Courage and Cowardice as Depicted in WWI Films

The recent centennial anniversary of World War I has the world once again examining the destructive and tragic nature of this conflict. The disastrous nature of World War I was unprecedented and the events of this calamity are well documented. The futility, waste of valuable resources, economic collapse, and loss of life all defined how future generations would interpret the events of 1914-1918. Films based on factual persons and events can be excellent mediums of instruction for both students of history and the wider audience of moviegoers who are simply seeking entertainment. However, films that lack historical accuracy can thwart the efforts of serious academics attempting to properly instruct the next generation of historians. The aim of this research project is to closely examine several noteworthy films and determine if the screenwriters and filmmakers provided audiences with historically accurate versions of the events and participants that they are depicting.

Four films will be the subject of examination. These are: Flyboys (2006), Paths of Glory (1957), Testament of Youth (2014), and The Lost Battalion (2001). These works depict the Lafayette Escadrille, the practice of execution for cowardice in the French forces, the tragic experiences of British VAC nurse Vera Britton, and the October 1918 experience of an American combat unit in northeastern France. These films were chosen for the variety of experiences and subject matter they represent. Paths of Glory and Testament of Youth are based on books by Humphrey Cobb (First printing, Viking Press, USA, 1935) and Vera Britton (First printing, Victor Gollancz Limited, UK, 1933). The moniker “The Lost Battalion” is often used for the title of secondary source texts that recount the October 1918 German siege of the 'Pocket' at Charlevaux, in the Argonne Forest, where the men of the US 308th Infantry Division 77th Regiment made their last stand. The title Flyboys does not have any specific text attached to it.
The Great War is well-documented and obtaining sources regarding these popular films and the issues and incidents they depict was a straightforward task. The film reviews are excellent primary source accounts of how contemporary film critics accessed the historical accuracy of each work as well as how they personally responded to the content of that particular film. Two of the films that are being examined are based on primary source texts which will serve as an added means of interpreting the historical events and attitudes that are depicted. The remaining primary source accounts will be compared to the cinematic depictions of events and circumstances in order to locate points of accuracy, or conversely, erroneous portrayals. The secondary source texts will be examined for details and discrepancies that pertain to each individual film. Details such as locations, persons involved or excluded, battle and nursing conditions, and the circumstances of military justice will be taken into consideration when attempting to determine the authenticity of each cinematic effort. These secondary works will be further utilized to fill in any gaps of knowledge surrounding the persons and events that screenwriters did not address in the respective length of two hours for each of these films.

The antics of the Lafayette Escadrille, the brutality and ineptitude of the French Army, experiences of loss and suffering by British VAC nurses, and the tragedy in the Argonne forest all make for excellent cinema. The films being examined will be judged not based on overall entertainment quality, but on historical accuracy. This case by case analysis will determine if Hollywood “gets it right” when attempting to portray persons and events involved in global war that was so shocking, tragic, and destructive it would change the conscience of its age.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


I pledge.........

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