

Im Westen Nichts Neues: How Much of Remarque's Novel Remains in the Movie?

By Gianluca Cinelli

I recently happened to stumble across an intelligent review of the movie *Im Westen Nichts Neues*,¹ the most recent adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's world-known novel of 1928 about the Great War. In her review, Megan Kelleher points out several aspects that make the movie remarkable and successful among the broader public. In the meantime, she argues that such a success is perhaps rooted in two major factors: the powerful visual impact of the movie and the fact that many people who watched the film (especially the young) never read the novel. My reflection will precisely focus on the relationship that exists, or that should exist, between the film and the book.

The opening scene shows a solemnly still and misty landscape, towering trees, and a group of cubs sleeping in their lair, protected and warmed by their mother vixen. For those who read the book, this symbolic association of images recalls two elements that Remarque puts at the core of his narration: the earth as a protective mother and the fragility of the soldier as a youngling. The next scene brings the watcher towards the ground, among dead trees and the devastated no-man's-land scattered with dead bodies lying in the mud, still violated by stray bullets and shell bursts that fling the corpses in the air. Eventually, the audience sees the battle, following the young soldier Heinrich closely, among the advancing soldiers who fall and scream, wrapped in smoke and mown by bullets. Heinrich abandons his rifle, useless in the chaos of the battle, and charges a French soldier slashing through his chest with his spade. I still remember the horror that I felt as I read many years ago, as a teenager, Remarque's description of the act of killing as something that human beings perform in a battle as if in a trance, as though they were controlled by some mysterious force or another unknown "self" that only wants to survive.

I must confess that the representation of killing in this movie is so graphic that it shocked me at first. The violence and cruelty of some battle scenes are appalling: I recall the slow and painful death of the stabbed French soldier, the hand-to-hand fight in which Paul smashes his opponent's face with a helmet, and the final close combat in the

¹ Megan Kelleher, *Im Westen etwas Neues: The Modernisation of All Quiet on the Western Front*, «Centre for the History of War, Media and Society», <https://research.kent.ac.uk/war-media-society/?article=1009>.

trench when Paul mangles a child-looking French soldier with his spade. The director Edward Berger conveys a powerful and shocking sense of horror through these scenes of extreme violence.

The tense combat scenes of this movie may convince the audience that war is a horrible thing that must be avoided by all means. However, a lynching or a raging mob are sickening to watch, too, for violence is always hideous. Therefore, I wonder, is the graphic representation of violence enough to convey the original antimilitarism spirit of Remarque's novel? In my opinion, it is not, and the film fails to adapt Remarque's criticism of war and militarism.

In the first place, the film excludes two pivotal episodes of the novel, namely the military drill Paul and his schoolmates undergo in 1914 and Paul's visit to his family at home on leave. These episodes are fundamental for the evolution of the character. Remarque describes the drilling as a soul-breaking experience aimed at turning a civilised young man, educated in the values of humanism, into a killing machine. Remarque claimed that when society neglects its moral, spiritual, and intellectual aims, progress and education become useless tools. Being a caveman and a rabid killer incapable of proving compassion, empathy, or pity is the only way to survive the battle. In the movie, Paul and his schoolmates leave school as teenagers to fight in the war in the spring of 1917. The schoolmaster's promise that the German troops will conquer Paris in a fortnight is historically unrealistic, for it is not August 1914, and the schoolboys of the movie are not the "heroes of Langemark".

The absence of the episode of the leave, too, weakens the bond between the movie and the novel. By visiting his family, Paul realises that returning home after the war will be almost impossible. He feels that he no longer belongs to the world of his family and other civilians. The human bond with his friends is the only sparkle of humanity left in Paul, which fades as his comrades die, one by one. He cannot imagine any future, and when he dies, he finally looks serene, as though he were happy about that. The movie dismantles this central episode of Remarque's book and confines its antimilitarism to a handful of short and scattered dialogues.

On the other hand, two significant parts of the film have no correspondence with the novel. The first is the story of how the representative of the new democratic German government Matthias Erzberger (Daniel Brühl) tries to speed up the negotiation of the armistice between 9th and 11th November 1918. The second concerns the character of General Friedrich (Devid Striesow), who represents the ideal (and stereotyped) kind of Prussian officer, suspicious of politics and unyielding. At the end of the film, General Friedrich commands his exhausted and demoralised troops to launch a final assault on

11th November, at 10:45 am, which should save the honour of the German soldier betrayed by politics but undefeated on the battlefield. Although the criticism of the Prussian style is historically consistent, it introduces, however, a note of exaggeration in the movie. The armistice at 11:00 stops the fierce battle like the referee's whistle stops a soccer game. This choice left me puzzled and disappointed, for it seems unreal and aestheticized. Moreover, the end of the movie capsizes the spirit of the novel. In the book, Paul's death at the end of the war is accidental and futile, "nothing new" in the frame of the mass massacre. He is a victim of one random blast and he dies anonymously. In the movie, Paul falls in the middle of combat precisely at 11:00, as though he were the last victim of the war.

Remarque's book is the tale of a survivor. Remarque saw his generation being swept away, his world collapse, and his mind and body scarred forever. His novel is desperate because only death liberates Paul Baumer from the nightmare of surviving the war in a devastated Germany. He blamed the military, but he was aware that his teachers preached hatred and poisoned him and his fellow schoolmates with the rhetoric of patriotism, heroism, honour, and sacrifice.

In the movie, all the blame falls on General Friedrich, who is represented as a cold-blooded fanatic. Politician Matthias Erzberger is his antagonist and the positive hero of the film: he, the father of a fallen soldier, insists on ending the war, while the German officer wishes to fight down to the very last man. Erzberger represents the kind of citizen that mends the damages of the war *after the war* and makes it possible to reconnect with the traumatic memory of the conflict. He is the real hero with whom the contemporary audience can perhaps identify and sympathise. *Im Westen Nichts Neues* seems the cultural product of a society that looks at the horrors of European history *ex-post*: the war is the monster to remember and fear, but what counts is asking how life will continue *after the war*, and how society will choose to remember the war and live with that. Remarque's antimilitarism was saturated with pessimism because it was the answer given by a traumatised survivor who had been scarred for life by the war. While the war ends in the novel with the death of Paul, the movie offers an optimistic remark, that is, wars end when society decides to stop them. Remarque fatalistically implied that war overwhelms people and puts their destinies out of their hands: chance tells who will live and who will die. The movie rejects such a fatalism, and although Paul and his friends die, it claims that society and politics can tackle the destructive chaos of war. Such a view fits our contemporary European faith in our democracy and values, for our antimilitarism is mostly advocated for by civilians, not veterans.