

Article

Ranjita Biswas

War and Peace



All Quiet on the Western Front, the new German version of Erich Maria Remarque's eponymous book (earlier version 1930) presented by Netflix, walked away with seven laurels at the recent Bafta awards including the Best Picture and Best Director award for Edward Berger. At Golden Globe also, it walked away with the Best non-English Film award. The film is on the nomination list for the upcoming Oscars in March.

At the acceptance speech at Bafta, Berger said how the film, though set on the battlefields during the First World War, is basically 'anti-war'. Indeed as you watch the horrific conditions at the French war front and the disillusionment of the young Germans, 'brain-washed' into thinking that war was all glory and bravery, you realise that the film- and the book, is an indictment of the macho

image of war. For his brutal portrayal of the truth Romarque, who was himself at the front, was hounded by the Nazis, the book was banned, and he chose to live in exile in Switzerland and later the USA. This an all too familiar scenario even today when unpalatable truth-speakers face the same fate.

True, poetry, fiction- Hemingway's *A farewell to Arms*, for example, paintings – think of Picasso's *Guernica*, which throws up many anti-war sentiments. Cinema, the most modern art form, has also reflected this philosophy at different times.

Many countries worldwide have their oeuvre of significant films that question the so-called 'patriotic' themes. At the moment, let's look at movies from Hollywood stepping away from its glamorous image to take up this refrain.

In 1957, Stanley Kubrick co-wrote and directed *Paths of Glory*, based on the eponymous novel by Humphrey Cobb. Kirk Douglas (Colonel Dax) stars as a World War I French colonel who confronts the army's ruthless top brass as his men are accused of cowardice after being unable to carry out an impossible mission. Dax sums up the film's core message in a dialogue: "The loss of empathy is the greatest casualty of warfare."

Look at *The Deer Hunter* (1978), one of the first mainstream films to tackle the controversial Vietnam War. What is it about? Male bonding? Mindless patriotism It's all this and more. About how the war affects people, and how the soldiers find it difficult to adjust to a 'normal' lifestyle or mindset back home from the fields.

As you read about the number of soldiers committing suicide, even inflicting violence on fellow beings after returning home from Iraq or Afghanistan, the real truth of war seems to bubble up. Why do the army authorities – not only in America- insist on discussing the need to counsel war veterans these days? Think of Abu Ghraib and the atrocities the so-called 'normal' people, even women who are supposed to be better caregivers, inflicted on the prisoners. Dehumanisation is an understatement.

Talking about war, one cannot leave out Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Epical in format, it is another film on the effect of the mindless Vietnam War of the 70s that later led to a cultural protest led by the Flower Children. In the movie, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) takes a dangerous journey upriver to find and terminate Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a once-promising officer said to have slipped into madness. It is

a metaphoric journey into the heart of darkness as we contextualise Joseph Conrad's book *Heart of Darkness*, set in colonised Africa and reflects man's degradation in conflict situations. In the film, recall Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore's callous words as he orders Willard to strike a Vietcong-controlled coastal village: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning."

You cannot but immediately think of the photograph of a naked nine-year-old girl fleeing the chasing fire of the napalm bomb. This iconic photo is now displayed at the *War Remnants Museum in Ho Chin Minh City*.



The story of *Apocalypse Now* is also an allegory for a journey into the self and how it darkens beyond recognition in the face of war. As they move upriver, Willard and the crew become more agitated and are in a schizophrenic frenzy as conflict rages in their mind internally and confronts it externally in surroundings ravaged by killings. Each man experiences his kind of mental breakdown.

"The horror, the horror!" Kurtz utters his last words as Willard slaughters him with a machete. As the film ends, you are left with an empty feeling of sadness, musing that wars through the centuries have not taught man to recognise the meaninglessness and cruelty of war.



Waltz with Bashir (2009) treats the subject through animation, but it's less effective in narrating war trauma. It is an autobiographical documentary where the film's Israeli director, Ari Folman, reflects on his involvement in the 1982 Lebanon War with Israel. The massacre at a Palestinian refugee camp by a Christian militia still raises questions. Who was to blame? Who ordered the shooting? Or was it done by the militia of its own will?

Folman tries to piece together the story with his interviews with Israeli soldiers at the front and his vague recollections. He found that animation was the only way the horrific tale could be told, perhaps shielding real people; some suffered from witnessing so many innocent people slaughtered and had nightmares.

The title refers to an Israeli soldier who loses equilibrium and fires indiscriminately on the street with posters of the just-assassinated Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel. Thus, *Waltzing with Bashir*.

As sirens rattle the sky above Ukraine, one is again tempted to mutter the cliché, 'History repeats itself'. All the novels, poems, and films that talk about the meaninglessness of it all seem to fall by the wayside.

Ms. Ranjita Biswas is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.