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# Comparative Analysis of 1917 and All Quiet on the Western Front – the Portrayal of Heroism through Narrative Structure, Cinematography, and Mise-en-scène

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**Abstract:** This essay compares Sam Mendes’s film 1917 and Edward Berger’s 2022 German adaptation of All Quiet on the Western Front, focusing on their different portrayals of war due to their distinct cultural contexts. The cultural background of British commemoration of humanity and sacrifice in the film 1917 leads it to highlight a profound heroism. On the other hand, drawing from Erich Maria Remarque’s anti-war novel and a modern, post-World War II perspective, All Quiet on the Western Front critiques nationalism and heroism, portraying war as a cycle of death that dehumanizes soldiers. Through analyzing narrative structure, cinematography, and mise-en-scène, the essay highlights the distinctive depictions of heroism in these modern war films: one honoring a hero despite the futility of war, whereas the other rejects glorification, presenting war solely as a destructive, dehumanizing force.

**Keywords:** anti-war; heroism & anti-heroism; cultural context; dehumanization; hero

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## 1. Introduction

**World War I (WWI)** was one of the most devastating wars in human history. Films about this warfare are never pure entertainment — they reflect how societies remember and interpret the war. Hence, it is crucial for us, the audience, to recall how war influences our perceptions of national identity, duty, and sacrifices. This essay focuses on two anti-war films – *1917* (2019) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022) – analyzing how different cultural contexts influence the portrayal of heroism.

The film *1917* is inspired by the stories of the director Sam Mendes’s grandfather, author and World War I veteran Alfred Mendes. In an interview with *Variety*, Mendes said he had a faint memory from childhood of his grandfather telling a story about “a messenger who has a message to carry” (Reporters)<sup>[1]</sup>. This personal connection provides the film with an intimate, humanized perspective. The film follows the journey of a lance corporal, delivering a message to cease an attack as 1900 British soldiers will be trapped in an ambush. Unlike Germany, Britain emerged on the “victorious” side of WWI, despite immense casualties. British culture, therefore, allows for commemoration of bravery within tragedy. Traditions like Remembrance Day (11 November), the poppy symbol, and countless local memorials frame the war as a solemn sacrifice. The protagonist, William Schofield, encounters various characters along the way, and through the interactions, he finds his calling and courage in his life-saving mission. In this context, the film delivers a theme that reveals all ordinary soldiers

can be heroes; heroism is not about patriotic glory but about the righteous cause of humanity.

On the other hand, in the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, released in 2022, the German director Edward Berger follows the protagonist Paul Bäumer, a young German soldier who enthusiastically enlisted for World War I (WWI) only to discover the terror and the futility of war<sup>[2]</sup>. The film is a German adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's world-renowned German literature *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1929), deconstructing heroic ideals. Personally experienced and survived through WWI, the author has a profound understanding of the nameless casualties and the devastating aftermath of the war. The novel focuses on common people who aspire to be heroes for Germany but instead end up as one of those unnamed victims, providing a powerful critique of German nationalism. Yet, the book was soon banned and burned since it greatly undermined the myth of patriotic heroism (*J. Willard Marriott Library Blog | BANNED! — All Quiet on the Western Front*). Nevertheless, the terrific demonstration of the horror of war and the disillusionment of the soldiers depicted in the novel stayed in many readers' minds. The film is the first adaptation produced by the Germans. The director, Edward Berger, previously stated in an interview with Collider that, being a German, he was raised with a certain anti-heroic mindset toward war. This story cannot be told in the style of a British or American film in which warriors are praised for their victories (*All Quiet on the Western Front Director Ed Berger on Remaking the Material From German Perspective*). Also, a political subplot is introduced in the film, which centers on the character Matthias Erzberger. In order to put an end to the combat, he negotiates on Germany's behalf and signs the Armistice of Compiègne and negotiates on Germany's behalf. Since the Armistice ultimately contributed to the emergence of WWII, the director Edward Berger is making a reference to the conflict here. This knowledge of the historical background demonstrates how the movie reexamines World War I through a post-WWII perspective, showcasing how blind patriotic glorification turns civilians into expendable cannon fodder. As a result, these cultural contexts all serve to imply the main theme of the film: unlike the heroism depicted in *1917*, this film reveals that the war produces no hero; it only dehumanizes soldiers to cannon fodder.

Although both films are anti-war genre, depicting the dehumanization and brutality of war, they diverge in their portrayal of heroism—*All Quiet on the Western Front* dismantles heroism as a destructive illusion, while *1917* reframes it as perseverance and sacrifice. These perspectives reflect differences in the usage of narrative structure, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*<sup>[3]</sup>.

## 2. Narrative Structure

The narrative of *1917* (*1917*) follows the protagonist Lance Corporal Schofield as he and his friend Blake embark on a seemingly impossible mission to trek through enemy territory and deliver a message informing their frontier commander to cease an attack that would potentially kill the entire 1600 soldiers in the army. The film employs a real-time subjective narrative, mimicking a “one-take” effect. The plot is structured as a road movie or a video game, with each segment presenting new obstacles and spectacles. Our perspective is solely limited to Schofield's perspective.

Schofield, played by George Mackay, is introduced as a cynical and emotionally detached veteran who blames Blake for selecting him for the mission. The prospect of winning a medal for the mission does not excite Schofield. He once traded a medal for a bottle of wine. However, when Blake dies, he vows to complete the mission and find Blake's brother. From this point on, the task becomes personal. When Schofield meets the French woman with the baby, he gives all of his supplies to the woman, feeds the baby milk, and reads her a poem. In this brief and genuine moment of connection, he is reminded of the gravity of his mission. This scene is a praise of humanity and the British-French alliance. After his dash through the fire-lit hell of the town and drift through the river, he is “reborn”. He embraces the fleeting hope and completes the mission. Schofield isn't concerned about the gravity and honor of this mission starting out. It is these genuine human interactions that he encounters along the way that help him find his purpose. The narrative is structured to humanize the mission for the detached veteran and ignite the hero in him. This narrative underscores the theme of *1917*: despite the futility and horror of war, the beauty of nature and humanity is worth fighting for. It is anti-war, but pro-heroism<sup>[4]</sup>.

In comparison, the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) employs a cyclical structure to show the cycle of death during war; each cycle of death features a soldier. The film opens with a soldier, Heinrich,

charging into the battlefield, and he dies. Then, Paul inherits his uniform and joins the army. The narrative elaborates the Paul's cycle. Paul starts as a naïve and idealistic, believing in patriotic heroism, but gradually stripped of illusions by trauma and the death of friends. In the final attack, he becomes a soulless killing machine and dies in a meaningless manner. This narrative denies him a heroic transformation, unlike Schofield in *1917*. At last, another soldier with an unknown name finds Paul's body, continuing the same fate. Moreover, the narrative also includes the subplot of Matthias Erzberger negotiating an armistice, juxtaposing frontline chaos with bureaucratic coldness – a departure from Paul's singular point of view. Such a structure objectively accentuates the futility of war on a macro level. The young soldiers are simple cannon fodder made from the factory of nationalism and sent to the battlefield to be burned. There's no hero in the film, no triumph, no glory, no purpose, only futility<sup>[5]</sup>.

The different attitude towards heroism can be best shown by a comparison between the narrative climax of the two films. They both feature a final attack. In *1917*, Schofield runs in the open field, exposing himself to the enemy's fire, running perpendicular to his fellow attacking force, trying to stop this attack. (**Figure 1**) As his eyes are determined with courage and strength (**Figure 2**), his humane and honorable purpose makes him a hero. However, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul is among the attacking force, going for a desperate final attack. (**Figure 3**) Although they are summoned by the idea of national glory, Paul and many other soldiers no longer believe it. As he kills fiercely on the battlefield, he is dehumanized into a soulless machine. (**Figure 4**)



**Figure 1.** Battlefield Run - Medium Shot



**Figure 2.** Battlefield Run – close-up Shot



**Figure 3.** charging into battlefield



**Figure 4.** detached and numbed state of Paul

In conclusion, the film *1917* delves into the journey and transformation of a singular soldier, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the narrative that flows with the character. It depicts how an emotionally detached veteran finds his purpose along the way and completes his mission. The filmmakers portray the beauty of life and nature, and praise the heroic act through an individual perspective. On the other hand, *All Quiet on the Western Front* employs a cyclical and objective structure, providing a systematic critique of the absurdity of German nationalism and the futility of war on a macro level.

### 3. Cinematography

The cinematography of *1917* is immersive and subjective. *1917* is famously constructed to appear as if filmed in a single

continuous take, even though it is actually composed of long takes stitched together. This requires the director and the cinematographer to design editing points, such as blocking the lens to be black or panning shots. This is used to immerse the audience directly into the soldiers' experience, creating a sense of urgency and tension. This "one-shot" illusion mirrors the real-time narrative structure of the story. As it is an urgent delivery that cannot pause, every moment feels consequential. The technique requires the camera to stay close to the protagonist and highlights the physical and psychological endurance required to survive. By tying the camera closely to Schofield, the audience experiences the war through his eyes, feeling his emotions as the journey goes on. This makes heroism deeply personal rather than abstract.

Although the camera is constantly moving, the framing is extremely composed and the aesthetic polished. The cinematographer Roger Deakin emphasizes the contrast between tender and harsh tones. He uses warmer colors and natural lighting, and he incorporates natural elements of trees, cherry blossoms, and green fields to create a tender and poetic tone. The film opens with an image of nature in overcast lighting (**Figure 5**), then the camera moves back to reveal the protagonists napping under a tree. (**Figure 6**) They bookend the film with Schofield resting under another tree (**Figure 7, 8**), bathing in the sunlight, enjoying a moment of peace and relief. This painterly cinematography creates a sense of poetry. In contrast with the day scenes, Roger Deakins uses practical lighting and embraces darkness. He lights the German bunker with flashlights (**Figure 9**), the ruins of the town with flares (**Figure 10**), creating a realistic look with unique shadows and strong contrast. The contrast between these images emphasizes the greatness of those peaceful moments. This helps to convey a sense of hope to both soldiers and audiences, and highlights the heroic cause of the protagonist.



**Figure 5.** Vitality of nature



**Figure 6.** Resting



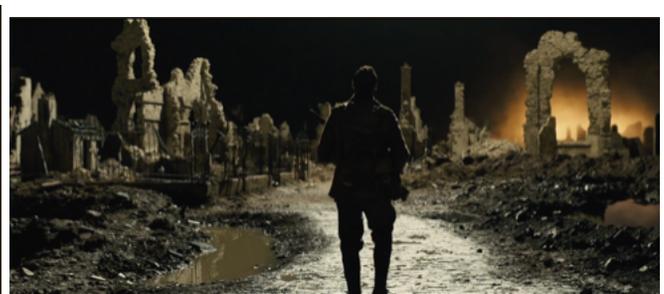
**Figure 7.** Relieved after mission



**Figure 8.** Relieved after mission



**Figure 9.** Charging through the village



**Figure 10.** Charging through the village

In contrast, the cinematography of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is mostly objective, emphasizing a harsh, cold, and brutal reality of war. Unlike the “one-shot” effect in *1917*, the cinematography is an ensemble of montage, coverage, and limited long takes. The camera is often objective, such as the ghostly tracking shots in the trenches, immersing the audience in a claustrophobic chaos (**Figure 11**), and the extreme wide shots far from the characters, providing a visual critique and moments of reflection. (**Figure 12**) Sometimes the camera is subjective. For instance, the handheld camera during the battle evokes a sense of disorientation and panic (**Figure 13**), and frequent close-ups of Paul emphasize his inner despair. (**Figure 14**)

The visual style is cold, harsh, and bleak; the scenes are utterly brutal. The framing often obscures individuality. Soldiers are framed as silhouettes, buried in mud, and indistinguishable in uniform, dehumanizing them as worthless objects designed to go on to death. (**Figure 15, 16**) No moment is visually glorified – the camera never turns combat into spectacle. Soldiers are filmed as fragile, vulnerable bodies rather than cinematic warriors. This style of cinematography subverts the heroism and poetry depicted in the film *1917*.



**Figure 11.** Battlefield scene



**Figure 12.** Aftermath of war



**Figure 13.** Close combat



**Figure 14.** anxious and scared emotions of Paul



**Figure 15.** aftermath of war



**Figure 16.** Walking into battlefield

#### 4. Mise-en-scène

The directors of both films use extensive mise-en-scène to deliver their anti-war message to the audience, yet they differ greatly in their methods. Both films exhibit features of a realistic battlefield, such as corpses, decomposed bodies, mud, bomb pits, and

blood. These elements in the set design ground the brutality of war. The trenches are meticulously constructed to be narrow, muddy, claustrophobic, and endless. The filth in the trenches, the one-way passage, the ubiquitous warning signs of “beware of Snipers”, and the ever-present wounded soldiers all make audiences feel as if they are in a real war.

However, different from the noisy bombings and continuous gunfire depicted in traditional war films, *1917* has many serene settings behind the battle front. These segments show a highly poetic beauty. The director uses the beauty of human nature in peaceful moments to set off the cruelty of war, and uses tranquility to show more diverse aspects of the character, highlighting each individual in the grand war environment. For instance, Schofield and Blake pass by an estate with many cut-down cherry trees. The cherry is a visual metaphor, symbolizing that lives are constantly being devastated and devoured. (Figure 17) The director also intentionally uses the motif of cherry blossom repeatedly. When Schofield’s journey was approaching the end as he drifted in the water, cherry blossom floats on the water, delivering a sign of hope. (Figure 18)



Figure 17. Orchard scene



Figure 18. Consideration of hope

In contrast with these serene scenes, the lighting and set designs for the dangerous combat and escape scenes are even more stylized and saturated. For instance, the ruined town lit by flare shots, the church on fire, and the river at dawn. (Figure 19, 20, 21, 22) The set designs and saturated and contrasty lighting choices together create a sense of surrealism, elevating Schofield’s heroic journey to a spiritual level.



Figure 19. Charging through the village



Figure 20. Charging through the village



Figure 21. Charging through the village



Figure 22. Run for live

Moreover, the signature props used in this movie humanize the characters. The Mission Letter is the central prop, fragile yet symbolically heavy. The milk collected in the early scene becomes the supply for the infant. There are also

many personal objects, such as Blake's and Schofield's family photographs. These highly individualized objects humanize Schofield, highlighting his greatness as an ordinary soldier becoming a hero.

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the filmmaker went the other route. Instead of shining a light on the beauty of nature and humanity, they are dedicated to revealing the horror and dehumanization of war. The sets are designed to be harsh and lifeless. All the sets are sites of war trauma. The boots of dead soldiers are piled up (**Figure 23**); the uniforms are washed and recycled (**Figure 24**); the factory is filled with soldiers who died from poison gas (**Figure 25**); the hospital is drenched in blood. (**Figure 26**)



**Figure 23.** piled corpses



**Figure 24.** factory scene



**Figure 25.** death of young soldiers



**Figure 26.** numbed resting of soldiers

The costume also serves as an important motif in demonstrating the anti-heroism concept of the film. The military uniform is a powerful symbol of how soldiers are easily replaced, whereas the uniforms are sustained longer. The film features one of the most horrific montages of the decade – the process of uniform recycling, which perfectly demonstrates the brutality of war and the propaganda machine. Such ironic usage of costumes demonstrates the dehumanization of the soldiers by war. (**Figure 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32**)



**Figure 27.** death – medium shot



**Figure 28.** cycling clothing



Figure 29. cycling clothing



Figure 30. cycling clothings



Figure 31. cycling clothing



Figure 32. cycling clothing

Additionally, the weapons that the soldiers carry are heavily featured in the scene. The rifle, which is portrayed as a symbol of heroism in *1917*, is portrayed as a source of ironic tragedy for the character. This detachment of the gun from glory and pride serves the theme of anti-heroism. The character Katczinsky was caught off guard by a child. A veteran who survived the war is executed by a rifle in a child's hand. (Figure 33) By inverting the symbolism of the prop and costume, the filmmakers emphasize the theme of dehumanization and anti-heroism.



Figure 33. veteran killed by a boy

Even having the same setting arrangement and similar props used in warfare, the intentions and depictions are totally different in the two films. In *1917*, even though there are features showing the brutality of war, there are still features that humanize the protagonist, making him an ordinary hero in the audience's mind. On the other hand, *All Quiet on the Western Front* depicts the setting, costumes, and props all in a critical viewpoint, showing the dehumanizing nature of warfare without any hope or saviors.

## 5. Conclusion

The difference in narrative and visual approach between the two films can be best exemplified through a comparison of the ending shots. At the continuous shot at the end of *1917*, Schofield shakes hands with Blake's surviving brother and walks towards a tree. He sits down and looks at his family photos and enjoys a moment of relief. (Figure 34-38) Whereas in the last sequence of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a young soldier finds Paul's body, takes the personal items from Paul, and we linger on the face of the deceased Paul. (Figure 39-43)



Figure 34. finished mission



Figure 35. cycle of death



Figure 36. fulfilling the last wish for Blake



Figure 37. cycle of death



Figure 38. relief – wide shot



Figure 39. cycle of death



Figure 40. relief - insert



Figure 41. cycle of death



**Figure 42.** relief – close-up shot



**Figure 43.** cycle of death

The contrasting portrayals of heroism and war in *1917* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* stem from their distinct cultural context and thematic priorities. *1917*, rooted in British commemoration of humanity and sacrifice, employs a linear, immersive narrative structure, painterly cinematography, and poetic mise-en-scène to frame individual heroism as a quiet but meaningful act. In contrast, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, shaped by Germany's reckoning with nationalism and war guilt, adopts a cyclical, systemic critique through an episodic narrative structure that denies redemption, bleak cinematography, and dehumanizing mise-en-scène. These differences in film elements ultimately reflect their divergent cultural lenses: one honoring perseverance amid futility, the other exposing war as an engine of annihilation. As masterpieces of the war genre in modern cinema, both films demonstrate how modern filmmaking is inseparable from the filmmaker's historical and philosophical perspectives they seek to interrogate.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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