Paths of Glory
Film Review
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Eager for promotion and so fixated on plucking a modest victory from the shambles of the Western Front, the aristocratic French General Paul Mireau orders a battery of artillery to blow hell out of his own battle-worn men to push them into the German guns.

Were Mireau's order the pinnacle of the drama, *Paths of Glory* (1957), Stanley Kubrick's shattering take on the Great War, would still be a landmark. But it's only one element in a superbly told and structured story of the injustice, and especially the debasement and dehumanization that Kubrick found in war. *Paths of Glory* is one of the darkest (and one of the few truly most thought-provoking) Hollywood war films. Technically and dramatically, it's as close to perfect as movies ever get.

Paths of Glory recenters the novel by the American writer Humphrey Cobb (1899-1944), who'd been kicked out of high school in Boston and in quest of adventure enlisted in the Canadian army at the age of seventeen, months before the United States entered the war. Active service and exposure to mustard gas at the battle of Amiens may have hastened his early death.[1] But for two months in 1935, Cobb's one powerful novel topped the bestseller lists; anyone still believing in the supposed "glory" of war is unlikely to find said glory more creatively eviscerated than in Cobb's novel or in Stanley Kubrick's adaptation.

The book's style is less than distinguished, but the story becomes riveting. Cobb's account of a doomed French assault on a German position called the "Pimple" (upgraded to the "Anthill" in the film) and a vile officer's hysterical order, leads midway into his primary interest: a fictionalized retelling of a stupid outrage of justice perpetrated early in the war in the French army. Surpassing its source in economy and power, Kubrick's equally riveting production was and is a stunning antimilitarist drama.[2]

Between 1914 and 1916 field officers of the French army had some 640 men, convicted by court martial for cowardice in the face of the enemy, shot by firing squad.[3] Perhaps the least defensible of these executions (carried out, in Voltaire's cutting phrase, "to encourage the others") occurred in the third week of March, 1915. On March 10, the first day of the battle of Neuve-Chapelle, the 21st Company, 336th Infantry, was poised to attack a German strongpoint near the commune of Suippes (Marne). Prior assaults had been bloodily repulsed, and the battalion's dead still littered no-man's-land: and moments before zero hour, the battered 21st sustained a shelling from misdirected French artillery.[4] After climbing out of their trench for the attack nevertheless, the first wave of the company's remnants was mowed down by German fire. The entrenched remainder of the mangled and exhausted platoons recoiled and refused to attack and die like cattle.

The infuriated General of Division Géraud Réveilhac, observing from a safe distance what he called "mutiny," then ordered French guns to shell the company again, this time intentionally, to drive the dazed troops forward: but the battery commander would not comply without written confirmation of the order. For the company's refusal to press the attack, Réveilhac, still incensed, promptly convened a tribunal to try two dozen enlisted men of the 21st for cowardice.

That number, one tenth of the paper strength of the company, was chosen arbitrarily, in the ancient Roman manner; all twenty-four accused were convicted, all were sentenced to death.

Twenty, however, were granted clemency by the court. The four executions were then implemented by a firing squad detailed from the victims' own company on March 17, at the nearby village of Souain-Perthes-lès-Hurlus. The affair, exposed only after the war, came to be known as that of "The Corporals of Souain."[5] Meanwhile, General Réveilhac had been made a Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor for his war service.

Those events, in a nutshell, were behind Cobb's novel. Shortly after it appeared, Pulitzer playwright Sidney Howard (formerly of the American Field Service and the U.S. 20th Aero Squadron), brought *Paths of Glory* to the stage. Howard's stage dramatization was an instant financial flop, but he wrote afterward that the film industry "must feel something of a sacred obligation to make the picture."[6]

A generation later, the twenty-eight-year-old Stanley Kubrick met that obligation and doing so sparked his acclaim as a directorial force with one of those few films artistically and emotionally more satisfying than their literary antecedent. The source novel allowed Kubrick to break free from the clichés and common tropes of action-adventure combat films, and in this he was aided by pulp novelist Jim Thompson and, especially, by the bestselling Calder Willingham, who overhauled Kubrick and Thompson's original script. The amateurism and stagey pretense of Kubrick's first commercial effort, *Fear and Desire* (1953) – a poorly conceived and highly stylized expressionist antiwar film – is gone. *Paths of Glory* presents with craggy realism the bleak view of life that Kubrick would return to as sardonic farce in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and as vehement satire in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a triad of powerful films about war that are distinctive among

themselves and distinct from just about any others. Life and death in these dark parables are ruled by monsters, idiots, and/or programed killers.

Paths of Glory opens with the French national anthem, *Le Marseillaise*, and a snare-drum cadence that the momentum of the drama fully sustains. A solemn voiceover establishes the sense of futility that's going to pervade the movie, specifically that of Western Front operations in the First World War. The Germans have failed to take Paris, and the French in turn have failed to expel them from France. Now in 1916, "after two grisly years of trench warfare," with tiny advances "paid for in lives by the hundreds of thousands," the war-beaten armies are locked in place. Back of the lines, within the opulent *chateau* housing divisional and corps headquarters, corps commander General Broulard (the urbane Adolphe Menjou) visits his friend and subordinate General Mireau (George Macready, one of filmdom's smoothest villains) with an order from the general staff: the Anthill must be seized in twenty-four hours. The "why" is irrelevant, but as Broulard testily explains much later to Colonel Dax, the pivotal figure in the drama (Kirk Douglas), strategy can often be swayed by criticism from newspapers and politicians.[7]

Mireau heatedly protests that his wrung-out troops need a long rest from the line and can't be thrown back into battle. The Anthill, moreover, looks impregnable. No, says Mireau, it would be impossible for any of his unit commanders to take that objective now. But when Broulard practices a little flattery with a wad of reverse psychology, then dangles another star and a promotion for whoever does the job, Mireau effortlessly changes his tune: after all, with a little courage, a little dash, a dollop of *élan,* "We might just *do* it!"

The first of the dramatic jump-cuts that punctuate the film takes us straight from the gilded *chateau* to a filthy front-line trench as Mireau visits Colonel Dax's dugout. Mireau, who

doesn't believe in shell shock moreover, is the only one to duck whenever a German shell plows up some far-off real estate. Blithely he informs a disbelieving Dax that no support will be available for the attack, while, just by the way, he stipulates a staggering fatality rate of 60% in taking and holding the Anthill. That doesn't include wounded: Dax, in other words, should expect his regiment to be annihilated. Then after the tautly filmed attack fails – even with the unflinching Dax in the lead – Mireau theatrically denounces the "whole rotten regiment" to Dax and Broulard, while keeping prudently mum about that command to bombard his own men. "They were ordered to attack! It was their duty to obey that order!...If it was impossible, the only proof of that would be their dead bodies lying in the trench!" And the cowards, or reasonable facsimiles, must be punished.

And how many will they be? The tactful Broulard jollies Mireau into charging just three men instead of the hundred he had demanded. Dax suggests instead that as the officer in charge of the assault, he alone should be punished for its failure. Broulard, however, amiably assures him it isn't "a question of officers." But besides being unable to abide injustice, Dax – luckily for the plot – is also one of the greatest criminal-defense lawyers in France, and the generals allow him to represent the accused, none of whom, it quickly develops, had acted like a coward. One soldier, previously cited for heroism, has been chosen by lot by his company commander; another has been selected by his for being a "social undesirable"; and a third was picked by Lieutenant Roget (Wayne Morris), because he knows that the drunken Roget has killed one of his own soldiers in a fit of panic on a scouting patrol the night before the attack.

A perfunctory inquisition follows. As Kubrick emphasizes visually and audibly the *chateau* courtroom's bleak spaciousness, Mireau watches with studied indifference as the president of the court again and again blocks, in the politest terms, Dax's impassioned defense. The only

acceptable exonerating evidence, we discover, would be eyewitness testimony that the accused had actually reached the German wire. Roget's nemesis, Corporal Paris (Ralph Meeker) testifies he'd been knocked cold at the start of the assault, and he has a gash in his head to prove it; but the court observes with *politesse* that that could have been "self-inflicted later." The panel retires to deliberate (to the echoing crash of sentries' boots), and Kubrick, waiving needless exposition, cuts instantly to the sergeant-major instructing a freshly organized firing squad, forcing us to grasp on our own the preordained outcome of the deliberations. The condemned undergo a night in the *chateau*'s dungeon (anguishing for them and us) during which they utter the hopeful lines, "Listen, we've got to get out of here....[T]here's got to be a way," and "Colonel Dax'll see us through!"

But if Mireau is a sociopath and his tainted tribunal a mockery, the stain of moral corruption reaches still higher. Once the sentences have been handed down, Dax, still trying to save the doomed men, learns from the battery commander that Mireau had ordered him to shell his own soldiers. Armed with affidavits from witnesses, a revitalized Dax calls on Broulard, who this evening is hosting a lavish military ball at his palatial headquarters. Dax diplomatically urges clemency for his clients, which Broulard, in a most avuncular manner, declines to give:

> Maybe the attack against the Anthill *was* impossible. Perhaps it was an error of judgment on our part. On the other hand, if your men had been more daring, they might have taken it. Who knows?

Then – as cinema has taught us to expect – Dax whips out his envelope of statements just as he's walking out the door. If Broulard will show clemency to the three judicial victims of a hellbent general's slaughterous attack and hold him accountable, the French army would serve justice while avoiding the scandal that public release of the sworn testimony would provoke.

Broulard, outraged by the action of Mireau and resentful of Dax's "blackmail," accepts the envelope and returns to his guests.

Moment by moment, *Paths of Glory* has been cranking up the suspense. Now, finally, Colonel Dax has come through for the innocent men he's resolved to free. But a last-minute rescue has to wait for the last minute, and before then there's an excruciating sequence as Mireau's scapegoats are escorted down the *chateau*'s endless, paved carriageway to the execution ground. It gets worse as the camera approaches and passes a granite-faced Dax at his ceremonial position near the firing squad. The three men are tied to their stakes. Then, shockingly, before a courier can arrive with the pardons, the executions are carried out.

Because, more shockingly, there are no pardons. Justice, as in *Billy Budd,* bows low to policy.[8] At an elegant brunch with Broulard, Mireau notes with satisfaction that the sentences were perfectly carried out and "[t]he men died wonderfully," with no one making a nasty scene. Broulard heartily concurs before he remarks casually of a preposterous story that Mireau had ordered the shelling of his own men. Mireau calls the story "infamous," and Broulard expresses confidence that in that case Mireau will certainly weather the public investigation he's ordering. Stiffly protesting that he's "the only completely innocent man in this whole affair," Mireau storms out after indignantly telling Broulard, "The man you stabbed in the back is a *soldier!*" (No thematic ambiguity there.)

But *Paths of Glory* has further tricks up its sleeve. The expert manipulator Broulard promptly offers Dax Mireau's command in admiration of what he presumes is his Machiavellian skill in angling for it. "Sir," Dax seethes (as only Kirk Douglas can), "would you like me to suggest what you can do with that promotion?" When Broulard threatens him with arrest, Dax

“apologizes” for not telling him what he’s come to understand, that Broulard is a “sadistic, degenerate old man” and he can “go to hell!” with his promotion.

Broulard is astonished:

> You really did want to save those men…. You’re an idealist, and I *pity* you as I would the village idiot. We're fighting a war, a war that we've got to win. Those men didn't fight, so they were shot. You bring charges against General Mireau, so I insist he answer them. Wherein have I done wrong?

Dax breaks the news: “Because you don’t know the answer to that question!”

The film’s finale – a scene not in the novel – leaves its most lingering image. As Dax, in town, walks back to his own modest HQ, he stops at the door of an *estaminet* packed with boisterous off-duty *poilus*, many of them, one must assume, recently from the erstwhile firing squad. When he first sees his men raucously whistling and flinging catcalls of mixed derision and lust at a frightened German girl (Susanne Christian in a small but vital role) brought from somewhere, somehow, to “entertain” them, his face registers disgust at their vulgarity. But the artless, unsteady girl soon mesmerizes the crowd with a plaintive, unaccompanied song. Kubrick leaves the German words untranslated because they don’t matter.[9] The catcalls fade: the men fall silent, then start to hum along, louder and louder, transfixed, as the young woman, and then a couple of the soldiers, shed a tear: she, of relief; they, of unspecified longing and regret. The watching, impassive Dax turns somber. It’s the moment when he comes to recognize the situation of the French as well as the Germans – alienated only by politics and culture from the common humanity that that now peeks through and similarly exploited by leaders who sacrifice people’s lives to their own vanity. When Dax learns that the regiment has been ordered back to the front “immediately” by a vindictive Broulard, Dax shares their fate. He tells the sergeant to

give the men "a few minutes more." As he enters his office, the German melody is taken up off-camera by the brass band that had opened with the *Marseillaise,* blaring it to the fadeout in a rousing internationalist call to arms. *Paths of Glory* thus suggests that, barring a Marxian uprising, all that decent people like Dax and his rank and file can do in the grips of militarism is kill, empathize, suffer, and die. The transformation of the jeering mob into a collection of heartsore men is a twist that some critics reprehend as softheaded schmaltz. But a half century after the movie's release, historian Dennis Showalter wrote: "This may be the greatest conclusion of a war movie ever filmed."[10]

Colonel Dax, the film's moral anchor, is at the center of a whirlpool of violence and depravity. His faith in justice and his band-of-brothers loyalty to his troops run up against Mireau's obscene ambition and Broulard's amoral bureaucratic function as agent of the high command, the man who could save lives but sees no reason to do so. Dax is thwarted first as a commander by German fire and then as a defense attorney by the corruptness of a servile court. The final stroke comes at the hands of the unfeeling Broulard. Yet Dax was never naïve. Even before the assault on the Anthill, he entertained a militarily unseemly cynicism about flag-draped ambition, as he rashly quotes to Mireau in their initial encounter Samuel Johnson's pronouncement that patriotism is "the last refuge of a scoundrel." It's a line – like the scene in the *estaminet*, Dax's confrontation with Broulard, and – crucially – the focus on Dax as center of gravity – that isn't in Cobb's novel. As they say, war compels people to learn their own worth, and Dax learns plenty: like his soldiers, he's worthless to his superiors except as an instrument of war and a tool of ambition.

Mireau and Broulard are, moreover, Hollywood's first despicable general officers of a democratic nation: they precede by seven short months General Edward Cummings, the prophet

of American despotism, in Raul Walsh's film of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*.[11] To the nth degree Mireau and Broulard incarnate the stereotype of malefic Great War commanders that developed, especially in Britain and Australia, between the wars. (An early example, tepid compared to Kubrick's specimens, is the "cheery old card" of Sassoon's 1917 poem "The General," whose "plan of attack" "did for" most of his unsuspecting men.) Indeed, *Paths of Glory* features a perfect storm of leadership sins, building to a picture of war as a mere exercise in killing, a sadistic hoax on the nation.[12] And the killing we remember is not that of the brief, calamitous battle sequence: it's that of the crucifixion-like deaths of the innocent. Pointedly, not one enemy soldier appears on screen, dead or alive: it's as though they're the least of the victims' worries. If *Catch-22* says that war is hell for being run by crazy and dangerous men, *Paths of Glory* argues that those men are not, as in Heller, dim egotists but glib sociopaths, and murder is their business. Vows Mireau, "If those sweethearts won't face German bullets, they'll face French ones!" Having fought for France and ready to fight again, the three enlisted men are liquidated by the country they fought for – because, as Broulard says "Troops…crave discipline." (He observes in the same context that "There are few things more fundamentally encouraging and stimulating than seeing someone else die." It will be a "perfect tonic" for "the whole division.")

An early draft of the script survives, credited only to Kubrick and Thompson. It ends bathetically with a last-minute commutation of the sentences by Broulard to thirty days in the guardhouse. Dax and Mireau (or "Rousseau" as he's called) then blather philosophically. Dax states his great respect for Rousseau as a "fighting commander." They go for a drink, laughing like old chums: The End. Kirk Douglas, in his autobiography, recalled Kubrick's explanation that the thematically disastrous ending would "make it commercial. I want to make money." It would

have made a hero of Broulard and implied that Dax was nearly as conscienceless as Mireau – who explains, "I am undoubtedly a very wicked man, but I don't feel wicked inside." Douglas, who was practically an uncredited co-producer of the film and put up his own money to help buy film rights from Cobb's estate, writes that he told Kubrick he'd have no part of "this shit." Douglas also called much of the Kubrick-Thompson dialogue "atrocious": he was correct.[13]

Kubrick's lean and unambiguous direction – backed by editor Eva Kroll and art director Ludwig Reiber – persuades us of the script's objectivity, not its neatly stacked deck. Meticulous camera work by George Krause excels, especially in a tracking shot of Mireau entering the company's trench (briefly going eye-deep into a nether world radically unlike that of his Louis XIV office) and the complementary one of Dax marching stolidly through the same trench to his jump-off position. The cast, moreover, could hardly be improved on. Menjou, Macready, Morris, and above all a coiled-spring Douglas, all give probably the best performances of their careers.[14]

War for Kubrick in *Paths of Glory* – as in the later *Strangelove* and *Full Metal Jacket* – isn't just horrible; it's an ignominious mockery of rectitude, honor, and justice – ideals invoked when wars are begun. *Paths of Glory* conveys tellingly that war and the inescapable totalitarian system it demands make effective just action impossible, even for an honorable officer like Colonel Dax.

When *Paths* was released, *Time* magazine commended all involved. But at the height of the Cold War, when World War I had long become a matter of indifference to Americans, the magazine somewhat ruefully likened *Paths of Glory* to "a moving speech in a dead language."[15] Yet two or three generations later, one of Hollywood's darkest and most dramatic films still has the power to anger and move those who see it.

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NOTES

[1] Manny Farber, "Humphrey Cobb," *New Republic* (May 22, 1944), 710-711.

[2] The first creative artist to employ Thomas Gray's phrase in a bitterly antiwar sense may have been the English painter C. R. W. Nevinson, whose canvas "Paths of Glory" (1917) depicts the corpses of a pair of British soldiers. Gray used the phrase in a more general way.

[3] Angelique Chrisafis, "France pressured to remember WW1 soldiers executed for 'cowardice,' " *Guardian* (Oct. 1, 2013): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/01/france-first-world-war-soldiers-cowardice-executed-memorial (accessed October 2, 2022). Richard Holmes, *Acts of War* (N.Y.: Free Press, 1986), 337. Richard Norton-Taylor, "Executed WW1 soldiers to be given pardons," *Guardian* (Aug. 15, 2006): https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/aug/16/military.immigrationpolicy (accessed October 2, 2022).

[4] David Broder, "When France Executed Its Own Soldiers." *Jacobin* (Feb. 8, 2022): https://jacobin.com/2022/02/world-war-1-french-soldiers-execution-punishment-memorial (accessed October 9, 2022).

[5] R.-G. Réau, *Les Crimes des conseils de guerre* (Paris: Éditions du Progrès Civique, 1925): http://chtimiste.com/batailles1418/combats/suippes.htm (Accessed Oct. 9, 2022). Nearly two decades later, a special court annulled the sentences concluding that "in wartime, the sacrifice of one's life to one's duty cannot be imposed when it exceeds the limits of human strength." The four widows were awarded symbolic recompense of one franc apiece: "French Tribunals Clear Army Men," *New York Times* (April 1, 1934), E-3; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014), 83. The policy of exemplary executions was ended in 1916.

[6] Phil McArdle, "Sidney Howard: From Berkeley to Broadway and Hollywood," *Berkeley Daily Planet* (Dec. 18, 2007): https://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2007-12-18/article/28760 (accessed October 15, 2022.)

[7] Cobb gives a "why": the papers have applauded an erroneous communiqué announcing that the "Pimple" has just been taken, and to avoid embarrassment the high command has decreed its capture posthaste, an unusually fatal example of dog-wagging that might have been appreciated by Joseph Heller. A Bavarian *Schloss* serves as Kubrick's French chateau: filming took place in Germany with a largely German crew.

[8] Peter Ustinov's 1962 cinematic version is another rare screen improvement on its source fiction. Thomas Vargish discusses *Billy* and *Paths* in a broad context of social crisis in "The Authority of Crises," *WLA* 20 (2008), 121-137.

[9] It's customary to add that after filming, "Susanne Christian" (Christiane Harlan) became Christiane Kubrick. The song she sings is "The Faithful Hussar."

[10] "Paths of Glory," in *100 Greatest War Movies* (Leesburg, Va.: Wieder Historical Group, 2007), 45.

[11] In words perfectly suited to Dax's position, Cummings notes that power "only flows from the top down. When there are little surges of resistance from the middle level, it only calls for more power to be directed downward to burn them out....The only way you can generate the proper attitude of awe and obedience is by immense and disproportionate power." Mailer wrote that it was the worst movie he'd ever seen, but Cummings (Raymond Massey) is just as malevolent as in the book.

[12] One can identify blind careerism, overweening arrogance, tactical idiocy, smug sadism, and admiration for lack of principle, not to mention an extreme indifference to human life other than one's own. H.G. Wells, who had written of a "war to end war" in 1914, later labeled the generals of that war either "imbeciles" or "criminally unwilling to learn and soul-blind to suffering and waste": *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933; rpt. London: Penguin, 2005), 71.

[13] https://www.screenwritersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Paths-Of-Glory-Script.pdf; Kirk Douglas, *Ragman's Son* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 275; Meher Tatna, "Out of the Vaults: Paths of Glory," *The Film Foundation* (May 26, 2020): https://www.film-foundation.org/hfpa-paths-of-glory (accessed September 13, 2022). The disparity between the two scripts shows how much the final product owed to Calder Willingham and to producer James Harris, who forwarded it to the executives of United Artists, who gave it the final nod, perhaps without noticing the difference.

[14] In the real world, the usually soft-spoken Wayne Morris was a Navy fighter ace credited with shooting down seven Japanese planes: "Lt. Wayne Morris Home From South Pacific Area," *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 15, 1944), 9. Macready's trademark scar, conveniently suggestive of Prussianism, came from an auto accident during college years at Brown.

[15] "Cinema: The New Pictures," (Dec. 9, 1957), 109.