

Chelmsford Film Club

An independent film club based in Chelmsford, Essex

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Paths of Glory

(U.S.A. 1957)

Running time: 86 mins.

Dir: Stanley Kubrick

Cast: Adolphe Menjou; Kirk Douglas;
Ralph Meeker; George Macready.

Peter Bradshaw wrote in *The Guardian* (1 May '14):" 'Paths of Glory' still has a reasonable claim to be Kubrick's best film, made when he was only 29. It has been re-released for the centenary of the start of the First World War. This brilliant tale of macabre futility and horror in the trenches was adapted by Kubrick, Calder Willingham and pulp master Jim Thompson from a 1935 novel by Herbert Cobb, in turn inspired by a real incident.

George Macready plays General Mireau, an officer who, in 1916, orders a suicidally pointless attack on a German stronghold and, after the inevitable fiasco, orders three men to be chosen, by lot, to be shot for cowardice. (Mireau is a cousin to Stirling Heyden's Jack D. Ripper in 'Dr. Strangelove'; calculating percentages of acceptable losses is something that happens in both films.) The resulting execution scene is like a nauseous non-crucifixion – three thieves without a Christ, or three Christs without a thief.

Kirk Douglas is Colonel Drax, the tough old soldier disgusted with his superior's incompetence, who attempts to defend these innocent men. Kubrick's juxtaposition of battle scenes and the sickening, petty tyranny behind the lines is masterly, and there is a domestic flash of pure genius in making one condemned man, just before his execution, announce that he has not had "one single sexual thought" since the court martial. The final sequence, in which a German civilian woman sings to the troops, has a redemptive beauty. Kubrick combines compassion with something of those commanding officers' cool detachment and control. A real cinematic field marshal."

By the end of the 1950s British, and European, society seemed to be ready to re-appraise the First World War. Kubrick's film can be seen as the precursor, almost, of this movement. The war began to be seen in the context of the dawn of a new, more liberal, less reverent, more egalitarian era, as post-2nd World War austerity receded: 'rock and roll' had arrived! So, Leon Wolf published *In Flanders Fields* (1959), looking at the 3rd battle of Ypres – Passchendaele – critically. In 1961 Alan Clark wrote *The Donkeys*, a term for the Generals who led the men -'The Lions' – which would stick for many years. Joan Littlewood produced her musical satire about the Great War, *Oh What a Lovely War*, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in 1963: Richard Attenborough would direct a film version in 1969. Another controversial account of the war by A.J.P Taylor, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and under surveillance, we recently learn, by MI5, wrote *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, which appeared in 1963: he dedicated it to Joan Littlewood! Benjamin Britten, himself a pacifist, was commissioned to write a *War Requiem*, marking the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral (the original 14th century one having been destroyed by German bombs), which was completed in 1962. Significantly, its libretto consisted of poetry by Wilfred Owen, killed in action just a week before the end of the war. In 1963 the then poet laureate, C. Day Lewis, edited *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, a collection that defined Owen as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. And we must not leave out Joseph Losey. After *The Servant* (1963) he worked again with Dirk Bogarde in 1964 on *King and Country* (also starring a young Tom Courtenay) which, like *Paths of Glory*, centred on the execution of a young, hapless soldier, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But the constant re-evaluation of the past goes on, usually as new records and documents are released by 'official sources': each generation colouring the past according to its own economic and social perspectives. Each decade since the end of the First World War has produced mountains of material - historic, biographical, artistic – about it, and a whole genre of fairly recent Military History seems to be dedicated to just describing how the war was fought, never mind the moral implications which are so central to films like 'Paths of Glory', the poetry of Owen and Sassoon or even the pictorial depictions by, say, painters such as Paul Nash and Mark Gertler.

And so back to *Paths of Glory* itself. "Gentlemen of the court, there are times when I'm ashamed to be a member of the human race, and this is one of them", says Colonel Drax, a line that could plausibly recur in any subsequent Kubrick movie: the director's misanthropy and pessimism are already baked into the fabric of *Paths of Glory*. And the techniques used in battle scenes that would later so impress and influence directors such as Terry Gilliam – the tracking shots across Norman's land? The finale of *Full Metal Jacket*, the inhumanly stupid Seven Years' War battle in *Barry Lyndon*? Maybe even Spielberg has not equalled Kubrick when it comes to battlefield scenes, though some viewers may find the combat scenes in *Paths of Glory* a little dated after the blood and carnage of the first minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*. However, our film is still an impressively human, and humane, statement against the view that war can end war.

At this film we support the Mayor of Chelmsford's annual charity appeal in aid of *The Royal British Legion*: please give generously to the bucket collection at the signing-in desk.

Paths of Glory can also be seen at the Cramphorn Picturehouse, in association with the Workers' Educational Association, on November 11.

Next CFC film: **Blue Ruin** – 20 November.

Quiz Night: bring your friends and family, and your own refreshments, for fun and games on 28 November at Moulsham Mill. Start: 7.30 p.m. Tickets on sale in the Foyer from Karen, our Treasurer.