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Marcelline Block and Barry Nevin, eds. *French Cinema and the Great War: Remembrance and Representation*. Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016. xxiv +180 pp. Notes. \$90 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-4422-6097-9; \$85.50 U.S. (eb). 978-1-4422-6098-6.

Review by Peter Bloom, University of California Santa Barbara

This edited collection is a more recent contribution to debates about the status of remembrance and commemoration in relation to cinema and World War I, or the Great War. The co-editors cite the work of Modris Eksteins, Maurice Halbwachs, and Laurence van Ypersele in particular as a basis for their “multi-textured fusion of perspectives” that seeks to address the effacement and selection of memory traces in tension with official evocations of commemoration (p. 167).<sup>[1]</sup> The edited volume by Michael Paris also looms large, particularly the writing of Pierre Sorlin.<sup>[2]</sup> The *French Cinema and the Great War: Remembrance and Representation* includes a preface by Laurent Véray, one the best known French scholars of World War I and cinema. The introduction asserts that the centenary of the war is an important vantage point from which to reconsider how films have transformed our understanding of its significance over time. Overall, the collection is a valuable contribution to studies of particular films that specify the context of political and social disruption within a nationally constructed framework. It may be contrasted with an emphasis on urban and transnational approaches related to film exhibition in film and media studies more generally. In particular, I am thinking of Judith Thissen and Clemens Zimmermann’s *Cinema Beyond the city*.<sup>[3]</sup> While there continue to be a number of important books that foreground the role of particular filmmakers, such as Colin Burnett’s remarkable *The Invention of Robert Bresson*, or historical filmmaking communities, such as Jennifer Wild’s *The Parisian Avant-garde in the Age of Cinema*, a diffuse approach to films about World War I is increasingly rare in film and media studies.<sup>[4]</sup>

The volume itself is divided into three sections, each containing three to four chapters of varying lengths. The first, entitled “Recording and Remembering the Great War”, includes a series of approaches to acts of commemoration through a range of films. It begins with a discussion by Maryann De Julio of Germaine Dulac’s newsreel compilation film *Le Cinéma au service de l’histoire* (1935). This film was lost and then rediscovered in the 1970s at which time it was entrusted to the Cinémathèque de Toulouse. While the author provides a useful recounting of the film’s structure and details about its exhibition, there is little mention of its restoration, and unfortunately only limited information about its availability for viewing. By contrast, the two chapters that follow (by Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Phillip John Usher) describe two popular films that are accessible, *Thomas l’imposteur* (dir. Georges Franju, 1966) and *Le Roi de Coeur* [*King of Hearts*] (dir. Philippe de Broca, 1966). Both chapters present well-rehearsed discussions about theatricality, political power and the historical context for their releases in the mid-1960s. Usher’s approach, in particular is a very elegant reading, and among other contributions in the volume, he emphasizes the context for antiwar activity. The final contribution to this section by Henri-Simon Blanc-Hoàng examines three different films: Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *La victoire en chantant* (1976), Bertrand Tavernier’s *Capitaine Conan* (1996), and Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Un long dimanche de*

*fiançailles* (2004). The discussion of these three films focuses on the theme of historical displacement within the context of the moment of their release by recovering and adapting well-known narratives associated with the war.

The second section of the volume, “Women at the Front”, foregrounds the position of women in two films that were released during the war and two others released in the early 2000s. Clémentine Tholas-Disset’s chapter begins with the provocative question--“what is a patriotic film?”--as a means of comparing the French film, *Une page de gloire* (dir. Léonce Perret, 1915) and *The Little American* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1917). It highlights the nature of the heroine in both films in order to address very different ways of mobilizing the involvement of women in the war effort. This is followed by a somewhat more conventional approach by Karen A. Ritzenhoff regarding how more recent films, such as *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, evoke the position of female subjectivity which is taken up in a slightly different light from Blanc-Hoàng’s reading. This is then followed by Marcelline Block’s discussion of *La vie et rien d’autre* (dir. Bertrand Tavernier, 1989) and *Joyeux Noël* (dir. Christian Carion, 2005), which is one of the strongest contributions in the volume. Her discussion focuses on the interplay between the reality of warfare and romantic attachments, and points to how the scale of the World War I epic film recasts an understanding of sexuality and masculinity.

The final section of the volume addresses Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937), which remains a touchstone of representations of World War I and French Poetic Realist Cinema. With regard to the argument of the volume itself, the interwar period is particularly significant given that the institution of filmmaking and exhibition practices became well recognized by an expanded international film-going public at this time. Important themes derived from this film include: the nature of memory, in William Kidd’s excellent and detailed contribution; the culture of masculinity and the wounded body explored by Julie M. Powell; the effect of the war on the French aristocracy taken up by Frederic Leveziel; and finally the function of the war veteran in Renoir’s oeuvre discussed by Barry Nevin. These chapters contribute to the already expansive scholarship about Renoir.

In conclusion, I will certainly refer to individual contributions in this edited volume upon screening some of these films in my undergraduate courses. However, the arguments developed in the introduction about remembrance and representation fall too easily into a narrow sense of French national identity and cinema that seems to leave the reader with little context for understanding ongoing strategies of commemoration in contemporary France. While the volume is focused on the Great War, some of the very same tactics of commemoration regarding official history remain in force, embedded, as it were, in the infrastructure of particular cities, bridges, buildings, monuments, and social geographies as demonstrated in the important work of Paul Virilio.[5] While these films may serve as partial conveyance of memory in themselves, it seems as though a more expansive archival context for the earlier films, and a wider frame of references regarding the production context for the more recent ones would extend the editors’ initial arguments about memory and commemoration. Furthermore, the technologies of cinema aligned with the Great War, and contemporary narrative appropriations, specify the war as an international geographic totality. It remains a significant point of reference in the emotional economy of our contemporary era of instantaneous global communication and remote strategies of warfare.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Marcelline Block and Barry Nevin, “Introduction: the Great War: history and memory”

Maryann De Julio, “Germaine Dulac’s *Le cinéma au service de l’histoire* (1935): World War I and the French newsreel”

Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, “War changes everything: the reality of illusion and investitures of power in *Thomas l'imposteur* (1965) and *Le Roi de coeur* (1966)”

Phillip John Usher, “An anti-archive of World War I: Philippe de Broca’s *Le Roi de coeur* (1966)”

Henri-Simon Blanc-Hoàng, “Expressing pacifist views through the recovery of World War I’s silenced voices in Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *La victoire en chantant* (1976), Bertrand Tavernier’s *Capitaine Conan* (1996), and Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004)”

Clémentine Tholas-Disset, “Unexpected heroines in French and American patriotic war films: *Une page de gloire* (1915) and *The little American* (1917)”

Karen A. Ritzenhoff, “Women’s voices, memory, and the war: Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004)”

Marcelline Block, “‘Love and nothing but’ in *La Vie et rien d’autre* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1989) and *Joyeux Noël* (Christian Carion, 2005)”

William Kidd, “‘Une mémoire de pierre’: spaces of memory and grammars of remembrance in Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937)”

Julie M. Powell, “Re-membering the war: masculinity and the wounded body in Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937)”

Frederic Leveziel, “The French aristocracy at war in *La Grand Illusion* (1937) and *La Règle du jeu* (1939)”

Barry Nevin, “‘Un homme lui, un héros!’: commemorating the World War I veteran in the work of Jean Renoir”

#### NOTES

[1] Modris Eksteins, “Memory of the Great War,” in Hew Strachan, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 305-17; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*. Trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Laurence van Ypersele, “Mourning and Memory, 1914-45,” in John Horne, ed. Helen McPhail, trans. *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 576-90.

[2] Michael Paris, *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the present* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[3] Judith Thissen and Clemens Zimmermann, eds., *Cinema Beyond the City: Small-town and Rural Film Culture in Europe* (London: Palgrave on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2017).

[4] Colin Burnett, *The invention of Robert Bresson: the auteur and his market* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

[5] Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989).

Peter Bloom  
University of California Santa Barbara  
[pbloom@filmandmedia.ucsb.edu](mailto:pbloom@filmandmedia.ucsb.edu)

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