

THE GREAT WAR IN ROMANIAN FILM FROM THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Abstract: The historical film seems to be privileged in the Romanian filmography if we take into account the fact that the first great accomplishment was *Independența României* (The Independence of Romania, 1912) directed by Grigore Brezeanu. Under these circumstances, it would appear that at least this type of films would have flourished during the next period, but, as in other areas, despite Romanian pioneering, the material lacks were inevitably invoked.

During the interwar period, the films concerning the Great War - *Ecaterina Teodoroiu* (1921, 1931), *Datorie și sacrificiu* (Duty and Sacrifice, 1925) and *Vitejii neamului* (Heroes of the People, 1927) – were under the influence of the act of the Great Unification of 1918. Although they may be regarded of the same level as the European productions of those times, this filmic category represented a much awaited national variant in the process of debating a subject of great emotional impact.

Keywords: History, tragedy, individual, symbol, resistance.

The Great War in International Cinematography

Present in any hierarchy of the world cinematography, the war films, especially those on the Great War, proved to have an outstanding impact over the generation that had the bad fortune to be part of that war and over the following generations.

If we pertain to a top of films on the Great War, according to film critic Andreea Lupșor, we may establish the following list¹: 1. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, directed by Lewis Milestone) 2. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, directed by David Lean) 3. *Paths of Glory* (1957, directed by Stanley Kubrik) 4. *Gallipoli* (1981, directed by Peter Weir) 5. *A Very Long Engagement* (2004, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet) 6. *Joyeux Noel* (2005, directed by Christian Clarion) 7. *War Horse* (2011, directed by Steven Spielberg) 8. *Wings* (1927, directed by William Wellman) 9. *La Grande Illusion* (1937, directed by Jean Renoir) 10. *The White Ribbon* (2009, directed by Michael Haneke).

The above top covers almost a century of film making, from the American silent film *Wings* (1917) to *War Horse* (2011). We notice the predominance of American films, better supported financially and the reflection of a different angle on the war depending on the year of production, being focused on various aspects of the individual and society at war. Thus, we could point out two great films on war – *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), a war history as an epic story of the Arabic world on one hand, and the film adaptation of Eric Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) as the cult film of the lost generation and the theme of lack of adaptation in the world after the conflict, as well as promoting pacifism on the other hand.

Films like *A Very Long Engagement* (2004) and *Joyeux Noel* (2005), *War Horse* (2011) managed to bring in the foreground the war that destroyed so many human destinies: searching

¹http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/cele-mai-bune-10-filme-primul-razboi-mondial (Accessed May 2017).

for the young fiancée, the victim of incompetent superiors; celebrating Christmas that brings for a short period of time the sense of normality for soldiers from opposite camps, and the emotional story of friendship between a teenager and his horse so that friendship and solidarity are interwoven.

It is worth mentioning the French film *La Grande Illusion* (1937) that proved to be prophetic, being forbidden in France and some other countries for the message considered too pacifistic even for the year of its premiere. Its full version was presented only in 1958. Former soldier, the director Jean Renoir presented the French and German soldiers in the same manner. Moreover, the irony of fate was that the message of the film prefigured not the characters' trust in peace, but its failure².

The American generation of the Great War was attracted by the desire to forget everything connected to war so that the post war film *The Big Parade* (1925, directed by King Vidor) was presented as "a film that makes you hate war"³. Another example of war film inspired by real events, the film *Dawn* (1928, directed by Herbert Wilcox) became subject of debates in England, as two opposite parties emerged: one that accused the message of the film and its extreme cruelty, resuscitating some anti-German attitudes, while another party appreciated the film as being dedicated to Edith Clavell's life and activity, supporting the artistic performance⁴.

A great success of the Czechoslovakian cinema was the film *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1926, directed by Karel Lamač, based on Jaroslav Hašek's novel), combining the satirical and tragical themes. The film was followed by three other similar films: *Švejk at the Front* (1926), *Švejk in Russian Captivity* (1926) and *Švejk in Plainclothes* (1927)⁵.

A special case was the war representation in the Soviet Russia, where Lenin grasped quickly the importance of cinema and its impact over the people and society, unlike tsar Nicolas II⁶. The great impact of the Russian cinematography on the subject of the Great War and October Revolution was mainly due to a genius of cinema – Sergei Eisenstein. For this prodigious director the war was the background where history and masses became his heroes, a mandatory and justifiable background for the new world that was born. In two cult films of Eisenstein – *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927) - new montage techniques were enough to overwhelm the spectator by bringing in the foreground the crowd as the single hero that may guarantee and fight for the legitimacy of power (see especially the first sequences of *October*, where the crowd floods the city with the desire to demolish the past represented by the statue of tsar Alexander III)⁷.

Romanian Films on the Great War in Interwar Period

In the Romanian space the film with historical themes was privileged from the beginnings of cinematography, especially taking into account the fact that the first Romanian

²*Secolul cinematografului. Mică enciclopedie a cinematografiei universale [The Century of Cinematography. Short Encyclopedia of Universal Cinematography]*, 1989, p. 171-172.

³*Secolul cinematografului...*, p. 107.

⁴*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.124.

⁵*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.113

⁶*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.113 – see the resolution of the tsar Nicolas II concerning an approval for the Russian representatives to attend the International Congress of Cinematography in Chicago.

⁷ Caranfil, *Vârstele peliculei*, 1984, p. 153.

film is considered *The Independence of Romania* (1912, directed by Grigore Brezeanu, with the contribution of Aristide Demetriade). Its premiere was welcomed as a “film of great art and patriotic sensation”, while its production promised to be the beginning of a fruitful cinematography, which unfortunately didn’t develop according to the expectations, given the material struggle and some other factors⁸.

Under the influence of the Great Unification of 1918 a continuation of this cinematographic initiative was expected, even only to legitimise the political act. However, unlike the European cinematography, the Romanians underlined the event by a series of newsreels regarding the royal family that was meant to regain the public space in Transylvania with the royal visits. In the mentioned context, the Photo-Cinematographic Studio of the Romanian Army initiated on the 15th of November 1916/January 1917 (according to other sources) a great activity in order to preserve on footage the important moments of the war, after Romania entered the war. The first notable accomplishment was the first documentary – *The Romanian Front* – presented at the National Theatre of Iași on the 2nd of May 1918⁹.

Some sequences of front journals were integrated into the first Romanian films that placed their action during the years of the First World War: *Ecaterina Teodoroiu* (1921, 1931), *Duty and Sacrifice* (1925), *Heroes of the People* (1927). This pattern was taken over in other subsequent Romanian historical films.

All three movies are focused on the Great War, but they are mixed productions, where the scenes of the film were an homage to the Romanian soldiers. In the first film – *Duty and Sacrifice* (1925) - the director Ion Șahighian highlighted “ethical intentions” destined to the soldiers’ education. The film was the second one for a great theatre actor George Vraca in the role of Ion Străjeru.

The second film – *Heroes of the People* (1927) – was considered by the film and theatre critic Bujor T.Râpeanu a drama and action film: the rivalry between the sons of a mayor is continued on the battlefield, where the elder brother tries to defect, intention which was presented as an imoral and apatriotic act¹⁰. The film remained in the memory of Romanians due to its prohibition and due to the debate generated in the Chamber of Deputies: some scenes were considered offensive by the German Embassy in Bucharest, although they depicted real events – bombing Bucharest by Germans and Mackensen’s visit to Bucharest. There is however a scene that may be considered offensive – children in a village feeding pigs in a German helmet found in a pit.

As it was expected, the director Eftimie Vasilescu and Gheorghe Popescu were asked to reshoot some scenes, and the film was relaunched on the 25th of February 1927. The success was ensured by numerous battle scenes – real or reconstituted – that reminded the audience of victories achieved in hardships. In *Dicționarul subiectiv al realizatorilor filmului românesc [A Subjective Dictionary of Romanian Film Makers]* the well-known film critic and historian Tudor Caranfil pointed out the fact that the critics of those times appreciated some scenes from a renowned silent movie *J’acusse*, directed by Abel Gance.

During the same year another documentary premiered in France dedicated to Verdun battle - *Verdun, visions de l’histoire* – for which the director Leon Poirier used archives and consulted advisors of those times. He was the master of „documented reconstitutions”, as he said: „cinematography is the most indicated art to fight oblivion, fatal oblivion, as starting with

⁸*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.46.

⁹*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.63.

¹⁰ Râpeanu, *Filmat în România*, 2004, <http://www.istoriafilmuluiromanesc.ro/film-romanesc~vitejii-neamului~137/> (Accessed May 2017).

the moment when people don't remember the teachings of the past, they are tempted again to start a war"¹¹.

The typical hero of the Romanian interwar cinematographic production is Ecaterina Teodoroiu, who had two films dedicated to her – 1921 and 1931 – with many war scenes from the so-called activity journals of the war period. The first film gave the impression of a montage of filmed scenes by director Barbelian in Braşov and other sequences from journals on the front by the cinematographic service of the army. An interesting fact to mention – financing was ensured by the Society of War Heroes' Graves. Unfortunately, only one incomplete copy of the film was preserved.

The second film entitled *Heroine from Jiu (Eroina de la Jiu)/ Ecaterina Teodoroiu* was directed by Ion Niculescu-Brună with Matias Berger in 1920/1931, offering an interesting experiment by using people who play their own role – Ecaterina Teodoroiu's mother and Commissioner Pompilian. The film also included real images with Queen Maria visiting the hospital where Ecaterina Teodoroiu was interned, as well as sequences with King Ferdinand and General Prezan on the Moldavian front. The scenes that reconstituted the battles also included war veterans. The film premiered having in the audience the royal family, the government and the diplomatic corps¹².

In his studies and articles concerning the history of the Romanian cinema and the evolution of the historical theme, the film critic Călin Căliman situated the above mentioned Romanian films in the so-called decade of silent film (1917—1930), closing a period that started under Brezeanu's promising and ambitious beginnings in 1912¹³.

Brief Conclusions

The Great War generated a wealth of film productions worldwide, starting with the interwar period and ending with recent years, proving to be a source of artistic meditations on the human condition at war and a reflection of different attitudes of society toward war. The Romanian case makes no exception from this movement of filmic representations of the First World War so that we offered a short perspective on four cinematographic productions on the matter, highlighting the preponderant documentary character and usage of documentary footages from the war period.

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¹¹*Secolul cinematografului...*, p.117.

¹²<http://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/ecaterina-teodoroiu-27614/>, <http://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/ecaterina-teodoroiu-26900/>, <http://www.istoriafilmuluiromanesc.ro/film-romanesc-ecaterina-teodoroiu-eroina-se-la-jiu-73> (Accessed May 2017).

¹³ Fulger, *O istorie necesară şi indispensabilă*, apud: <http://www.istoriafilmului.ro/articol/126/o-istorie-necesara-si-indispensabil> (Accessed May 2017); Căliman, *Istoria filmului românesc (1897-2000)*, 2000.

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