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COM 491: Senior Seminar

1917: Film Analysis

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May 5, 2020

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War films are a unique genre of cinema that often bring the audience into a taste of difficult history. Modern War movies have often paid tribute to wars in their own respects by glorifying the characters as heroes based on their accomplishments in war. Many audiences are drawn to war films because of the intense action, heroic stories and historical background. In today's world, most of the general public get historical knowledge and information from movies and tv shows that they watch. Therefore, the historical accuracy within these films are incredibly important. As a Communication Arts and History major for the past four years, I have gained a deeper understanding of the importance in how history is communicated. False historical knowledge is dangerous because it can essentially change the true history.

The film, *1917* (2019), directed by Sam Mendes, has set itself apart from any other war movies ever created. If you have not seen the film, I recommend seeing the film before you continue reading the rest of this analysis. *1917* uses a unique cinematic approach of a one-long continuous shot in realtime to portray the experiences of these two young British soldiers in WWI. This filmmaking technique has been done before, but never for the entire film. Within this film, the storyline and characters are all fictitious. They are not representing any actual men who fought during WWI. But the storyline is based around true stories from WWI veterans who were assigned as messengers during the war.

1917 was nominated for many prestigious awards. It won an Oscar for Best Achievement in Cinematography by Roger Deakins, and an Oscar for Best Achievement in Visual Effects by Guillaume Rocheron, Greg Butler, and Dominic Tuohy. This film also won two Golden Globe Awards for Best Motion Picture - Drama and Best Director - Motion Picture for director Sam Mendes. One film critic, Tara Mcnamara wrote in the Common Sense Media, "About 15 minutes

into this movie, it dawns on you that this is something uniquely brilliant; by the end, it's clear that Sam Mendes has made one of the best films of 2019".¹ This highly acclaimed film brought its audience into a new film experience. This film analysis will look at the filmmaker's cinematic approaches and the film's historical accuracy to understand the importance in accurate historical storytelling and why this film has drawn the attention of so many people. The filmmakers of *1917* cinematic use of a one continuous shot supports the film's overall historical accuracy of what it would have been like as a soldier during WWI.

Movie Synopsis

The film follows Lance Corporal Blake, played by Dean-Charles Chapman, and Lance Corporal Schofield, played by George Mackay. They have been given a mission to deliver a message that would stop 1,600 men from walking straight into a deadly trap. The date is April 6th, 1917, which is about one year before the war would actually come to an end. Lance Corporal Blake's brother is one of the men in the other battalion they need to stop. In order to get to the location, they are faced with challenges that draw the attention of the viewers. It is a high stakes mission for both men, with the possibility of death around every corner. And as a viewer, the cinematic style makes you feel like you are there in the midst of every action. They travel through no man's land to the German front, and escape the abandoned booby-trapped German trenches. The stakes are high for Lance Corporal Blake because he wants to save his brother from falling into a deadly battle.

Eventually, Lance Corporal Blake is killed by a crashed German pilot who he tries to save. Lance Corporal Schofield promises his best friend that he will find his brother and deliver the message in time to stop the invasion. Schofield is now on his own and travels through a

¹Tara McNamara, "1917 - Movie Review." Common Sense Media: Ratings, reviews, and advice. Common Sense Media, December 17, 2019.

German held city, passes out from a head injury, meets a young French girl in hiding and travels down a river. Eventually he reaches the battalion that is preparing for the invasion. He is exhausted and defeated and as a viewer you also feel tired from the non-stop danger and action. In the end he realizes that he still has time to stop the invasion. Shoefield runs up into open fire to reach the general as fast as he can to deliver the important message and stop the already in progress invasion. After the invasion is stopped, Shoefield concludes his mission by finding Blake's brother to tell him what happened to Blake. The audience and Shoefield are then relieved with peace that he was able to stop the invasion from happening.

Cinematic Approach

One of the most well-known reasons this film is unique is because of the one-continuous shot technique. There are about 34 different seamless cuts throughout the entire film between scenes. These long takes between cuts are known as "oners". Oners have been accomplished in other films before and even some war movies. But this cinematic approach has never been accomplished for an entire full-length feature war movie, with one oner after another. Dean-Charles Chapman states in one discussion, "We were immersed six months before we even started shooting, We practically was Blake and Shoefield for that whole year!.. In those scenes, I forgot we were making a film. You was just in it and that was it and the thing is these one takes, I think the longest take we did was 9 minutes, as an actor you really do just get lost in it".² Chapman explains his experience as an actor performing these one long takes. They had to become these characters in order to successfully act through these long takes.

² Entertainment Weekly, "'1917' Cast & Creators Discuss Making The Ambitious One-Shot Film | Entertainment Weekly". Filmed Dec. 2019. YouTube video. 2:59. Posted Dec. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldOU2yCTbdE&t=718s>.

When the director of photography, Robert Deacon, was first given the script for the project he thought that Sam Mendes was joking about an entire film being shot as a one-continuous shot. But Deacon explains, “Then I read the script and it was fairly apparent why he wanted to do it. But I didn't want the technical side of it to get in the way of the conversation about what do you want to achieve. What do you want it to feel like? How do you want it to look? That's what you talk about ... not the technicalities. The technicalities can be worked out later”.³ The film's storytelling took priority over all technical techniques of the film. Both Deacon and Mendes knew that this cinematic approach of a one-continuous shot fit the storytelling of the movie. Deacon and Mendes worked closely together in the pre-production stages. Before thinking about how they would accomplish each shot they created a shot list of how they could best tell the story. Robert Deacon emphasized the significance of the film's one-shot technique, “It's not a technique you would use on every film, it's quite specific to this story. It's a very particular story, and Sam had this idea ... this is how we could really bring the audience into the story with the characters”.⁴

Once they were ready to actually film, they were well prepared for how they would accomplish telling this unique story. In one exclusive interview he explains some of his cinematic technique thought process, “Where do you put the camera? How is the action staged? Where do you put the camera? How do you accommodate what that camera does in the set and staging? How does the camera and the characters work together?”.⁵ Robert Deacon is able to

³ Linda Romanello, "1917: OSCAR-WINNING DP ROGER DEAKINS DISCUSSES THE INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO SHOOTING THE WWI DRAMA." Post, November-December 2019, 30+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed May 1, 2020). https://link-gale-com.proxy2.noblenet.org/apps/doc/A611334193/AONE?u=mclin_n_gordon&sid=AONE&xid=f293bb8b.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mashable. “1917 Is ONE CONTINUOUS SHOT — Roger Deakins Explains How He Did It | Exclusive Interview” Filmed Dec. 2019. YouTube video. 2:59. Posted Dec. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q10YCBRKM9U>.

move the camera along with the characters. Always moving the camera forward, never back. Robert Deacon needed to pay attention to every detail. In another one of his interviews, he also expressed the importance of planning and timing. The sets needed to be just the right length for the whole scene. There were also many days that the lighting needed to be just right in order to shoot the scene. Cloud covering was required for every outdoor scene, so there was a lot of waiting around for the right weather to film.

Editing this film may have been one of the biggest challenges for the film. Usually, the editing takes place after all production has already been shot. But editor, Lee Smith, began working on the project in the pre-production stage. Similar to Deacon, Smith laughed when Mendes sent him the script and he first saw that the film was to be done in one continuous shot. During production, he was on set every day, making sample cuts from the takes they did that day. The transitions between scenes needed to be edited perfectly. They had no option but to choose the right takes as the production was being filmed. The only way they were able to accomplish this one continuous shot technique was by editing the scenes as the film was being produced.

Lee Smith explains, “Cause each day was informing the next day’s photography... if you didn't pick the right take, the next day could be screwed effectively by matching into the previous days shoots. So it was an enormous amount of pressure while we were shooting to be 100 percent sure that everything we were choosing was the correct take. Normally you would do that in post-production... So the pressure on a daily basis was much more than what I would normally experience... you either get it right or you're dead”.⁶ The cuts between scenes within this film were seamless. Filming began on April 1st, 2019 and continued through June 2019, the

⁶ HeyUGuys, “1917 World Premiere - Editor Lee Smith explains the 'one shot' feel of Sam Mendes' film”. Filmed Dec. 2019. YouTube video. 4:11. Posted Dec. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84P_lkisonw. (0:46-3:10).

film premiered on December 4th, 2019 at the Royal Film Performance in London. And the film was released in theaters on December 25th, 2019.

Historical Accuracy

Historical accuracy in war films are essential. Most people get their history facts and information from historically based movies and shows. *1917* has some fact and some fiction. Some historical movies and shows want to retell the stories as they happened, while others want to show an accurate portrayal of the time and event. Films can still be historically accurate even if they contain some fictitious characteristics, as long as the representations are true. The characters and plot in *1917* are fictional but based on true stories. However, the sets and details of the film are historically accurate. Factual portrayals within these films are imperative.

For *1917*, Mendes hired historical advisor Andrew Robertshaw and a senior military technical advisor Paul Biddiss for the film. Andrew Robertshaw is an English military historian, curator, author and educator who has worked on various other films including *War Horse* (2011) and *Wonder Woman* (2017). Paul Biddiss is a Military adviser and former British paratrooper who has worked on other films such as *Fury* (2015) and *Mission Impossible 5* (2015). Although these men are the lesser known men behind the scenes, they had very important roles throughout the making of the film. They needed to ensure that every detail was historically accurate. From costumes, to extras and all the sets, it all had to look real. They also would advise Mendes on elements throughout the story that would support the historical accuracy of WWI.

Historically based films will often create new characters and plots influenced by true stories. Filmmakers and writers do this to make the stories more engaging for the audience and as a way to truthfully portray history without mis-representing the life and stories of an actual person. The story and characters from *1917* were heavily based on Sam Mendes Grandfather,

Alfred H. Mendez, who worked as a messenger during WWI. Sam Mendes remembers his grandfather's stories being told to him when he was younger. Mendes explains, "I won't go into specific detail about what things in the movie were specifically influenced by what he told, but there are several. The characters George MacKay and Dean-Charles Chapman play are not my grandfather. But the spirit of what he told me and the central idea of a man carrying a message wouldn't leave me. It just clung on in there somehow, for the last 50 years".⁷ Sam Mendes takes the knowledge and stories that he had to create something brilliant.

Although the characters and plot are fictitious, the sets and many of the discussions and activities between the soldiers are historically accurate. Soldiers would often be stationed all along the trenches just waiting for action. Soldiers would also drink, write letters and play games while waiting. In the film, as the camera follows Blake and Schoefield through the trenches you see men in the waiting. Many soldiers during the war would also receive medals as awards, Blake and Schoefield have a conversation about possibly receiving a medal for the journey. The set portrayal of the trenches, no man's land, the abandoned farm and the war-torn city are all historically accurate. During WWI the trenches were in terrible conditions and no man's land would have been filled with deep, water-filled craters and dead bodies. The abandoned farm with the dead cattle is also something that would be commonly seen during WWI.

The date of the mission in the film, April 6th, 1917 was a key date during the actual war. On April 5th, 1917, the Imperial German Army completed its withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the new main defensive line in the Western Front. When they retreated, they destroyed everything they left behind so that the British would not gain any resources. They destroyed weapons, killed cattle and cut down fruit trees which were all shown in the film *1917*. The film is

⁷ Screen Rant."1917 Movie: Truth Versus Fiction". YouTube video. 10:02. Posted Jan. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SE5Tpv6M13o>. (2:50-3:10).

also believed to be heavily influenced by the Battle of Poelcappelle due to the misleading information which led to confusion on which date they would attack. This is very similar to the mislead information in *1917* which initiated Blake and Shoefields mission.

Comparisons

Many other historical films, similarly, create a new plot and characters that are influenced by factual events and stories. While others attempt to portray factual stories and plots from history as a historical re-enactment. I also watched *Midway* (2019) and *Dunkirk* (2017) to compare the cinematic approaches and historical accuracy within these films. *Dunkirk* (2017), directed by Christopher Nolan, depicts the Dunkirk evacuation of World War II. This film takes a similar approach as *1917*, by creating a fictional storyline and characters that are influenced by true stories and characters from that specific event. *Midway* (2019) directed by Roland Emmerich, takes the opposite approach and follows a factual storyline and characters from Pearl Harbor, Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway.

Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* takes a unique perspective on the events that happened during the Battle of Dunkirk in May 1940. The focus of this entire film is mainly on that overall picture and the actions that are taking place. They follow a few different characters throughout the film that you never fully connect with as a viewer. Nolan wanted to focus on the actual events that took place during the Battle of Dunkirk whether it was on land, in the sea and in the air. The characters are not based on real life people from the Battle, but they are based on actual events that took place during the Battle. And the smaller character driven storylines were fictitious, the overall plot of the film is historically accurate. Smith Lee was the editor for both *Dunkirk* and *1917*. I found that *Dunkirk*, similarly to *1917*, takes their own unique style of

storytelling to accurately portray a historical time period that would also draw the attention of its audience.

Midway follows a few different men that were involved, including Dick Best, Edwin Layton, Wade McClusky, Jimmy Doolittle and Admiral Chester Nimitz, but does leave out Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, who was the actual tactical commander in both the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway. This film puts more of the focus on the actual characters and people who helped the Battle of Midway be a successful victory from the intelligence of the operations, to the lead commanders and the men on the frontlines. One article from the Smithsonian explains, “Orr [Laura Lawfer Orr, a historian at the Hampton Roads Naval Museum in Norfolk, Virginia] says she hopes *Midway* the movie reveals the “personal side” of the battle. “History is written from the top down,” she explains, “and so you see the stories of Admiral Nimitz, [Frank Jack] Fletcher and Spruance, but you don’t always see the stories of the men themselves, the pilots and the rear seat gunners who are doing the work”.⁸ Overall the film is historically accurate and accomplishes honoring the men that were portrayed in the film from the Battle of Midway. Unlike *Dunkirk* and *1917*, I did not find that the cinematic style of this film in any way helped the historical accuracy of this film.

Conclusion

In conclusion the filmmaker’s cinematic approach, within *1917*, of a one continuous shot supported the film’s historical portrayals of what life would have been like as a soldier surviving in the trenches during WWI. Despite having a fictional plot and characters, the film creates a distinguishable portrayal of WWI. The storyline and the cinematic approach drives the story along and brings the audience into a new film experience. From my point of view, Sam Mendes

⁸ Meilan Solly, “The True Story of the Battle of Midway.” Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, November 8, 2019. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-battle-midway-180973516/>.

does an excellent job in portraying the truth about WWI. He is still able to use true historical accounts to accurately show what life was like for a soldier. The characters of Blake and Schofield were able to represent how most men during WWI would have acted or reacted in each scene, the historical advisors did their jobs well and Sam Mendes accomplished one of the best films of 2019.

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