Film

J. HOBERMAN | ON DVD

When Movies Went to the Trenches

VERISIMILITUDE IS ALWAYS an issue with a war film. "You can't show war as it really is on the screen, with all the blood and gore," the director Samuel Fuller once observed, suggesting that it might be better to "fire real shots over the audience's head" and "have actual casualties in the theater."

G. W. Pabst's "Westfront 1918" (1930), newly out on disc from Criterion, depicted World War I with a remarkable lack of sentimentality and a visceral clamor of shouts and explosions. A cosmopolitan and protean filmmaker, Pabst (1885-1967) was attracted to naturalism as well as to big issues. "Westfront" was hailed as the first German talking picture to concern the war as well as the first German feature to represent life in the trenches.

"A German antiwar film had to come sooner or later," wrote The New York Times's Berlin correspondent. "That they have not produced a film of this kind before now was due to the repulsion felt by everyone at the very thought of war." In a way, "Westfront" was a national psychodrama. Three of the four main actors were war veterans and so were many of the spectators. Nazis clashed with veterans in the audience at the movie's Berlin premiere.

Still, the relatively modest "Westfront" was overshadowed by the Hollywood superproduction "All Quiet on the Western Front," adapted from the international bestselling novel by Erich Maria Remarque, which opened in Germany later that year. Despite the evident qualities of "Westfront" — the critic Siegfried Kracauer considered it a historical document — and Pabst's once considerable reputation, the movie has been neglected ever since.

An ensemble film that unfolds as a series of vignettes during the war's last stages, "Westfront" focuses on four German infantrymen in Occupied France. The French are not the enemy; the enemy is war. At one point the Germans are trapped in the trenches that are being shelled by their own army. Those at home are preoccupied with their own shortages and privation. One of the soldiers gets a brief leave, returning to find his wife in bed with the butcher's assistant (who supplements her rations and has himself just been drafted). Hopelessly demoralized, the soldier returns to his comrades on the front and volunteers for a haz-

For an early talkie (and Pabst's first), "Westfront" is notably fluid. The camera is highly mobile and the director makes skillful use of long takes — although portions of the brilliantly extended, existential battle sequences are filmed with a fixed camera. "Westfront" is also notable for its creative sound editing, expanding space through offscreen sound, creating sound bridges using artillery fire that extends from one shot to another and even devising audio match cuts, between cries and whizzing shells.

Much of "Westfront" is played out in the scarred and denuded buffer zone between the trenches — filmed by Pabst in highly defined sharp focus. A meeting between two



German soldiers in this cratered deathscape has been singled out as the essence of Germany's fatalistic mood, trapped between one war and another that is yet to come. Nobody in the film really gets out alive. The most gung-ho character goes mad, screaming all the way to the field hospital that has been set up in a bombed-out

The powerful final image has a blinded French soldier reaching out to grab the hand of the German lying next to him without realizing that he has sought comfort from a corpse. In his next film, "Kameradschaft" (1931), also newly out from Criterion, Pabst made an even more impassioned

'Westfront 1918' and 'Cease Fire' embraced new technologies.

plea for solidarity — having German rescue teams aid the trapped French miners when a coal mine collapses on the border between the two countries.

The Korean War film "Cease Fire" (1953), recently released on disc from Kino, strove for another kind of battlefield authenticity being a sort of neorealist experiment in 3-D.

Made by the documentary filmmaker Owen Crump with the cooperation of the United States Department of Defense, "Cease Fire" was shot in Korea, during the final months of the war, while the armistice was being negotiated. It was released four months after the cease-fire began. American servicemen play themselves, recreating an engagement in which they participated. Their resigned body language is A scene from "Westfront 1918." It was the first German talking picture about World War I.

more eloquent than their stiffly delivered

After establishing its 3-D bona fides by firing a howitzer into the spectator's face, the movie settles down to standard patrol stuff. Unlike "Westfront," however, "Cease Fire" is wholly uncritical. The enemy is cruel and implacable; the Americans are stalwart and patriotic, slogging through a minefield as Dimitri Tiomkin's tiresome "Brothers in Arms" exhorts them "onward and onward."

The 3-D is most effective where the terrain is most rugged, as in a battle waged around some deep ravines. But there are moments when even the climactic spectacle, with American bombers pounding the mountainsides, are upstaged by the sight of the wind moving in the leaves. The least compelling scenes, reportedly added by the producer Hal Wallis, are the interpolated ones of cynical correspondents waiting out the cease-fire negotiations in the town of Panmunjom, just north of the de facto bor-

Writing in The Times, Bosley Crowther found the 3-D "superfluous and annoying" but praised "Cease Fire" as "a robust, hairraising realization of the ruggedness of the foot soldiers war in the ugly hills of Korea." He ended his enthusiastic review by noting that the moral enforcers of the Motion Picture Production Code removed three "hells" and a "damn" — too much realism, it would

Koyu RANKIN

(Atari)

Newly Released



CHANCES Two brothers, both in the British Army, and the woman they love, struggle through World War I. Reviewing the movie, now available on DVD, in The New York Times, Mordaunt Hall had strong praise for the director Allan Dwan and his female star Rose Hobart whose "artistry," he wrote, prompted pleasurable anticipation of her subsequent work. (Warner Archive)



NOCTURAMA Bertrand Bonello's suavely choreographed provocation has a band of French terrorists blowing up Paris monuments and then seeking refuge in a capacious department store. "Part 1 is fast-moving and suspenseful, Part 2 languorous and luxuriant," A. O. Scott wrote in his Times review in August 2017. "The young terrorists are brisk and businesslike until the plastic explosives detonate. Then they act out a parody of jaded consumerist hedonism, browsing among the brand names." On Blu-ray and DVD. (Grasshopper Films)



SILENCE AND CRY A defeated revolutionary soldier takes refuge with a peasant family in this tense cat-and-mouse game set in 1919, on the great Hungarian plain during the aftermath of the nation's short-lived existence as a Soviet republic and directed by the great Hungarian filmmaker Miklos Jancso. Balletic in its stylization, the movie never had an American run; the restored Blu-ray and DVD have been put out by a British company. (Second Run)



VIVA L'ITALIA Commissioned to make a movie for Italy's centenary celebrating the patriot and revolutionary hero Giuseppe Garibaldi, Roberto Rossellini directed these costumed battles as though filming a documentary. However lavish, this 1961 film is a prelude to the austere historical dramas Rossellini would begin making later in the decade. Blu-ray, DVD and Amazon Video. (Arrow Academy)



UNDERGROUND Emir Kusturica won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1995 and reaped a whirlwind of criticism for this phantasmagorical account of black marketing among the Yugoslav partisans during World War II. Reviewing the movie in The Times when it was shown at the New York Film Festival, Janet Maslin called it "a feverish, whimsical allegory elevated by moments of brilliant clarity." Blu-ray and DVD. (Kino Classics)

Bryan CRANSTON



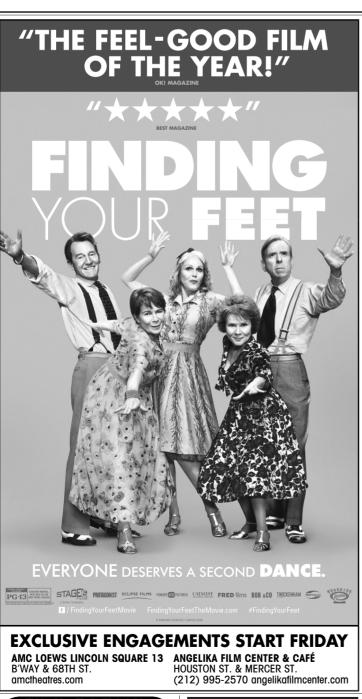
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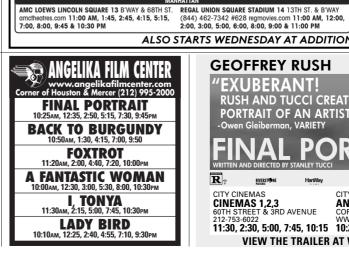
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