Cinema of War

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Let’s change topics. In the previous issue [of this journal], I acknowledged the physical attributes and behaviours that a writer for the cinema must embed within the dramatic material in order to make its passionate content clear to the viewer, to transform spirituality and emotion into something tangible, and to translate thought into a scene.

That was about the art and the actual making of a cine-drama. Now, we want to read into another facet of this eminently morphological art, which can act, narrate, reproduce, and bear witness.

We want to consider the cine-drama as a document of the era and its customs. We want to put it on equal footing with historical treatises so that it will become a chronicle of imagery. Isn’t action perhaps more eloquent than words? Isn’t spectacle more effective than description? We see in the cinema a role as an archive. Such an archive will leave no room for objections, discrepancies between sources, interpreters’ adulterations, when in 20 years—if not sooner—all the colours of diplomatic books blind the eyes and take over the critical senses of the conscientious historian of the current war.

This is precisely what we want to examine: the function entrusted to the cinema in the terrible conflict that is tearing Europe apart. Do you think that the documentary power of film is negligible? Not only is it not negligible, but in certain cases in the not too distant future, it will serve as definitive evidence. And no admonishment will be more frighteningly useful. The horror of a Maupassant or Zola—two writers who superbly describe man’s trials and tribulations—will be able to convey the stench of this war’s charnel house. Maupassant’s novella L’Année terrible (The Terrible Year), and Zola’s La débâcle (The Debacle) both reach the depths of disgust, just as Hugo reaches its height in the inventive chapter of I miserabili (Les Miserables). But it is necessary to stimulate the imagination so that the artists picture can come to life in the reader’s emotionally touched heart.

This wondrous modern machine, on the other hand, completes this miracle without the help of divine poetic inspiration. It reproduces what happens before the camera lens with a few turns of a crank, and any teacher of prose or poetry is outdone. Gigantesque Reality imposes its tragic view. It is the most authoritative proof and the most imaginative artist.
No one will want to ignore the obstacles, the prohibitions, or the dangers of such an epic undertaking. The most modern films do not shy away from danger, and do not find any problems with—and even takes delight in—the endeavours that stimulate the courage and ‘strategic’ talent of all of the most daring cameramen. A perfect filmmaker aspires a bit to the glory of Napoleon, both in hatching plans and in the pride of carrying them out. Now, here is a field battle-worthy for those kinds of generals!

In the current situation, this comparison is not a figure of speech. This is precisely about a struggle in an open field—exposed to attacks, without any defence. But that isn’t what would put the brakes on the camera operators’ daring. The difficulty to overcome is instead getting the supreme commanders’ approval to catch the salient points of a military exercise, to capture it in progress, and to situate it overall in such a way that it achieves its aim and doesn’t limit itself to fleeting episodic scenes, which won’t allow for a holistic understanding of the situation.

In short, it is necessary to avoid the suspicion of a trick and the disillusion from a spectacle that is promised but never attained. Some recent examples of this will be especially instructive.

If the cinema of war seeks for itself an ethical and aesthetic ideal, if as time goes by it wants to be an original form of this art (which is continually expanding its reach), it is essential that it attains the height of perfection and forgoes fictional substitutes and the construction of a terrible reality. We will soon determine which criteria is neccessary to achieve such a goal, and also how effective we think it will be to record reality. This isn’t about the incomplete attempts, fleeting trials, or amateurism carried out behind the frontlines of the war. This is about exerting skills, reaching the summit, battling chance and men, taking up arms—in a figurative sense, and probably also in a literal sense.

Uncharted paths of the vanguard—not behind the frontlines anymore. Specifically for that reason, we spoke of the commemorative function.

It is good, then, for war cinema to reach a greater development and to be spurred on with the numerous tools that the great production companies have at their disposal. This will be not only an excellent business deal—given the spasmodic fever that will afflict the public for witnessing real battles between formidable armies, the strategic movements of troops, frightening artillery battles, aerial combat, and the war-time dangers on both land and sea. It will also be—and this doesn’t seem like hyperbolic conjecture—an essential component of historical criticism and humanitarian philosophy.

While the war carries on with unperturbed furore, the unleashing of the conflict is already contributing to protests about its political origin and
the most venomous polemics about responsibility—to tossed between one nation and another—let’s now think about what would happen when we pass from the diplomatic field to a military one. That is, when we will have to ascertain how and with what results the battles were carried out, what episodes were the most important, or what critical element determined a victorious outcome. Now, imagine that it was possible to gather in a film the war’s unfolding, its alternating events, the final outcome of many of these episodes. Imagine that one can hold before their eyes the tactical, strategic, and combat procedures of a battle. There is no doubt that the future military historian will have at his disposal the most certain document for making an impartial and expert judgement. And the selection of informative materials, the list of specific reports and dispatches that major states contribute to the war’s military history will pale in comparison—in terms of evidentiary value—with what a thin photographic strip will have gathered together, with the impartiality of an indifferent witness and with the automatism of an incorruptible machine from all the phases of a military action in their reality.

I spoke of humanitarian philosophy. Really! Ooh, that sounds nice. And pretty—it makes you smile. The cinema—which rivals Descartes, Helvetius, and Vico—is the butt of simple jokes in humour magazines and does not promote paradox. But the cinema does not aspire to these laurels because, poor thing, it does not do moral philosophy. Philosophers continue to do it. The only thing is that instead of doing an analysis of dialectical argumentation on one of Plato’s dialogues, Spinoza’s *Ethica* (*Ethics*), Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique* (*Philosophical Dictionary*), or [Vico’s] *Nuova scienza* (*The New Science*)—all of which are bread baskets of wisdom—they will rummage around in the bread box of the cinema. And they will find no more maxims and theses, like those in the coffers of Knowledge, no more adages, no more brilliant or profound religious or speculative treatises, no more spiritual imperative that is the judging conscience’s uniform, but simply an EVENT. From an allegorical breadbox one can claim no better bread than an event. A grand and terrible event, an event ripped from the headlines of an incredible news story, an event that is the most frightening vision of the Apocalypse, more fantastical than a chivalric poem, more teeming with carnage than any artistic fiction, more authentic than any historical narration.

It is the event that is seen, that assaults you with its flagrancy, that nails you to the scene and yanks pity and horror out of you.

This event will cause the philosopher to loath the ferocity of war and the deadly and disruptive instincts of humanity (both of which continue to run their course) better than the most intransigent dogma. What we see with
our eyes cannot be erased from our imagination. The spectacle of corpses piled up like garbage on the bloody battle lines is more striking—in terms of the strength of moral teaching—than the scornful irony of Voltaire, the eloquence of Lacordaire, the austere mandates of Thomas Aquinas, and the modern evangelical preaching of Leo Tolstoy. The moralist—who has noted the failure of human progress and the uselessness of the propaganda advocating for the universal love of man in this savage outburst that bears all the primitive roarings of a Miocene cave—can expect some beneficial effect only from the *physical fear* of what happened and what continues to happen.1

*Seeing:*—*Seeing* the massacre that is taking place day after day, *seeing* the flower of every race mowed down daily, the eradication of youth—as if it were the bad root instead of the joyful seed of the human race; *seeing* the howitzers that pulverize, the machine guns that mow down, the bombs that tear apart, the rifle blasts that knock down the thriving of life; *seeing* the collapse of the fortresses, the destruction of the forests, the rotting of corpses, pestilence swarm the trenches; the agony of mutilation, the rage of man-to-man combat, and the duel transformed into a brawl, with fists, teeth, a knife; *seeing* how we have reached this anonymous destruction from the heroic battle of phalanxes that the ancient poets sang about, exalting courage and civic virtue in the holy name of the Patria—with no individual valour and without chivalrous generosity—in which the calibre decides and the arm only moves the overabundant machines of war; *seeing* all of this and feeling its callous barbarity. Here is what moral philosophy can gain from viewing a film: help with its sterile laws, and its very noble whimperings, which will never change the criminal beast into a creature of love and peaceful coexistence.

Let it remain, then—through the will of a fragile and amenable contraption—as an example for those to come, the *sight* of all living things throughout the world. Let the machines work in the battle fields, not to offer a degenerate pleasure or the morbid satisfaction of a cruel feeling to the regular spectators—who have many drops of their own blood on those scarlet fields—but let them gather the horror that will persecute us throughout the ages. We will pass on this *visual horror* to the coming generations in the wishful hope that they will be less foolish and ferocious than we, who will leave only photographs of our foolishness and ferocity in the convulsing gestures of hatred and in the lightning-fast paths of bullets.

It will be the testament to a lost generation that transmits, along with a grisly legacy, the documentation of a collective crime—the crime of a century.
The century, alas, is just a quarter of the way through and it can persevere in wickedness, but the very grandiosity of certain crimes does not authorize their repetition. Like Lady Macbeth’s spot, no water will clean murderous hands. Whoever survives the extermination will have before his eyes for many, many years, an indelible shame regarding the rights of the reproduction of the species and regarding humanity’s right to life.

And he will have before his eyes that modest number of European descendants that, despite the destruction of youth, did not prevented the survivors or the invalids from generating.

The cinema will be the breeding ground, the unconscious recipient of curses, pity, mockery, and disdain of those who bore witness in irrefutable testimony to the enormous assassination attempt on Life, Joy, Beauty, and the Brotherhood of Man.

Go forth, then, cinema’s war correspondents: point your cameras.

Point them; and you will arrive on the screen:

FOR THE HISTORY OF A UNIVERSAL FOLLY AND FOR THE MOST UNIVERSAL DENUNCIATION OF A FOLLY IN HISTORY.


Note

1. [Editors’ note. In the author’s argument, which is informed by Darwin, the outbreak of the First World War is compared to the violence within primitive communities.]