

A bridge between two worlds

Bénédicte Chéron

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TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH



BÉNÉDICTE CHÉRON

A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

“In 1897, an operator at the Lumière factory, followed by Georges Méliès turned a painting by the famous military painter Alfred de Neuville, *Les Dernières Cartouches* (‘The Last Cartridges’) into a short film, thereby giving the war film what was to be one of its favourite subjects—the desperate last stand. Although the painting itself is fairly mediocre, it was widely reproduced on engravings. It depicted a famous episode of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870: cornered in a house in Bazeilles, French soldiers fire their last rounds of ammunition against the Prussians, marking the end of a long and heroic defence against an enemy superior in both numbers and weaponry¹.”

The long 20th century that ensued had no lack of moments when French soldiers, in victory or defeat, conducted an operation that was destined to feed the long tradition of narratives of military exploits. However, despite this first encounter in 1897, there is general agreement, more than a century later, that relations between these two worlds are difficult, and that French cinematographic fiction, unlike its American counterpart, does not abound in well-told stories and convincing narratives. It is true that French productions for the cinema, television and, more recently for serial platforms, have been fewer in number. In this same issue of *Inflexions*, Yves Trotignon manages, in only a few pages, to present an almost exhaustive panorama of the French films that recount war or the people involved in war. However, these films do exist, and some of them are well worth attention. Masterpieces in this genre are rare, but even the very prolix American cinema has its fair share of failures, “turkeys” and films that are “so bad they’re good”, hilarious or underwhelming flops, and predictable moral fables with over-obvious ideological messaging from one side of the aisle or another. However, the diversity of American war films is much greater, and their sheer numbers mean that, by force of statistics, productions of high quality and works that can be passed down to posterity appear at more regular intervals.

So, how are we to understand this impression that the encounters between French fiction and the history of wars and their warriors are too often missed opportunities? The reasons are complex and are linked to the complexities of this profession of manufacturing images, in its continual to and fro between the political and social context of a given society, the cultural life of the society and the foreign influences

1. J. Daniel, *Guerre et Cinéma*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1972, p. 26.

infusing it, the creative desires of the individual artist and the economic constraints of this unique industry with its output of audio-visual fiction. Ideally, we should be able to examine a multitude of factors whenever a story recounting a contemporary French war and the fate of the people fighting in it appears on the big or small screen. However, various broad outlines emerge through this tumultuous history that emerges from the long 20th century into the early part of the 21st century.

The inaugural scene of the Great War

A good story needs good characters. However, the figure of the French soldier has emerged bruised and battered from the history of the French wars of the 20th century. Yves Trotignon has shown how defeat and human tragedies have structured French war story production, far from the great patriotic frescoes of the Americans. These stock features of French portrayals of war are not due to incompetence or personal bias on the part of the directors but stem from the cultural realities engendered by French military history.

European cinema became a mass medium at the same time as the continent was tearing itself apart between 1914 and 1918. In the cinema, as in so many other fields, that conflict constitutes a very specific inaugural scene. Overall, throughout European social and cultural life, the figure of the “poilu”, the conscripted infantryman, gradually became seen as a victim. As the historian Nicolas Beaupré reminds us, this vision called into question the very nature of war, even before the manner of narrating this particular armed conflict could be coloured by the ideological context of the interwar years: “If we are to believe Jay M. Winter, following in the footsteps of Paul Fussell², this was the image that, in Western Europe, by its nature, was the root cause of a profound change, undermining the grand ideas of military glory, of the heroism of the warrior, of honour, courage in battle and self-sacrifice. [...] All these visions of the soldier as pure victim, or as martyr or hero, are insufficient to give a full picture of the complexity of the actual experience of the Front during the Great War³.” They may be insufficient to give a full picture of the complexity of the Great War, but they provide the foundation for most of the representations of the French soldier during the long century that followed - the figure of the hero, then the martyr, gradually eroding

2. P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975.

3. N. Beaupré, « La victimisation des combattants de la Grande Guerre », in S. Schirmann (dir.), *Guerre et Paix. Une destinée européenne ?*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 99-112.

to reveal only the figure of the victim. Beyond the numbers of the dead and the painful return of the wounded, the land itself, the soil of the victorious nation, was bruised for decades to come. Even if the soldier can still be a hero, he will no longer be the hero of a victory that stirs patriotic fervour, but the hero of a tragedy.

However, this eroding process was not immediate. The interwar period was also a time of coexistence between the various types of representation, even if, in the cinema, the figure of the hero was already weakened. It is true that during the twenties and thirties, film-makers had judged that their audiences would have little stomach to see the horrors of the war that had just ended displayed on the big screen⁴. A few major films caused controversy. This was the case of the anti-war film *J'accuse* by Abel Gance in 1919⁵. However, very soon, the figures of French soldiers that continued to appear on the screens were those fighting far away, in conflicts that escaped the burden of this painful memory and that the films could still portray as noble wars, epic adventures, free of the ugliness of Europe's chaos and the hail of lead and fire. Here, the soldier remained a romantic hero, a voyager who could take his place next to the great characters of colonial literature⁶. True, he was leaving French soil, with its deep collective wounds, but his departure was explained mainly by his own individual destiny, his personal dramas and, in particular, his own sentimental disappointments⁷. Exoticism and romanticism won the day over the portrayal of the act of battle and its political dimension.

Also, the link should be made with the resurgence of anti-militarism during the interwar years: this movement was marked by pacifism and the European ideological context, which was polarized by the appearance, in the East, of the dictatorship of the proletariat⁸. These three historic facts, which are neither equivalent nor entirely dependent on one another, generated a unique cultural climate that was conducive to the emergence of the figure of the soldier as victim, resulting in a gradual transposition of the class war into uniform. In the same article, Nicolas Beaupré shows that the French soldier was progressively portrayed less as the victim of the enemy as of the logic of war itself,

4. J. Daniel, *op. cit.*

5. A. Gance, *J'accuse*, 1919, can be viewed at the French national library (BNF).

6. Concerning this «colonial» literature, see in particular J. Frémeaux, «Joseph Peyré, documentaire et légende», in J.-R. Henry and L. Martini (dir), *Littératures et temps colonial. Métamorphoses du regard sur la Méditerranée et l'Afrique*, papers from the conference of Aix-en-Provence on 7 and 8 April 1997/Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, June 1999, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, pp. 281-297; «Expédition de guerre et imaginaire colonial : autour de *L'Escadron blanc*», *Configurations. D'un Orient l'autre*, vol. 1, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1991, pp. 147-154.

7. For example in Jacques Feyder *inn* 1934, *Les Réprouvés* by Jacques Séverac *in* 1937 or *La Bandera* by Julien Duvivier *in* 1935.

8. J.-Ph. Lecomte, «L'antimilitarisme. Proposition de définition», *Les Champs de Mars*, vol. 9, No. 1, 2001, pp. 111-133.

which was triggered and sustained by a class consisting of a combination of military chiefs, political leaders and capitalists. So, the Second World War arrived against a backdrop of cultural—and in particular cinematographic—representations that offered a significant place to the French military, but in contrasting forms. The figure of the soldier as victim was becoming increasingly deeply imbued, while the figure of the military commander was already suspected of a multitude of evils.

■ The French soldier - victim or perpetrator

The notion of military heroism emerged severely damaged after the defeat of 1940 and the Occupation. The “hero of Verdun” was now a fallen marshal, charged with every national shame. After the Liberation, French cinema chose other heroes, who did not wear uniform. The emblematic *La Bataille du Rail* (The Battle of the Rails) by René Clément was released in 1946. During the decades that followed, not a single French film destined for posterity depicts a French soldier in the uniform of 1940 or 1944–1945. Yves Trotignon narrates this great vacuum and the emblematic rise of the characters of the comedy war film series *La Septième Compagnie* (The 7th Company). The success of the first film, *Mais où est donc passée la septième compagnie ?* (Now Where Did the 7th Company Get To?), which was ranked number three at the French box-office for 1973, spawned two sequels: *On a retrouvé la septième compagnie* (The Seventh Company Has Been Found) in 1975 and *La Septième Compagnie au clair de lune* (The Seventh Company Outdoors) in 1977. The many repeat broadcasts of these films on TV anchored in the French public mind a sympathetic but rather contemptible image of the French soldier defeated in 1940, although this image is very far from the realities of war. Defeat, which can be so inspiring under other circumstances, in this case opened the door to a period that was too collectively traumatizing to ever be narrated in epic light.

This painful memory was subsequently compounded by the news of the Algerian war, coming after the collective lapse of national memory with regard to Indochina⁹, with the militant anti-militarism that

9. There is not enough space here to describe France's collective national amnesia when it came to the war in Indochina. In her paper on the subject, (*La Guerre d'Indochine dans le cinéma français, 1945-2010*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2015), Delphine Robic-Díaz studies a body of forty-five films spanning the period from 1945 to 2006. However, only eight of these directly tackle the subject of this war. For all the others, the war is only a backdrop, an allusion or a starting-point for a script that subsequently departs from this event. The films of Claude Bernard-Aubert, who also had experience of the war in Indochina, with *Patrouille de choc* (1957), *Le Facteur s'en va-t-en guerre* (1966) and *Charlie Bravo* (1980) are largely forgotten today, as is *Les Parias de la gloire* (1963) by Henri Decoin. By contrast, *La 317^e Section* (The 317th Platoon), released in 1965 and directed by Pierre Schoendoerffer, has been passed down to posterity: without being very widely known by the younger generations, it continues to enjoy the same very broad critical acclaim that greeted its first release, and it remains well-known to a large audience of cinema-lovers, with an appeal that goes beyond the limited circles of military history enthusiasts and war film fans.

resulted¹⁰: this new wave of anti-militarism combined the memory of the revolutionary anti-militarism of the late 19th century and of the anti-militarism of the interwar years with the specific context of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the revolt against the established moral order with which the military hierarchy was identified.. The duality between victims and “perpetrators” (torturers and executioners) was established and perpetuated during these years. The side of the victims includes the contemporary conscripts, heirs of the “poilus” of the Great War, victims not of an enemy but of the people who decided on the war and led it. On the side of the perpetrators are the professionals of this war, those occupying the higher ranks without any great distinction, the NCOs who were inevitably brutal and the officers who were forcibly cynical. The caricatured films of the seventies, aiming to denouncing the action of the French army in Algeria, have not had any successors, but this duality continues to mark the attempts to recount the French wars of the 20th century. In this context, the work of Pierre Schoendoerffer appears particularly isolated. His characters escape this duality between victim and perpetrator and the arbitrary distinctions between conscripts and professionals, because he reunites with successive European traditions in the representation of heroism, without falling into the self-caricature of the epic patriotic exaltation of the 19th century¹¹.

When Florent Emilio Siri directed *L'Ennemi Intime*, which first appeared on the screens in 2007, to give his account of the Algerian War, he very explicitly claimed the heritage of Schoendoerffer, and this is reflected in the duo formed by the young officer interpreted by Benoît Magimel and the experienced NCO incarnated by Albert Dupontel, echoing the encounter between Lieutenant Torrens (Jacques Perrin) and Willsdorff (Bruno Cremer) in the Indochina of *La 31^e Section*. Nevertheless, Siri does not escape the archetypes of victim and perpetrator. However he does reflect a very pronounced shift that was taking place in French fiction from the 1990s, marked by the decline of militant and politically structured anti-militarism: the perpetrator is no longer a torturer and killer by political choice or by adherence to a collective logic but because he himself is a victim. He is a victim of the chaos of war, rendering him penetrable to all forms of immoral temptation. This type of perpetrator is a traumatized individual who does not accept that he is traumatized.

So, these French directors placed the soldier collectively into this function of victim: this was emblematic of a view of war adopted by

10. J.-Ph. Lecomte, *op. cit.*

11. B. Chéron, *Pierre Schoendoerffer*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2012.

a society that only sees war from a distance and therefore no longer grasps the implications of collective commitment and engagement or the political dimension. This archetype of the victim invaded the entire field of representations, down to the most minor TV film, whenever a soldier or veteran puts in even the most discreet appearance. The series *Plus belle la vie*, broadcast every day at 8 p.m. on France 3 since 2004, has brought the figures of three veterans into its gallery of characters since the series first started. All of them are traumatized. They enlisted because they were unstable, or they are unstable because they had enlisted, and they were now living on the margins of society or had sunk into delinquency. All are victims; all are deprived of the rational, collective and conscious aspect of their enlistment to serve their country.

With this trend, the depoliticization of the subject and the absolute victimization of the soldier deprive French fiction of its ability to provoke thought on the question of the commitment of those who enlist to go to war. The people responsible—or even guilty—for the evils befalling this perpetual victim in French uniform are diluted and increasingly difficult to identify *via* the customary shared political framework known to all of society. How can you carry a critical story if the person wearing uniform is only and inevitably someone suffering from a series of traumas, whose enlistment is deprived of any collective meaning? The poverty of current French pacifist films is also rooted in this reduction of the individual to the level of caricatured psychology, including in the choice to be one of the people who fight the country's wars.

Bringing the two worlds together

For the armed forces, this difficulty of seeing military destinies faithfully told in French fiction is a recurrent observation. The armed forces themselves are often very fearful, dreading any excessively close incursion by directors suspected, rightly or wrongly, of anti-militarism and an ideological agenda. The Algerian War has left enduring traces, to the point that even Pierre Schoendoerffer, when he wanted to tell its history in *L'Honneur d'un Capitaine* (A Captain's Honour) first screened in 1982, was met with considerable reticence and opposition from the military world.

With the passing of time, military chiefs, civilian officials at the Ministry of Defence and some of the bigger names from the world of audio-visual creation have begun to press reset. Like their fellow-citizens, all remain marked by France's long history and memory, but the events of the news also add their strata of contemporary imagery

on the facts of the distant past¹². In particular, the media treatment of external operations has considerably evolved since 2008 and the second part of France's engagement in Afghanistan. The relations of the armed forces with the world of cinema are also part of the broader changes occurring in the military's public communication. The long-standing professionalization of military communication, which was able to adapt to the changes in the media during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of this century, has gradually directed increasing attention to this question of the creation of audio-visual fiction.

On 31 January 2007, Jean-François Bureau, who at the time was Director of the Information and Communication Department of the Ministry of Defence ("DICOD"), brought together four hundred professionals from the worlds of cinema in the Foch amphitheatre of the École Militaire. He announced the launch of the Ministry's new policy of welcoming film crews, expressing regret that: "We have been bumbling amateurs rather than true professionals¹³." Since 2008, the Ministry of Defence, now renamed the Ministry for the Armed Forces, has attended the film market held during the Cannes festival. The Office of Film Hosting Policy ("BAPT"), which had already succeeded the Audio-visual Policy Office ("BPAV"), has not immediately seen its resources greatly increased, but its two members have gained a visibility that, although only relative, is new. Their work still consists in replying to directors who wish to have access to sites owned by the Ministry for use as film sets, but upstream discussions on scripts and projects is gradually earning a new place.

This was clearly the aspect of the bapt's work that Jean-Yves Le Drian aimed to reinforce when he announced in May 2016, with considerable support from the communication department, the launch of a new cinema department, "Mission Cinéma", entrusting its leadership to Olivier-René Veillon, former Director of the Film Committee for the Paris Region, and increasing the department's team from two to four members (including the Director). So, the ambition to influence public perception is now fully assumed by the minister, and the importance he gave to his announcements conferred considerable additional legitimacy on this department within the ministry. Initiatives to engage the world of audio-visual creation increased. Examples include the signature of a convention between the Ministry

12. B. Chéron, *Le Soldat méconnu. Les Français et leurs armées : état des lieux*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2018.

13. « We have been bumbling amateurs rather than true professionals, but our desire to adapt is real and sincere, and we wish to work for the long term with professionals from the world of cinema » (« New policy of the French Defence Ministry for hosting film-makers », Finance et Cinéma [in French], [http : //www.finance-cinema.com/Nouvelle-politique-d-accueil-des-tournages-du-ministere-de-la-defense_a154.html](http://www.finance-cinema.com/Nouvelle-politique-d-accueil-des-tournages-du-ministere-de-la-defense_a154.html))

of the Armed Forces and the French Screenwriters Guild in September 2017, and the discussions held with authors and screenwriters in February 2017 at the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (SACD - Society of Dramatical Authors and Composers)¹⁴.

From then on, the support provided by the Ministry and by the armed forces to certain projects was given widespread media coverage. Although judgements of each of the films supported can legitimately vary, the manner in which they were received by the critics shows that the relations between the cinema and the armed forces are no longer perceived in the same way as before. The suspicion of propaganda now arises only rarely, and, in general, the films are analyzed for themselves as works of cinema. The support of the French Navy was even a widely broadcast promotional argument for the first two films most openly aided by “Mission Cinéma”: *Volontaire* by Hélène Fillières (2018) and *Le Chant du loup* by Antonin Badrey (2019).

Since the era of what sometimes seemed to be an opposition of principle between the two worlds has now passed, other questions can now be asked: why does French fiction not do more and better? Apart from the fact that we must allow time for the two worlds to meet in a new context, other fundamental hypotheses can be suggested. The military world is a universe for the initiated, with very well established visual codes that can arouse the interest of the people working in audio-visual creation. Nevertheless, the narrative elements that structurally appeal to the general public, in particular on television, are those based on suspense of the detective story/thriller type¹⁵. The result has been a large number of films featuring criminal investigations in a military environment, using the military world mainly to set the scene for a thriller, and not to describe military destinies. For example, the TV film *Peur sur la base*, broadcast on France 3 on 3 March 2018, had a large audience (4.27 million viewers, 19% market share), putting the channel in second place that Saturday evening, behind *The Voice* (5.33 million viewers, 26% market share) and ahead of *Le Plus Grand Cabaret du Monde* with Patrick Sébastien (2.47 million viewers, 11.9% market share). However, this success was founded very largely on its detective-story format, where Audrey Fleurot plays Odessa Berken, assistant chief of the Naval Military Police, responsible for investigating a murder on a naval base of the French Navy.

14. «La Mission cinéma du ministère de la Défense, présentation aux auteurs», SACD, fr, 26 April 2017.

15. B. Chéron, «L'expérience militaire dans les médias (2008-2018). Une diversification des formes de récits», *Étude de l'IRSEM* n° 66, 2019. The ratings for TV fiction in France in 2017 shows that the series or TV films having a crime investigation in detective story format as their main narrative were a large majority of the top ten fictions viewed. *Performance of fiction in Europe in 2017 (France, Germany, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom)*, statistical analysis by the French Media Regulatory Authority, CSA, September 2018.)

In fact, this detective format is conducive to maintaining the presentation of the military man or woman in the duality of victim and perpetrator. In the French imagination, which remains marked by the memory of the previous decades, the military criminal is a figure with very effective archetypal features, as is also echoed in the typical treatment of the news items that occasionally feature these rare, but always mentioned, figures of veterans who have fallen into delinquency or crime. In a society that has relegated violence to its margins, the people who possess this very special skill of killing cannot help but arouse narrative curiosity, both in recounting the news and in the narratives of detective fiction. These story-lines are all the more tenacious because they are anchored in older representations of the ex-soldier who has become marginalized and delinquent, which was particularly prevalent in the cinema following the Algerian War¹⁶.

Moreover, the hegemony of American film production and its weight in our collective imaginations imply that the portrayal of military destinies in their ultimate vocation of confrontation with the enemy requires a powerful industry endowed with colossal resources. For some people¹⁷, jealous of the sheer exuberance evidenced in the portrayals of American patriotism, this can arouse the desire to see the emergence of homegrown giant frescoes similar to those produced by our bigger ally. The weight of American influence is therefore multiplied by this sense of frustration. This partly explains the risk evoked by Yves Trotignon of manufacturing “rootless” films, pale copies of the grand American fictions, lacking any real filiation with the French and European history of relations between war and filmed fiction. Nevertheless, French approaches to the representation of military destinies do exist and have given rise to some sensitive works of immense quality, of which *La 317^e Section* is the most emblematic example.

So, the question of the distance to be bridged between the two worlds is crucial, not to ensure that the “Mission Cinéma” department occupies a monopolistic position of influence over French cinema concerning these subjects, or to nurture the emergence of an artificially constructed patriotic cinema, but to make sure that as wide a spectrum as possible of filmed fiction can exist, whether or not with the support of the armed forces and their ministry. A minimum critical mass is required for the emergence of works that are fit to be

16. *L'Insoumis* by Alain Cavalier (1964), *Objectif 500 millions*, by Pierre Schoendoerffer (1966) or *Adieu l'ami* by Jean Vautrin (1968) are just three of the films that narrate the destiny of military veterans who have fallen into the worlds of serious crime and marginalization.

17. This hypothesis is based on the regular recurrence of this comparison *in* interviews conducted over the course of many years with contacts at the Ministry of Defence, which has now been renamed the Ministry of the Armed Forces.

passed down to posterity. The French have for long lived far from the war zones where their military forces are engaged, and that is France's good fortune. The full experience of battle is not transmissible. By contrast, the audience can be given a sense of what those directly confronted with combat go through, and that their destinies cannot simply be reduced to archetypes—even if this means developing the critical sense of the French, who are insufficiently encouraged, during normal times, to reflect on the wars conducted in their name. ┘