All Quiet on the Western Front
1930, 1979, 2022

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In his 2022 iteration of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*AQ*), German director Edward Berger wants you to know positively that war is loathsome, and that monsters run the meat grinder. Thus, watching this high-intensity, Oscar-winning production, you're likely to experience no more than three feelings: shock, disgust, and appreciation for James Friend's Oscar-winning cinematography. If you've seen enough slasher flicks, which convey visceral horror more effectively than most war movies, you may be left with *AQ*'s visual style alone.[1]

For the first fifteen minutes, though, this latest recycling of Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 bestseller promises greatness. Berger's *panache* is instantly on display with the unexpected image of a vixen snoozing with her litter in a shadowy den: a far cry from Lewis Milestone's acclaimed 1930 filming, which begins with the novel's epigraph plus marching men and cheering crowds, or Delbert Mann's version of 1979 with the same epigraph punctuated by an exploding edifice. Once we realize they're foxes under the ground, we're beguiled by the idea, novel and potentially metaphorical. The animals wake slowly to muffled thumps, and cinematographer Friend's camera soars out of the woods and across country to the source: a French bombardment of entrenched German infantry in the regrettably human, non-vulpine activity now called World War I. Unlike the sheltering fox den, chaos reigns here in an assault even more harrowing than Kirk Douglas's charge into no-man's-land in *Paths of Glory* or the unprecedentedly realistic attacks staged by Milestone in his own *AQ* nearly a century ago.

Urged on by an NCO, a terrified German private clambers aboveground and fires blindly again and again at the enemy. The last we see of him alive, he's swinging an entrenching tool at a French soldier like a maddened animal. A smash cut just before the tool connects shows the man's corpse on a pile of corpses. His uniform is stripped off, boiled with countless others in a huge vat, mended with those countless others by seamstresses in a vast factory, and warehoused for issue to the next victim: an unsophisticated Felix Kammerer as *AQ*'s protagonist, the teenaged Paul Bäumer, freshly arrived at a receiving barracks and keen to be a soldier.

The whole sequence is as inspired and distinctive a war-movie incipit as any produced. That makes it all the more dispiriting when the picture reverts to the sadly familiar norm. Once it moves Paul into the trenches, *AQ '22* regrettably devolves into a mildly interesting, history-inspired horror show, a tapestry of suffering with little new to offer but stunning visuals. If platitudes are your dish, however you may find Berger's *AQ* quite rewarding.

Because unlike Remarque's canonical novel – and its two previous translations to the screen – Berger's *AQ* substitutes shock and gore for emotion, his declared intention being merely to convey the "inhuman terror of war."[2] That kind of existential front-line terror was broached in fiction, almost for the first time, by Stephen Crane in the 1890s and was never more concisely described than by Captain Siegfried Sassoon, British Army, in his thirteen-line poem, "Attack," written in 1917, the year in which Berger's *AQ* begins:

> …Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
>
> The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
>
> With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
>
> Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,

They leave their trenches, going over the top,

While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,

And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,

Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop![3]

Films, too, have hammered home, for decades, the frightfulness of combat, but fear of death is not the only, nor even the principal, hellish element in war. Berger's vision, moreover, is dismayingly inadequate to the novel: comparable, say, to readings of Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* as an optimistic tale of a boy who "becomes a man" by facing battle and banishing fear.

"Telling a truthful version of the story is important to us," Berger has said, but while his *AQ* is "truthful" enough, its omissions and additions rather distort the novel's concerns. In 2020 Berger expressed his intention to tell Remarque's story on screen "from my country's perspective" for the first time; but the novel's strength has always been its emotional universality. The twin elements of Berger's perspective are that demon generals ran the war, and the Treaty of Versailles was unjust to Germany – themes foreign to the novel, whose sole and understated political point is that national rivalries and not ordinary people are responsible for wars. Remarque, Milestone, and Mann, moreover, had no interest in demon generals: what engages them more than "inhuman terror" is the emotional distance of unwitting and deluded civilians incapable of right empathy; either like Paul's father, smug in the romantic nationalism that had been rife in Germany for decades, or else, like his mother, anguished but still ignorant of modern war and what it was doing to the nation's sons. Berger jettisons Paul's family (and his

pointed awareness of a generation gap), replacing most of the contrast between disillusioned soldiers and uninstructed civilians with the routine of villains and victims.[4]

It makes for sterile drama. Excised to make room for extraneous scenes of armistice negotiations and a final German assault is one crucial episode: Paul's return home on leave, when he realizes for the first time that he is no longer Paul but a new creature of the battlefield. Because Berger's point is pity and horror, battle on screen has rarely been uglier. But after decades of startlingly graphic screen combat, ugliness substitutes poorly for interest, and the once striking novelty of Remarque's subject and viewpoint has worn away.

Lewis Milestone's 1930 adaptation won deserved acclaim, including Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director, for effectively dramatizing a German novel that had had been the number-one U.S. fiction bestseller of 1929, had been translated into a score of languages, and had sold well over 2,000,000 copies in a little over a year.[5] Scripted by Broadway's Maxwell Anderson and George Abbott, Milestone's *AQ* was doubtless the most intense war feature yet released, even if changing styles and advancing tech make it creaky today: its earnest pacifism may now seem a little too emphatic, its scenes sometimes stagey, with pre-method acting that overaccentuates the drama – quite the opposite of the novel's understatement. Milestone's simulation of Western Front combat was even grittier than the once relatively stunning realism of King Vidor's *Big Parade* (1925) and Raoul Walsh's *What Price Glory?* (1926), films that stripped away the heroic idealism with which popular culture had invested the war while it was being fought, an idealism on the wane among the former Allies but not fully extinguished in 1930. The film's transnational antiwar impact earned producer Carl Laemmle, once responsible for the scarcely pacifist *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* (1918), a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.[6]

In one of Milestone's noteworthy scenes, the once comic village postman Himmelstoss (John Wray), now a sadistic drill corporal, gloatingly oversees Paul and other trainees crawling on their bellies through mud – in dress uniform with the elaborately ornamented leather *Pickelhaube* – projects a visual comment on the difference between romantic posturing and reality. The humiliations of training are extended in Delbert Mann's *AQ* of 1979, with a dapper Ian Holm as the mustachioed sadist, but Berger drops all of it, including Himmelstoss, who in both 1930 and 1979 was significantly awarded an Iron Cross.

Mann's movie, moreover, boasts more natural acting, greater fluidity, a more meticulous realism, and location shots in a Czech mining town fortuitously in the midst of demolition. Milestone's monochrome imparts a texture like that of any other film of its time, no more or less bleak than any other movie; but Mann's extended passages of ocher landscapes, drab uniforms and vehicles, and gray ruins, are far less flashy than most color films of the seventies and makes the barrenness of the front line feel even more desolate. Especially marked is the contrast between the filthy, insecure confinement of dugouts and trenches on the one hand, and the clean expanses of Paul's hometown and the warm interior of his family's home.

Berger's style, in contrast to his predecessors', is uniformly cold with the lush hyperrealist look of Soviet director Elem Klimov's brutal, expressionist World War II movie *Come and See* (1985). Much of the action takes place in the dim light just before dawn or just after sunset, encouraging cinematographer Friend to apply a steely-blue, almost livid tint to the sights of violence and despair. In earlier versions, particularly Mann's, war is a hell brought close through Paul's developed sensibility; in Berger, whose Bäumer remains mostly passive, it's a hell you gape at and feel disgust for. It's the difference between tragedy and tendentiousness.

In Berger's film, the anonymous schoolmaster (Michael Wittenborn), exhorting his schoolboys to enlist, stands at the head of a staircase haranguing them in Hitler-like tones and promising quick victory. It excites them. This Hitlerization is an easy, cheapening spin on the earlier versions. It's unlikely, moreover, for "Spring, 1917," when the scene is set, more than two years into a stalemate that had already cost German families hundreds of thousands of dead. In Milestone's film and Mann's, the scene takes place as in the novel in the opening days of the war. Eyes a-glisten with the fancied romance of battle, Milestone's Kantorek (Arnold Lucy) mesmerizes his trusting class with appeals to idealism and youthful love of adventure: he's a fool, not a fascist. In 1979 Donald Pleasence is more subdued as he reminds the boys of what he and they have long thought true: war that advances the greatness of the fatherland is always right, and now it's their turn – as heroes and "iron youth" – to take up the cudgels to defend the nation of Beethoven, Schiller, and Goethe. Simplifying for the masses once again, *AQ* '22's nameless headmaster invokes none of these culturally emblematic names, invoking only a victorious march on Paris "in a few short weeks."

To Paul's daunting experiences on and off the battlefield (the focus of the novel and the two previous films), Berger adds a brand-new subplot that follows German vice-chancellor Matthias Erzberger (Daniel Brühl) as he delivers Berlin's call for a ceasefire to Allied commander Marshal Foch in a railway coach in the Forest of Compiègne. Foch brooks no negotiation: the requested Armistice will be signed on the victors' terms. This episode adds little to the film but to suggest that the Allied terms were vaguely unconscionable, even though Germany had occupied a large chunk of France for several years, not vice versa. Tacked on to the subplot is a further novelty, the lethal determination of a shiny-bald, rock-jawed General Friedrichs (David

Striesow) to launch one final German attack, no matter how pointless, for the "honor" of the Fatherland. "What is a soldier without war?" he laments, even though he's just had four years of it. Glaring into the camera, he seems intended to speak for all generals everywhere. (After he gives the order from his high balcony, a few of his troops shout a protest, and we hear them being summarily executed, as in a comic book tale.[7])

Mann's *AQ*, on the other hand – made for CBS-TV for just $6,000,000 – is faithful to the novel and arguably the most satisfactory film of the three. The grizzled Ernest Borgnine in the key role of Kat, Paul's newfound mentor and friend, is more expressive than Milestone's grizzled Louis Wollheim, and star Richard Thomas, as Paul, evinces more believable emotion than either Lew Ayres in 1930 or Felix Kammerer in 2022. (Among Berger's players, only Albrecht Schuch as Kat conveys much depth of personality.)

Especially well handled in Mann's film is Paul's crucial home leave after he's released from the hospital. Richard Thomas made his name as an actor on NBC's *The Waltons* as a perceptive, articulate kid next door, and Bäumer is a role he was born to play.[8] Bäumer/Thomas gets diary-like voiceover privileges from writer Paul Monash, which partially recreate the book's first-person narrative style and automatically add substance to his character. As Paul crosses the mostly empty square of his hometown (filmed in Loket in Bohemia), the market tables are nearly bare of produce: most of it has gone to feed the army. In his old room at home Paul's butterfly collection and school souvenirs give material evidence of his civilian identity. Before he goes back, his mother, ill with cancer, anxiously warns him against French women – not knowing that a night with a French farm woman was the only moment of normality he'd experienced in his military life. Paul also endures an animated *Biergarten* discourse between his father and his

middle-aged cronies, who are sure of the army's high morale and who, confident of victory, talk strategy and tactics while dismissing Paul's barely suggested negativity as baseless. When he visits his old teacher and denies the myth of glorious war, Kantorek is practically speechless. More painful yet is his condolence call to the mother of Kemmerich, one of the first of his comrades to be killed. After losing a leg, Kemmerich had lingered in a chaotic army hospital overflowing with wounded before succumbing in pain and misery. Paul, however, knows he must console the distraught Frau Kemmerich by reporting her son had died instantly from a bullet through the heart – a commonplace heroic image. When she insists Paul swear on his own life and hope for return that he's told her the truth, Paul swears. Then he writes an agonizing note to his own mother:

> I am not what I was when I <u>lived</u> here. I am a soldier. My business is…killing. My <u>knowledge</u> of life is <u>limited</u> to death, and I know now I <u>should</u> <u>never</u> have come back, because it has no meaning.
>
> My <u>companions</u> at the front are the only <u>truth</u> I know. I <u>depend</u> on them and I <u>depend</u> on <u>nothing</u> else. Mother, it's a <u>terrible</u> <u>thing</u> to say, but I feel I am now <u>going</u> back to my real home.

This goes deeper than "inhuman terror." By the end of the story, both of Berger's directorial predecessors show Paul as a hardened veteran who, however, is still sufficiently himself to be attracted – fatally – by a bird or a butterfly. Berger chooses to turn him into a blank-faced, killing automaton – and it's difficult to feel much for an automaton.

Fresh from high school, teenagers like Remarque's Paul had unwittingly entered and partaken of a starkly contingent world of cynicism, callousness, deprivation, and violent death,

where life was cheap as dirt and sacrifice quickly drained of meaning. (Remarque has Paul say, "We had become tough, suspicious, hardhearted, and rough – and a good thing too, for they were just the qualities we needed.")[9] Yet these things had availed them little and Germany nothing. Post-combat stress was poorly conceptualized and widely regarded as weakness of character. The patience of veterans like Remarque for petty and ignorant civilian attitudes had been drained. Near to this was the resentment of many, variously focused, of the political forces that had promised quick victory, tormented them and killed their comrades, and finally – in a mythology borne of press censorship and military propaganda – stabbed their supposedly invincible armies in the back. Remarque's epigraph, quoted by both Milestone and Mann but not Berger, speaks of a "generation destroyed by the war," among whom he specifically includes "those who survived." Could men who knew nothing but war successfully rejoin society and build normal civilian lives? Berger and his writers show no interest in this question, which both Milestone and Mann urge on us in their scenes of Paul at home.[10] That theme of estrangement won't occur to anyone watching Berger's aestheticized and thematically enfeebled *AQ,* and no idea of comparable interest comes through. Not quite up to the mark is the cliché that soldiers' true enemies are nationalists and glory-hounds in power positions, like the strident headmaster and the monstrous Friedrichs. (Middle-aged men in charge may be all that's keeping us from a halcyon world of peace, but one doubts it.) Except for Friedrichs's momentary invocation of the myth of a sellout by social democrats, the anger, sense of betrayal, and contempt for authority and for civilians that after 1918 would smolder below the surface of German society goes unacknowledged.

What sticks with you in *AQ '22* instead of a plot or personalities is, regrettably, its attention to the colors, textures, and consistencies of mud: troughs of mud, liquid mud, lumpy mud, brown mud, gray mud, mud caked on clothes and faces till the actors look like extras from *Night of the Living Dead,* mud blown to atoms along with the people standing on or lying in it. There's also slasher-level gore: in the famous scene where Paul repeatedly, hysterically, stabs a French soldier trapped with him in a water-logged crater, only to discover a family photo proving that the enemy is a man much like him, Paul's savagery is greater than in any previous telling of the story. Later, in a standoff between huge French tanks and apparently suicidal German riflemen, a fortuitously placed man is crushed audibly and lengthwise by a caterpillar tread. None of this is implausible, but its emphasis does bespeak a script short on interesting insights.

But the most significant change is in the character of Paul. In 1930, he's killed by a hidden sniper when he distractedly reaches for a butterfly; it shows he can still respond childlike to the remnants of beauty in a man-made hell. In 1979, he's shot when he just as distractedly rises to get a better look at a lark that he's begun to sketch, wishing to make permanent a moment of natural beauty. In his latest incarnation, however, slack-jawed and zombie-eyed, he's bayoneted through and through in a French dugout during the senseless assault ordered by Friedrichs, who explicitly doesn't care that the Armistice will take effect in fifteen minutes.

Berger and co-writers Lesley Paterson and Ian Stokell add to the mix a woman's shift bestowed by a French farm girl on one of Paul's friends. It's passed along for sniffing like the panties in *The Outpost* (2019), though this trope didn't occur to Remarque. When (for some reason) a tousle-headed replacement takes the worn, mud-begrimed garment from under the

dead Paul's tunic to tie around his own neck, the shift could be a sign of more wars to come – wars, in popular theory, embraced largely out of sexual frustrations.[11]

In earlier versions, Paul's unextinguished humanity gives emotional weight to his demise. But not this time. By the time of the final, vain attack, this re-imagined Paul is a goggling wraith that moves forward, shoots, kills, tussles, and dies – evidently the last German soldier to die in the First World War. To judge from his facial expression, like a bovine going to slaughter, the built-in anxiety and horror of war have robbed him even of human consciousness. Yet one thing that makes the earlier tellings so effective is our conviction that Paul, deep down, is still Paul. His sad, pointless death a few weeks before the war's end, briefly distracted by beauty that seemed to have vanished from the earth, is a loss. But the death of Berger's now totally robotic Paul comes almost as a relief – for him and for us. Berger tells us that war reduces warriors to killing and dying machines. Remarque, Milestone, and Mann tell us it doesn't quite.[12]

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NOTES

[1] The Academy named *All Quiet* Best International Feature Film of 2022 on March 23, 2023. Christian M. Goldbeck and Ernestine Hipper were similarly honored for Best Production Design. Volker Bertelmann's postmodernist score of sporadic snare drums, rim shots, and three-note electronic groans also garnered an Academy Award.

[2] "All Quiet on the Western Front," *Netflix* https://about.netflix.com/en/news/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-shooting-for-german-netflix-film-directed-by. Accessed Feb. 25, 2023.

[3] *The Cambridge Magazine* (Oct. 20, 1917), 48.

[4] Andreas Wiseman, "All Quiet On The Western Front," *Deadline* (Feb. 14, 2020) https://deadline.com/2020/02/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-timely-german-language-version-of-wwi-classic-heads-to-efm-with-edward-berger-daniel-bruhl-rocket-science-1202860007/. Accessed Feb. 25, 2023.

[5] Fanny Butcher, "Best Sellers of Year Reported by Publishers," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Dec.21, 1929), 14; Brian Murdoch. *The Novels of Erich Maria Remarque*. (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2009), 57; Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *70 Years of Bestsellers: 1895–1965*. (New York: R.R. Bowker Company., 1967), 139.

[6] Lilian Nadel, "War Films," *New York Times* (Sept. 11,1938). *All Quiet* was not Hollywood's first pacifist film. Several were released between 1914 and America's 1917 declaration of war on the Central Powers, including – strange to say – Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, whose pro-Klan, racist slant can obscure Griffith's conviction that war is a disaster, and the Civil War was redeemed only by the *post-bellum* determination of both sides to reconcile. Stories of the World War in American between-war pulps like *Adventure* and *Flying Aces*, while eschewing ideals of "glory," relied heavily on derring-do, humor, close calls, and mademoiselles: war in these magazines was no longer a righteous crusade, but it was certainly invigorating.

[7] Of some 11,000 casualties of all kinds incurred by both sides in the six hours between the signing and the start of Armistice – a higher hourly rate than on most days of the war – most were the result of shellfire. By Foch's order, however, many Allied and American commanders continued to press forward till 11 a.m.

[8] He'd done less well as Henry Fleming in Lee Philips's disappointing TV remake of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1974), a novel whose inward focus probably makes it impossible to film satisfactorily: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeGwgGtwIrY.

[9] Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, tr. Brian Murdoch (1994; rpt. London: Vintage, 1996), 19.

[10] Remarque elaborated this theme in his next novel, *The Road Back* (*Der Weg Zurück*, 1930, tr. 1931, filmed by James Whale in 1937). U.S. Marine Laurence Stallings, co-author of *What Price Glory?* and scenarist of *The Big Parade*, had taken up theme earlier in the novel *Plumes* (1924). Ernst Jünger, however, who arrived at the front as a teenage private in 1914,

expressed his conviction in *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*, 1929) that the war was a forge and crucible of character, the perfect preparation for civilian life.

[11] See especially Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, tr. S. Conway et al., 2 vols. (1977-78; Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1987); Margaret Randolph Higgonet, Jane Jenson, et al., eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1987); Michael C. C. Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1990), and John V. H. Dippel, *War and Sex: A Brief History of Men's Urge for Battle* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2010).

[12] Compare with the words of an American veteran of Vietnam in Fred Turner's *Echoes of Combat* (N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1996), 168: "You had no feelings…I was *not* a human being. You turned. You had to turn to survive…Revenge. That was my motivation. Revenge."