From Battle to the Screen: The War Wounded of Cinema & Television

Jack Huston as the combat-veteran turned assassin Richard Harron on HBO’s Boardwalk Empire

The intersection of film, television and war—like Hollywood itself—has scaled the heights of artistic achievement and sunk to the level of exploitative trash. Movies and television dramas dealing with combat have garnered awards, critical accolades, controversy and box-office success and failure alike. Whether successful or not, “war films” now form a well-known genre.

Less explored in film and television, though not entirely ignored, is the idea of what happens to combat veterans after the wars have ended. Yet as early as the 1920s, the silver screen was exploring the complexity of post-combat stress, injury and illness.

In his book, Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War, Anton Kaes draws the direct connection between the groundbreaking artistry of the cinema in Germany’s post war Weimar Republic and the horrors experienced by many of its
brightest directors in the trenches of World War I.

“Many of the references that were readily understood by contemporary audiences are lost on us today,” Kaes wrote. “By examining what the films implied but did articulate, by reading ‘what was never written,’ we may be able to apprehend the forces that generated a cinema of shell shock.”

Classic works such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and Metropolis, though not depicting soldiers in combat, display the signs of war’s aftermath, according to Kaes. Extreme psychological distress is manifested in film as broken story lines and harsh lighting contrasts.

And while the First World War had temporarily capped the ascent of European cinema, Hollywood truly came into its own early in the 20th century.

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930) is known primarily for decrying the futility of war, but it also captures the stunned disbelief of the newly injured and the syndrome known as “shell shock” that would later evolve into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In both its silent and sound versions, the film follows enthusiastic young Germans from indoctrination in their school, through recruit training and into trench warfare against their French enemies. Two characters—Franz Kemmerich, played by Ben Alexander, and Albert Kropp, played by William Bakewell—suffer leg amputations that seem as devastating to their mental state as their physical bodies. Both later succumb to their injuries but not before expressing sorrow for their vanished future plans.

In a thread of the film that would echo in future war films, the character Paul escapes physical dangers in the trenches only to return home on furlough and be assaulted by the hollow jingoism of his hometown friends and family. Ignorant to the brutality Paul and his comrades have faced in battle,
hometown crowd expresses an enthusiasm for the war that is out of place given what the audience has been shown. The most fervent of the crowd is the very same teacher, played by Arnold Lucy, who inspired Paul and his fellow students with the myth of “saving the Fatherland.”

A decade later, America’s great author Ernest Hemingway turned the story of a disabled doughboy into one of the era’s definitive novels, The Sun Also Rises. In 1957, the film version of the classic debuted on the silver screen.

The film featured megastar Tyrone Powers as American ex-pat and disabled war veteran Jake Barnes. Jake’s impotence, caused by an unnamed war injury, leaves him with a crushing introspective depression that he tries to assuage with sport, leisure and involvement in the social scene of the Parisian cafes in the 1920s.

Albert, played by Jerry Irvine, and his horse, Joey, in Steven Spielberg’s War Horse

The barbarity of war and its effect on the bodies and minds of those in the trenches continued to reverberate on the silver screen over the years, including: Johnny Got His Gun (1971), the film adaptation of Dalton Trumbow’s harrowing look at a mute, quadruple amputee’s desperate struggle to die; Pink Floyd: The Wall (1982), the acid rock band’s trippy nightmare featuring a war orphan turned rock star who longs for a father who died in the trenches; Legends of the Fall (1994), with Brad Pitt’s Tristan haunted by his inability to save his
brother from the barbed wire, mustard gas and machine guns; and many more, including Steven Spielberg’s equine-themed tear-jerker War Horse (2011).

Until recently, World War I and its aftermath had not received such deep exploration in television. This ended with two critically acclaimed series featuring the Great War.

In 2010, the British drama Downton Abbey became a huge success with American audiences. With its depiction of the drama at a fictional Yorkshire estate in the second decade of the previous century, the show began its second season in January with some of its characters shipped off to battle in France. While the younger men struggle in battle, the titular abbey becomes a convalescent home for wounded soldiers.

That harsh reality was also brought home by the HBO prohibition-era drama Boardwalk Empire. While the main focus is on the bootlegging mobs of Atlantic City, New York and Chicago, two of the show’s main characters have provided a dramatic look at the harsh realities often faced by combat-injured veterans.

While visiting a veterans hospital in Chicago, the show’s star meets Richard Harrow, played by British actor Jack Huston, the grandson of legendary director John Huston. Harrow’s face had been severely disfigured by a battlefield explosion and he is left with a mask to cover the half of his face that doctors could not repair.

At once a quiet and gentle man with a deep kindness for women and children and a cold and lethal psychopathic assassin, Harrow’s character was meant by the show’s creator, Terrence Winter, to reveal the scarred American conscience during the post war years.

In a recent interview, Huston said the character is “a part of me, who affects me to my core. There is something so affective about how brave and lost he is.”