

Burhanuddin Mogul

Hist 390 101

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Depiction of World War One in *1917*

World War One was characterized greatly through the use of trenches in almost every battle across the Western Front. Networks of trenches spanning hundreds of miles became both a sanctuary and a nightmare for the soldiers. The movie *1917* followed the story of a soldier in the British army, Lance Corporal William Schofield, and his harrowing journey to stop the attack that would have killed many British soldiers. The film is shot in two continuous scenes, giving a level of immersion not often found in films, and giving an impactful perspective on the life of soldiers in the trenches. Like the other films viewed this semester, *1917* gave us an insightful perspective on the physically conditions and psychological toll on World War One soldiers like William Schofield, but with the use of modern technology, it also created a sense of immersion not felt in the earlier films.

The film depicts life in the trenches in a similar light as the films viewed earlier in the semester. Like the film *All Quiet on The Western Front* directed by Lewis Milestone, *1917* also shows the crowded and stuffed nature of the trenches. In *All Quiet on The Western Front*, we see soldiers running into each other while trying

to get into position as there is not enough space (*All Quiet on The Western Front* 00:42:00). In *1917* we see a similar sequence, but this is when William Schofield and Thomas Blake are trying to get to no man's land, there is no space for them to walk freely and are constantly bumping into fellow soldiers (*1917* 00:10:00). The film *Paths of Glory* depicts Colonel Dax and his men charging into no man's land in the middle of a battle, constantly falling into puddles and running over dead bodies (*Paths of Glory* 00:29:50). In *1917* William Schofield and Thomas Blake are both seen discreetly traversing the land, but also avoiding puddles and going over dead bodies (*1917* 00:18:30). There is a constant depiction of dirt, mud, grime, blood and flesh throughout all of these films. *1917* is able to use modern effects and technology to make these aspects of life as a soldier more vivid and gruesome than seen in the previous films. Later in the film, William Schofield has to swim through a pile of decomposing German bodies (*1917* 01:27:00). This scene shows how even through some horrible conditions and scenarios, soldiers had to push through and do things that normally would be avoided at all costs. The physical conditions in *1917* that were portrayed were gruesome and dirty, completely throwing away any romanticized notions of war that are seen throughout the film *Wings*. The film makes it clear in every scene that this war was physically abusive on the soldiers who served in it.

Another realistic depiction of the film *1917* was that of the psychological toll taking place on the soldiers, specifically William Schofield. There are both subtle

and more dramatic instances where the viewer gets an understanding of the psychological state of William. The most evident example of this is after the death of Thomas Blake, where William sits in complete silence, traumatized by the sudden loss of his friend and companion (1917 00:47:00). A similar portrayal of psychological trauma can be seen in *All Quiet on The Western Front* when Paul kills a French soldier in a shell hole and breaks down from the guilt (*All Quiet on The Western Front* 01:16:50). Unlike the other films, the use of a continuous shot in 1917 allows us to see William's mental state progressively deteriorate as the film progresses, particularly visible during his journey through Écoust (1917 01:08:00). *Paths of Glory* shows us paranoid and fear ridden soldiers during the siege on the ant-hill but in 1917 we see this on a more detailed scale as it focuses specifically on William (*Paths of Glory* 00:33:00). The weight of war on soldiers' minds is further shown when William encounters a group of exhausted troops by the river, silently listening to a soldier sing (1917 01:30:40). William is completely drained and feels deflected, he sits there just listening and taking it all in. Only once he realized he is with the group he was sent to inform does he seem to get some life back in him. Perhaps the most powerful display of psychological trauma is when William must tell Blake's brother about his death (1917 01:45:00). The pain and guilt in William's eyes during this scene show how the psychological effects of war extend beyond just combat experience. Not only do we see it in William, but we also see it in Lieutenant Joseph Blake as well, to hear of the death of his younger brother but know that he

must stay strong and carry on as he is a soldier and his men rely on him. Through these scenes, *1917* makes it clear that the war's impact on soldiers' minds was just as devastating as its physical toll, if not more

After viewing *1917* for the first time it became very evident as to why this film won so many awards. The depictions of the war were visceral and heartbreaking. Seeing William Schofield's set off on a journey he wanted nothing to do with to seeing him deliver the news of Thomas's death to his brother kept me glued to the screen. There was always an atmosphere of not knowing throughout the film, will they make it, will they successfully stop the attack, was it all for naught, and many other questions kept arising. This film was able to depict the feeling of not knowing so well, that the viewer can attain some understanding of what it meant to be a soldier on the front lines, just trying to carry out an order. Other films viewed during this semester were similarly able to depict the horrors of war, but *1917* had to benefit of being made in the twenty-first century, with the technology and years of filmmaking knowledge to convey what serving in World War One may have felt like.

Works Cited

- Lewis Milestone *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Universal Pictures, 1930.
- d'Arrast, Harry D'abbadie, and William A. Wellman. *Wings*. Paramount Pictures, 1927.
- Kubrick, Stanley,, et al. *Paths of Glory*. Santa Monica, CA, MGM Home Entertainment, 1999.
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