All Quiet on the Western Front

By Garry Wills
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"All Quiet on the Western Front," first released in 1930 by Universal Pictures, is the greatest anti-war film ever made. But those who viewed the film in the ensuing years would most likely have seen a copy that had been bowdlerized in one way or another – some were shorter by a full hour than the version released to theaters in 1930. The movie had been a victim of time and politics. The Nazis, angry at an antiwar film, shown from the Germans' side, prevented its showing in Germany. French exhibitors in 1935 removed a key scene where a Frenchman slowly dies. The film, which gives a sympathetic picture of German soldiers in World War I, was also altered for anti-German propaganda purposes in America in 1939.

When it was not suffering from nationalistic concerns, the film was sliced up by distributors fearful of the Motion Picture Production Code. Risqué lines and "vulgar talk" were excised. So was a glimpse of severed hands still holding barbed wire (a nod to 17th century poet and playwright John Dryden, who described Trojan warriors "whose dismembered hands yet bear the dart"). The movie was also cut to move audiences in and out of theaters for two-hour schedules and to fit into a three-hour double-feature slot.

The film must have seemed easy to trim, since it is episodic; the only plot line has the leading characters fall, one by one, to the dreadful attrition of trench war. (The studio voiced misgivings about the "downbeat" story. Director Lewis Milestone responded: "I just found a way to get you a happy ending. The Germans win.") Still, although Erich Maria Remarque's novel, in the form of a soldier's diary, rambles and often lapses into preachiness, the screenplay is a masterpiece of structure. It tightens and reshapes the book's material to move the characters like cogs in a vast war machine. Maxwell Anderson was called in to do the screenplay – he had collaborated with World War I veteran Lawrence Stallings on the hit Broadway play "What Price Glory?" His first attempt, guided by the film's producer, failed to ascend above easy movie clichés, but he, screenwriter Del Andrews and Milestone were able to refashion it, with the help of theatrical genius George Abbott.

Their script is held together by repeated foreshad-

THE MIGHTIEST DRAMA EVER FILMED!

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Starring
LEW AYRES
LOUIS WOLHEIM
with JOHN WRAY   SLIM SUMMERVILLE
WILLIAM BAKEWELL

Former Academy Award Winner

A Realart RE-RELEASE

From ERICH MARIA REMARQUE'S novel · Directed by LEWIS MILESTONE

Re-release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

ows and retrospective glimpses of action. The pair of boots first seen in training camp follows the soldiers into war, into a hospital and back to the front. A swimming scene is anticipated two episodes earlier by shots of the same swimmers in the background of another scene. For brevity's sake, the novel's scattered descriptions of a struggle with rats in the trenches are compressed into one scene of soldiers flailing wildly with short trench spades. But Abbott shows us, several scenes later, the same spades being used on humans when French soldiers swarm (like rats) into the German trenches. Elsewhere, disjunct references to barbed wire in the novel are brought together in a powerful scene in the film. In the novel, the first man to die is shot in the eye. Abbott and Milestone have him run into the very wire he has been stringing to keep off the enemy; his eyes are torn out. Another scene, in which the protagonist, Paul Baumer (played by a 22-year-old Lew Ayres), reaches out on the battlefield toward a butterfly, is foreshadowed earlier when the young soldier looks at his boyhood butterfly collection.

So reuniting the scenes in sequence was as important as restoring the total number of scenes. Technicians used the code numbers on the edges of the original film to reassemble once-contiguous footage. The result shows how expertly placed are the episodes, and how they improve on the book. The scene in which Baumer watches a French soldier dying in a foxhole sharpens a passage in the novel where people simply *hear* a Frenchman dying slowly on the field.

The actual restoration of the film took place at the Library of Congress's laboratory, at that time located in Dayton, Ohio. Working with a nearly intact master print found in the Universal vaults, technicians not only filled in scratches and resynched the sound (at times improving on the original job the filmmakers had done) but produced a new print that makes it possible to see the entire frame. This is especially important since the sense of space is a key element in the film. Large patterns of movement – parades, horses flying across the foreground, troops wheeling in choreographed drill, trucks churning – are counter to the small-scale acts of frightened or numbed soldiers caught in war's meshes.

The first sequence is a good example. It takes place in a classroom, where riotous paraders are visible through windows on each side of the blackboard. On the blackboard are two Latin quotations, scientific and philosophical, and the opening Greek line of "*The Odyssey*." As the professor whips the students into enthusiasm for war, the frenzy of the crowd outside spills into the classroom. Students tear up and throw the school papers like confetti. They cross out the Latin quotations, leaving only the heroic poetry intact. Arthur Edeson's camera roams over and around the scene, giving the lie to the claim that early talkies had to be static. (Edeson is best known for the moody *noir* look of "They Drive by Night," "The Maltese Falcon" and "Casablanca.")

Milestone made innovative use of the new sound technology. He used weird, prolonged pings to represent the explosives the troops used to detonate enemy land mines, and a drum-like beat of machine guns to create sound montages. And to make this torture-by-shell more searing, Milestone used little background music. The gunfire pierces silence. Later prints toned down the sound level of the weaponry and added music to silent sequences, to fulfill audience expectations. But Milestone wanted to *defy* expectations as in the final scene when the shrill crack of a shot is the last sound we hear in the film. A retrospective image of the young men going off to war is played out in an eerie silence. Later prints were embellished with conventional film-is-ending music.

Part of the challenge of restoring the film was finding the footage that had been cut early on. The Library did find one of these segments in a print distributed in Europe in 1930. Most prints showed a man picking up a loaf of bread smeared with blood, cutting off a section and eating it. But in this European version, he then breaks the neck off a cognac bottle and hands around the sharp-edged cup to others – perhaps their own Last Supper. Here as elsewhere, the creative team turned a good novel into a much greater work of art.