dynamic Imagination*. Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press 2018.
- Kirk, G. S., Richard Janko, and Mark W. Edwards. *The Iliad: A Commentary / Vol. 4, Books 13-16*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lahausse, Jean-Bernard and Romain Sertelet, "Discours du Mois—Novembre 2012 André Maginot le 10 novembre 1920." Verdun—Meuse, 6 November 2012. Accessed 25 June 2020. <http://verdun-meuse.fr/index.php?qs=fr/ressources/discours-du-mois---novembre-2012---andre-magi>.
- Laurendeau, Francine. "Bertrand Tavernier." *Séquences*. No. 143, novembre 1989.
- Le Naour, Jean-Eve. *The Living Unknown Soldier: a Story of Grief and the Great War*. Translated by Penny Allen. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.
- . *Le Soldat inconnu: La guerre, la mémoire, la mort*. Paris: Hachette littératures, 2002.
- Lemonier, Marc. *Chroniques du Paris insolites*. Saint-Victor-d'Épine: Cité éd., 2008.
- Len, "Les qualités plastiques exceptionnelles," *Variety*, 30 août 1989.
- McBride, Joseph. *Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting made, mostly, painless*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- Merchant, Jean-Dominique. "Au moins 300 familles ont réclamé le soldat inconnu vivant." *Libération*. 11 novembre 2002.  
[https://www.liberation.fr/france/2002/11/11/au-moins-300-familles-ont-reclame-le-soldat-inconnu-vivant\\_421273](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2002/11/11/au-moins-300-familles-ont-reclame-le-soldat-inconnu-vivant_421273).
- Mills, Kelly-Ann. "Bodies of 125 WW1 soldiers found entombed in perfectly preserved trench 101 YEARS after their deaths." *The Mirror*, 13 July 2018. Accessed 30 June 2020. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/bodies-125-ww1-soldiers-found-12910413>.
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel. "'The past isn't done with us,' Says Hamilton Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda." Interview by Terry Gross. NPR, 29 June 2020. Accessed 9 July 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884592985/the-past-isn-t-done-with-us-says-hamilton-creator-lin-manuel-miranda>.
- Nicolson, Adam. "A living ghost from the trenches whose plight confused a nation riven by grief." *The Telegraph*. 16 January 2005. Accessed 29 December 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3635054/A-living-ghost-from-the-trenches-whose-plight-confused-a-nation-riven-by-grief.html>.
- Persico, Joseph E. *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918 World War I and Its Violent Climax*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Random Harvest. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. M-G-M, 1942.
- Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Translated by A. W. Wheen. Toronto, ON: Little, Brown & CO., 1929.
- Smith, Leonard V., Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker. *France and the Great War 1914-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

- Tavernier, Bertrand. Interview by Eric Derobert and Michel Sineux in 1999. *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*. Edited by Lynn A. Higgins, T. Jefferson Kline. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. Reprinted by permission from *Positif*, No. 343 (September 1989) and translated by T. Jefferson Kline.
- . Interview by Richard Phillips in 1999. *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*. Edited by Lynn A. Higgins, T. Jefferson Kline. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- . "John Ford and the Red-Skins: An interview with Bertrand Tavernier" *Positif*, No.343, September 1989. Interviewed by Eric Derobert and Michel Sineux. Translated by T. Jefferson Kline. Reprinted in *Bertrand Tavernier: Interviews*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- , Philippe Noiret, and Karen Jaehne, "La Guerre n'est pas Finie: An Interview with Bertrand Tavernier and Philippe Noiret." *Cinéaste*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990.
- Thomas, Kevin. "Tavernier and Noiret: Soldiers of fortunes: film director and actor join forces in *Life and Nothing But* to trace the fate of 350,000 French Troops after World War I." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 November 1990. Accessed 12 July 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-02-ca-3829-story.html>.
- Thomson, David. "Casablanca: The story of a scene." *The Guardian*, 16 October 2010. Accessed 2 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/16/Casablanca-closing-scene>.
- Thorton, Stuart. "Red Zone," *National Geographic*, 1 May 2014. Accessed 27 May 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/red-zone/>.
- Tolson, Melvin B. "The Unknown Soldier." *Rendezvous with America*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1944.
- Véray, Laurent. *La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire*. Paris: Editions Ramsay, 2008.
- . "La Vie et rien d'autre," 14-18 Mission Centenaire. <https://www.centenaire.org/fr/espace-scientifique/arts/la-vie-et-rien-dautre>.
- La Vie et rien d'autre*. Directed by Bertrand Tavernier. Kino video, 1989.
- "La Vie et rien d'autre." *La Cinémathèque de Toulouse*. Accessed 29 June 2020. [https://www.cineregent.fr/medias-pages/lycee/la\\_vie\\_et\\_rien\\_dautre\\_dossier\\_documentaire\\_jzsl72-20181128-192537.pdf](https://www.cineregent.fr/medias-pages/lycee/la_vie_et_rien_dautre_dossier_documentaire_jzsl72-20181128-192537.pdf).
- Webster, Donovan. *Aftermath: The Remnants of War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
- Winter, Jay. "Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War." *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Edited by Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- . *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- . "World War I Created a New Culture of Mourning." Interview by Birgit Görtz. *Deutsche Welle*, 18 November 2013. Accessed 27 May 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/world-war-i-created-new-culture-of-mourning/a17233945>.
- Zants, Emily. *Bertrand Tavernier: Fractured Narrative and Bourgeois Values*. Lanham, Maryland, and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999.