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The Doomed Adventure:
Narratives of Disillusion in Post-World War I American Cinema

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B.F.A., New York University, 2005

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

The Doomed Adventure:
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By John Malahy

This thesis examines the effect of World War I on Hollywood film narratives in the late 1910s and 1920s. I identify the "doomed adventure" as a manifestation within film stories of postwar societal disillusion in America, in which a protagonist's once-promising journey becomes overwhelmed by tragic circumstance, leading to that character's disenchantment with the adventure. I argue that this narrative model is reflective of the popular understanding of the war by American soldiers and civilians after the conflict; moreover, it appears across a variety of film genres and regardless of authorial intent.

My analysis includes symptomatic readings of three films from different genres: King Vidor's war epic *The Big Parade* (1925); Cecil B. DeMille's drama of sex and class, *Male and Female* (1919); and Charlie Chaplin's tragicomedy *The Gold Rush* (1925). Both within and without the context of World War I combat, the essential spirit of the war is recalled through various forms of disillusion. Vidor's film links the war's doomed adventure narrative to the war film genre through its main character's experiences as a soldier. DeMille's upper-class heroine comes to question the ethics of English class divisions that hinder potential romantic pursuits. Despite his eternal optimism, Chaplin's Tramp finds himself hungry and desperate enough to make a meal of his own shoe. In each of these examples, the main character is not necessarily physically doomed, but his or her glorious adventure ultimately proves illusory.

Many analyses of 1920s American cinema have been written, but few of them consider the war's effects on film narrative; they instead choose to focus on its economic impact on the industry. A symptomatic reading of postwar Hollywood film reveals an underlying anxiety that funs afoul of the popular image of the "roaring twenties," and of a film industry whose formative years align with those of the "war to end all wars."

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INTRODUCTION

The American cinema was king after World War I. The 1914-1918 conflict had practically eliminated European industrial output and left the United States—a late participant and physically isolated from battle—the undisputed world economic leader. This prosperity extended to film production, which in Hollywood had developed into a standardized studio system during the war years.[1] Yet despite the war's monumental economic impact, the historical consensus holds that Hollywood films roundly ignored the war, and more specifically, that producers considered the subject unviable as commercial entertainment until MGM's production of *The Big Parade* in 1925 proved otherwise.

This thesis argues that World War I did in fact appear in Hollywood film in the postwar years, not only in subject matter but also in theme. Though the war had many meanings for its various participants, as historians like David Kennedy have pointed out, I argue that its primary significance was as a disillusioning event. Furthermore, this disillusion was transplanted to Hollywood film stories in the postwar years. I call the resulting narrative model the "doomed adventure," wherein a character sets out on a promising journey but becomes overwhelmed by unanticipated consequences of that journey. He or she concludes that the adventure was not worth the risk originally taken. America won the war, but final victory made the preceding warfare no less terrible; doomed adventure film narratives may likewise end in a positive situation for the character, but the adventure itself contains an essential element of disillusion.

Robert Sklar warns, "To speculate about the cultural messages of movies en

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[1] See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 9.

masse is to display one's skill at fantasy, philosophy or metaphor."[2] Sklar writes of the influence of films on the society that views them, or "the movies' place as instruments of social transformation";[3] my assumptions about the relationship between films and a society could more accurately be described in the reverse, that films are symptomatic of their time. Moreover, this paper does not attempt to judge postwar cinema *en masse*, but to select a few seemingly disparate examples of postwar American film and suggest that they in fact share a common preoccupation of disillusion, which ultimately can be derived from America's experience in the war. To this end, I have selected three films from different genres that display similar narrative patterns: King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925), Cecil B. DeMille's *Male and Female* (1919), and Charles Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925). These films are traditionally analyzed from an auteurist perspective; I will discuss other contemporaneous works by these same directors when appropriate links can be drawn between their oeuvres and the war, but my focus will remain on the narrative commonalities of these three specific films regardless of authorial intent.

My approach is foremost a study of film narrative rather than visual style, though I occasionally discuss visually expressive moments within the films; the tramp's lonely cabin in *The Gold Rush* is one such example, as is the enormous cavern archway that divides the first and second acts of *Male and Female*. My symptomatic reading of these films is an approach that has not been applied to Hollywood film in the post-World War I era. David Bordwell describes a symptomatic reading as the interpretation of meaning

[2] Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 87.
[3] Ibid., 88.

that lies "outside the conscious control of the individual who produces;"[4] this can also be called "repressed meaning" and is necessarily opposed to auteurism as originally conceived by Andrew Sarris and others in the 1960s.[5] To identify "involuntary symptomatic expression" in, say, *The Gold Rush*, is not to discount Chaplin's abilities as an artist or comedian, or even as a film producer, but to acknowledge that his films were not made in a cultural vacuum.[6] New Hollywood filmmaking of the Vietnam War and Watergate eras, for example, is often reflective of societal paranoia and skepticism of the establishment; the plot of Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) is discussed in reference to the post-9/11 Patriot Act.[7] If World War I ushered in the "modern era" of American life, then postwar film narrative—the nation's most popular form of mass entertainment in those years—should bear the scars of that violent transition. Certainly *Male and Female* can be read simply as a questioning of traditional morality and class structure indicative of postwar liberal attitudes, but a closer look at the film reveals that these attitudes are forged by a disillusioning event that shakes the main character to her core; it reverts her literally to a primitive state. The traditional approach to the film as a DeMille "sex comedy" or a mere adventure tale misses the inherent narrative connection to the terrible world event that made the attitudes in the film possible. My thesis seeks to remedy this shortsightedness.

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[4] David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 72.
[5] Ibid., 78.
[6] Ibid., 82.
[7] See Sharon Willis, "2002: Movies and Melancholy," in *American Cinema of the 2000s*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, 61-82 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 67-70.

Postwar America: 1918 to 1929

Historian Susan Currell writes of the "distinctive boundaries" of the Armistice in November 1918 and the Wall Street crash in October of 1929, which together demarcate the postwar decade in America. She describes the tension between prewar and postwar America, between progress and tradition—the progressivism of Wilson and the "normalcy" of Harding—as "a central paradox underlying American history and culture."[8] In grander terms, the 1920s constitute the "Jazz Age" that "marked the birth of modern America."[9] Popular attitudes about art changed in this "modern" era, as reflected in Lea Jacobs' *The Decline of Sentiment*, a study of the developments in critical and popular taste after the war. She contends that American filmmakers in the 1920s faced a "rejection of sentimentality" from their audience.[10] Lucy Fischer gives a brief summation of the period in her introduction to *American Cinema of the 1920s*, but like other film historians she mainly considers the economic impact of the war on the American cinema rather than that conflict's possible influence on the shape of film narrative.[11]

American silent film art seems to have distinctive boundaries; David Bordwell argues that Hollywood film production reached a point of industry standardization by 1917;[12] between 1927 and 1929 the studios and their theaters made the transition to sound. Richard Koszarski's volume in the History of the American Cinema series argues that the period is characterized by its "peculiar exhibition conditions" and thus covers

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[8] Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.
[9] Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), 3.
[10] Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), ix.
[11] Lucy Fischer, "Introduction: Movies in the 1920s," in *American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 1-22 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1-22.
[12] Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 9.

1915 to 1928.[13] William Everson begins his study of the silent era by writing that American film history can be conveniently separated into "ten-year dynasties," each beginning on a year ending in nine; thus 1919 saw "big business… transformed into giant industry" and 1929 ushered in "a whole new grammar of film."[14] This technological revolution places certain obvious "doomed adventure" narratives beyond the reasonable scope of this paper. Universal's sound film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), for example, went into production in early November of 1929, only days after the stock market crash, and therefore arguably belongs to different cultural and cinematic eras in America.[15] Significantly, these two major shifts at the end of the 1920s rendered both the materialistic excess of the Jazz Age and the art of silent film doomed adventures of their own. Everson writes that at the end of the 1920s, "a glorious kind of fatalism" pervaded Hollywood. "The films were being produced only for the moment; in a year or two, they would be dead for all time."[16]

Scholarly Models

Two texts stand as models for my approach. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* links the experience of British soldiers on the western front to changes in public language, literature and poetry after the war. Central to his argument is a new emergence

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[13] Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928,* History of the American Cinema (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), ix-x.
[14] William Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-4.
[15] For *All Quiet* production dates, see Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War* (London: Routledge, 1997), 44. To say that the events of October 29, 1929 began a new era in American life is potentially problematic. Historian Nathan Miller writes, "The word 'crash' has misled later generations. There was no overnight plunge from glittering prosperity to a grim world of closed factories, shuttered shops, and breadlines. The onset of the Depression was more like the slow leak in an automobile tire than a sudden blowout." See *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 373.
[16] Everson, 335.

of irony in postwar writing, the catalyst of which was the war's "embarrassment to the Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress."[17] The postwar literary scene, revered today as the birth of modernism, would have been unthinkable without the enlarged sense of irony introduced by the war and the accompanying disillusion which brought out a new style of writing by a new generation. Fussell describes prewar literature:

> There was no *Waste Land*, with its rats' alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness. There was no *Ulysses*, no *Mauberley*, no *Cantos*, no Kafka, no Proust, no Waugh, no Auden, no Huxley, no Cummings, no *Women in Love* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. There was no "Valley of Ashes" in *The Great Gatsby*. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language.[18]

He later connects the experience of the war to literary tropes, noting for example that the experience of sunrise and sunset became removed from their romantic era associations of moral beauty, as explained in Ruskin's influential *Modern Painters*: "The effects of the sky, he says, are 'intended' by their 'Maker and Doer' for our pleasure as well as for our moral instruction. The sky speaks universally to the human heart, 'soothing it and purifying it from its dross and dust.' "[19] After four years of anxiety-fueled "stand-to's" at dawn and dusk in the trenches, sunrise and sunset took on new meaning for returning soldiers. Fussell later quotes a poem by novelist George Eliot, which utilized "the new, modern associations of dawn: cold, the death of multitudes, insensate marching in files, battle, and corpses too shallowly interred."[20]

For an example from film studies, Alexander Nemerov's *Icons of Grief* examines

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[17] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.
[18] Ibid., 23.
[19] Ibid., 53. Originally published in five volumes between 1843 and 1860, *Modern Painters* was hugely influential in Victorian literature and would have been known to British soldiers in World War I.
[20] Ibid., 63.

the work of film producer Val Lewton, arguing that mute or grief-stricken characters in films such as *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) are evidence of cultural mourning during and after World War II. Lewton did not make films depicting the war, but rather within the fantasy-horror genre. While Nemerov does not find Lewton's work particularly horrific, he writes that it is nonetheless reflective of society's interest in the magical and in its contemporaneous preoccupation with death. Lewton's iconography is the "repeated imagery of immobilized figures... standing statuesque and alone."[21] They appear in just a "fraction" of the running time but "they are granted an extraordinary visual intensity that makes them stand out" as figures of "social and psychological deprivation, figures even of death itself."[22]

These films directly suggest the presence of death but are only abstractly related to the war, and Nemerov links them to the homefront rather than the battlefield; the icons represent a "wartime sense of sadness and trauma."[23] He describes a scene from *The Curse of the Cat People* in which the little girl Amy (Ann Carter) hears an eerie call from offscreen. Nemerov concludes, "In the film's setting of Tarrytown, New York… not even a whisper of the war could be heard, and the whole point of the story was to afford an escape from bloodshed. Yet this scene acknowledges the ghosts offscreen, and we hear them through our emissary, the only one who can sense them, the little girl."[24] American civilians were physically insulated from battles overseas, and their daily lives were little affected; James Agee wrote at the time, "our great majority will emerge from the war

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[21] Alexander Nemerov, *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Home Front Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.
[22] Ibid., 3.
[23] Ibid., 5.
[24] Ibid., 48.

almost as if it had never taken place."[25] The homefront was probably affected even less during World War I, if only because America's entrance into the earlier conflict was not precipitated by a unifying tragedy like the attack on Pearl Harbor. As depicted at the end of *The Big Parade*, the soldier returns home to a family that, while sympathetic, experienced none of the war's physical or psychological trauma. He eventually returns to the French peasant girl with whom he had fallen in love and who had likewise experienced the horrors of war.

Like *Icons of Grief*, this thesis suggests that sentiments surrounding a major world event may have a causal relationship to later film content, and it expands upon Fussell's argument to suggest that World World I had a lingering effect on American film screens in addition to the nation's literature and politics. Nemerov, writing in 2005, suggests that Lewton's films are now clearly "artifacts of the past" and that their "most resonant and powerful" elements are "only just now starting to become fully visible."[26] Nearly a hundred years have passed since the signing of the Armistice, but perhaps after a century of similar artistic reactions to national trauma, post-World War I American film is ready for reinterpretation.

Adventure vs. Action

In his genre study *The Romance of Adventure*, Brian Taves describes the standard adventure film as "one of the most enduring and mythically significant American film genres."[27] Narrowing the genre to historical adventure in the vein of *Robin Hood* (1922)

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[25] Quoted in Nemerov, 31.
[26] Nemerov, 10.
[27] Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), xi.

or *Captain Blood* (1935),[28] he writes, "The cinema's adventurer is impelled by an idealistic worldview and a belief in patriotism, chivalry, and honor. A political consciousness underlies all of these activities."[29] *Robin Hood* in particular depicts "the valiant fight for freedom and a just form of government, set in exotic locales and the historical past."[30] Taves' emphasis on political motivations and the "fight for freedom" seems to speak directly to the American war narrative. A decision to serve one's country is implicit in the act of enlistment, and young men in 1917 could not have escaped patriotic rhetoric urging them to fight in order to, in the words of Wilson, "make the world safe for democracy." Further, the enlistment process parallels the doomed adventure narrative's central character who surrenders his agency to journey overseas for a potentially rewarding experience.

Taves acknowledges the slipperiness of the term "adventure." As a genre, it is necessarily limited to the historical adventure film described above. But as a descriptive or "amorphous" term, adventure simply connotes "action," which Taves defines as "a male-oriented approach dependent on physical movement, violence, and suspense, with often perfunctory motivation and romance."[31] When not referring to the historical adventure genre, Taves prefers to use the term "action" because it can exist within multiple genres: "westerns, war, aviation, science fiction, ancient world-biblical, martial arts, spy, and all types of crime films."[32] Taves does not go so far as to argue for action as a genre, however; it remains a descriptive term.

World War I is a doomed adventure because its scenes of action—violent trench

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[28] Ibid., xii.
[29] Ibid., xi.
[30] Ibid., 4.
[31] Ibid., 5.
[32] Ibid., 5.

warfare—constitute a disillusioning event for soldiers who experienced them. However, the lay citizenry also was disillusioned by the war without ever having seen the trenches or experienced machine gun fire firsthand. Similarly, sequences of "action" are not required in doomed adventure narratives so long as a disillusioning event is suggested through a film's narration. In other words, though the doomed adventure stems from an action narrative—World War I—the phrase refers not to action, per se, but to a character's transition from a state of illusion to one of disillusion. Because of this, "doomed adventure" is divorced from particular generic tropes and cannot neither be made a genre nor taken as a suggestion of action cinema.

Incidentally, the films analyzed in this thesis do each contain at least one action sequence. *The Big Parade* is an archetypal war film with obligatory scenes of combat; the hero is disillusioned when he learns that modern war is the scene not of glory but of random killing. *Male and Female* contains a dramatic shipwreck sequence that separates the heroine's old world from the new; cut off from arbitrary English class divisions, she learns her place in the natural order of things. The disillusioning event in *The Gold Rush* takes place before the film begins. Men like the Lone Prospector have come to the Klondike in the hopes of gaining a fortune, but instead they face brutal weather and have little chance of finding gold. Scenes of real action are rare; in the case of the cabin that teeters on the edge of a cliff, it does not spark the protagonist's disillusion so much as represent, according to Walter Kerr, the climactic convergence of "comedy and death" between which the film oscillates throughout its plot.[33] This convergence is reflective of genre hybridity that occurs in these films. Chaplin's film is a tragic comedy, DeMille's film is a sex comedy-turned-island adventure, and Vidor's war film follows a distinct

[33] Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 251.

romantic arc in addition to its training and combat narrative.

Taves argues, "In action films a hero succeeds by facing death, courageously overcoming dangers and adversaries."[34] Such a definition may apply to a film like the pro-war *Sergeant York* (1941), but the characters I will discuss do not overcome their obstacles unscathed, but rather scarred by disillusion. Their experiences may contain elements of action, but the term "adventure" is more proper because it suggests the possibility of either positive or negative conclusions. The war itself is perhaps best described as an adventure for enlistees because it includes a journey to a foreign land and the possibility of heroism. The words of a popular song from the time promised, but obviously could not guarantee, American victory:

> Over there, over there,
> Send the word, send the word over there
> That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming
> The drums rum-tumming everywhere.
> So prepare, say a prayer,
> Send the word, send the word to beware.
> We'll be over, we're coming over,
> And we won't come back till it's over, over there.[35]

The protagonists of *Male and Female* and *The Gold Rush* both have a positive conception of "over there"—the beautiful tropical island, the gold of the Klondike—but like soldiers at the front, these characters' promised glory does not necessarily come to pass.

Doomed Adventure: Definition and Examples

Ultimately, a more precise definition of "doomed adventure" is required: a character decides to leave home for unfamiliar territory and finds him or herself unprepared for the challenges that he or she faces, thereby developing a negative attitude about the once

[34] Taves, 5.
[35] Lyrics by George M. Cohan (1917).

promising adventure. The character is not necessarily physically doomed—all my chosen protagonists survive at the end of their films—but his or her outlook on the world has been dramatically altered.

This narrative outline reflects the general American relationship to World War I. The country entered voluntarily, but even after winning a decisive victory the American population considered the overall effort largely wasteful. Progressive politicians who had clamored for war in 1917 were dealt massive electoral defeats in 1918 and 1920, and the country entered a new era of isolationism and economic deregulation. For the purposes of this study, the cultural effects of the war can be divided into sociopolitical and personal categories. Wilson's declaration of war before Congress stated that the official objective was, "to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles."[36] This is lofty rhetoric, but America's real interests were to end German aggression against American ships and to bolster its British ally.[37] After the war America's "return to normalcy" included the abandonment of Wilson's own League of Nations, which would have institutionalized "concert of purpose and of action" among the world's nations. Without America's participation, the League was soon rendered ineffectual and the war's larger sociopolitical legacy became one of Progressive failure.[38] Concerning the personal, a change in attitude regarding individual soldiers also

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[36] Woodrow Wilson, "Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany." Speech, April 2, 1917. http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=61.
[37] See, for example, Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 50-56.
[38] See Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 280-281.

took place during World War I. Progressives pushed for veteran rehabilitation and prosthetic technology in lieu of the costly pension system that had been in place since the Civil War. The soldier's body was considered resilient and recuperative, reflecting the Meliorist spirit of social betterment.[39]

The film examples I use speak to both sociopolitical and personal concerns. Chapter 1 makes a direct connection between American cinema and the war. I have chosen to discuss Vidor's *The Big Parade* because despite its somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the war it was the first major Hollywood studio production to depict the story of an average soldier, and the film was one of the silent era's biggest popular successes. Lea Jacobs discusses the film in relation to the 1926 film adaptation of *What Price Glory?*—veteran Lawrence Stallings worked on both scripts—but the Raoul Walsh film is primarily a story of romantic rivalry, not a doomed adventure narrative, and it came on the heels of both the original hit Broadway play from 1924 and *The Big Parade* itself and was therefore less of a box office gamble.[40] Similarly, a film like *Wings* (1927) is arguably more of an aviation spectacle that responded to America's fascination with flight in the mid-1920s, a la Charles Lindbergh.[41] *All Quiet on the Western Front* is perhaps the most famous World War I combat film, but as described above, it falls outside the time frame of this study.

The main character of *The Big Parade*, played by John Gilbert, is an upper-class young man who signs up for the war in a fit of patriotic fervor. He experiences loss and dismay in war, loses a leg after sustaining injuries, and returns home to find that his "girl

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[39] See Beth Linker, *War's Waste* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 10-34.
[40] See Lea Jacobs, 127-179.
[41] See Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 180.

back home" has fallen in love with his brother while he was away. Though the film is also a love story, and ends on an uplifting note of romantic resolution, it nonetheless shows that the personal World War I narrative—one of the first to grace American screens—is one of severe disappointment.

Moving beyond the war as subject matter, Chapter 2 looks at *Male and Female* within the context of DeMille's "sex comedy" period and considers his own personal relationship to the war. The film's main character, upper class Mary (Gloria Swanson), finds herself shipwrecked on a deserted island where normal social relations break down. Her butler Crichton (Thomas Meighan), thanks to his knowledge of how to efficiently maintain order and productivity, assumes the role of "king" and she becomes enslaved to him. In the end, she is able to return to her English home and lifestyle, but her worldview has been shaken by this unforeseen disturbance of the assumed social hierarchy. It could be argued that Crichton is equally the film's protagonist, though his own journey and disillusion lacks the profundity of Mary's doomed social adventure.

Several of DeMille's other films in the postwar decade explore modern marriage and divorce; one could also consider the Erich von Stroheim dramas *Blind Husbands* (1919) and *Foolish Wives* (1922) to be a part of this discussion. But *Male and Female* moves beyond the scope of these films to locate the doomed adventure within the arbitrary social construct of British class structure. Moreover, it does so in parallel with the war narrative: a literal journey to the island—another "over there"—concludes with the breakdown of traditional social rules within this strange, primal environment.

Lawlessness and primal behavior also characterizes *The Gold Rush*, which I examine in Chapter 3. The purpose here is to locate the doomed adventure within a genre

potentially antithetical to the war story, and in a film over which the director had total artistic control. The hero—Chaplin's iconic tramp—is in the Klondike presumably to make his fortune. To both pathetic and hilarious ends, the he finds himself starving in a forlorn cabin, where social civility dissolves, almost to the point of cannibalism. Unlike other travel and adventure comedies of the 1920s, such as Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923) or *The General* (1926),[42] the film's journey to a lawless environment parallels the war narrative with uncanny precision.

The originality of this thesis lies in its cross-generic analysis of symptomatic meaning related to World War I. There are have been similar studies of other time periods in American film history—the most direct parallel being "New Hollywood" films made during the era of Vietnam and Watergate—but the existing research on Hollywood film after World War I overlooks what I see as fertile ground for symptomatic analysis. By looking at the doomed adventure narrative, I begin the process of understanding how "the war to end all wars" affected the American cinema during some of the medium's most impressionable years.

[42] Codirected by John G. Blystone and Clyde Bruckman, respectively.

CHAPTER ONE
Vidor's *The Big Parade*: Doomed Adventure on the Battlefield

The doomed adventure narrative is derived from the war's narrative, and the obvious place to connect the war to cinema in the 1920s is the war film genre. Therefore this thesis uses King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925) as its first cinematic example. Viewed in its historical context, *The Big Parade* is a response to both American wartime propaganda and to the dearth of war discourse in Hollywood films in the intervening years. This historical progression calls for a brief timeline to track the various cinematic incarnations of the war. A classic film about an American soldier's experience in France and its conflict with his civilian life, *The Big Parade* parallels a common understanding of World War I as a disillusioning event that was first touted as "the war to end all wars" but instead wound up halting the Progressive achievements of the 1910s. I argue that the war can be understood as part of the rise and fall of progressive politics in the early twentieth century; the opening section of this chapter deals with this doomed political adventure.

It was not necessarily a shift in popular taste in 1925 that caused *The Big Parade* to be such a success—it is one of the highest grossing of all silent films—but as Michael Isenberg writes, "The basic appeal of *The Big Parade* was adventure and romance. None of its ingredients were new; they were only packaged differently."[43] The film did well precisely because its narrative did not break new ground. The framework of modern war was new for film in 1925, but the story is essentially a combination of a traditional romance and a young man's coming-of-age tale. If box office grosses are indicative of

[43] Isenberg, "Chapter 6. The Great War Viewed from the 1920s: *The Big Parade*," in *Why We Fight: American's Wars in Film and History*, edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, 137-155 (Lexington, Kent.: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 149.

popular acceptance, then the soldier's disillusion with the war was a phenomenon accepted by American audiences who, thanks to the film's romantic and action elements, welcomed its use as a major narrative in Hollywood entertainment.

World War I within the Progressive Narrative

The World War I experience in America is not limited to the act of fighting. Its larger narrative arc arguably contains the rise and fall of Progressivism, a movement issuing from the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s and bolstered politically in 1896 with the election of William McKinley and in 1912 with the competing electoral hopes of progressives Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Eldon Eisenach cites the presidency of Abraham Lincoln as the traditional rallying point for modern progressive thought, offering a number of examples of Lincoln's influence including *New Republic* co-founder Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909).[44] Croly argues that not only was abolitionism an attempt to improve society and form a more democratic country, Lincoln's "house divided" rhetoric also spoke to the Progressive nationalist ideal;[45] that is, an integrated and interconnected citizenry that could come together for common projects.[46] The ultimate goals of the Progressives were "political, social and economic reforms that would create common bonds of democratic citizenship."[47]

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[44] Eldon Eisenach, "A Preface to Progressivism," in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, edited by Eldon J. Eisenach, 1-2 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 1.
[45] Herbert Croly, "On Lincoln," in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, edited by Eldon J. Eisenach, 4-9 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 7.
[46] Eldon Eisenach, "A Democratic People with Common National Goals," in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, edited by Eldon J. Eisenach, 18-19 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 18.
[47] Ibid., 18.

The war provided the ultimate ironic event for progressivism. Historian Michael McGerr writes, "World War I brought the extraordinary culmination of the progressive movement," and later, "the Wilsonian war effort became the death knell for the progressive movement."[48] The final nails in the coffin were Congress's declination to join Wilson's League of Nations and the victory of Republican Warren G. Harding's "normalcy" policy in the 1920 presidential election. If Wilson's stated objective in requesting a war resolution was to "make the world safe for democracy," the rejection of his ultimate mechanism of world peace by Congress provided a sting to the already bitter end of the whole progressive affair.[49]

The Progressive Party Platform of 1912 briefly addresses National Defense, noting that the party officially "deplores" warfare.[50] But by 1917, both 1912 Progressive nominee Roosevelt and the re-elected Democrat President Wilson were advocating for American intervention. John Dewey was a contributor to *The New Republic*—a periodical supportive of Wilson—and helped push progressives towards a pro-war stance. Historian David Kennedy explains:

> Dewey wrote in August 1917 that he harbored a "vague but genuine vision of a world somehow made permanently different by our participation in a task which taken by itself is intensely disliked … But it is ridiculous," he stressed, "to say that [progressive goals] are mere idealistic glosses, sugar-coatings of the bitter pill of war. They present genuine possibilities, objects of a fair adventure." That language—"possibilities," "fair adventure"—accurately caught the progressive mood. The words suggested neither tender-minded naïveté nor swooning surrender to sonorous idealistic slogans. They suggested, rather, an attitude of calculated risk. The progressives gambled on Wilson because they felt the stakes were high; but neither did they forget that the odds were long. In 1917, it was not wholly unreasonable to believe that the "fair adventure" might, just possibly, be crowned with success; but the progressives were not so foolish as to presume that

[48] McGerr, 280-281.
[49] Wilson, "Joint Address."
[50] "Progressive Party Platform," in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, edited by Eldon J. Eisenach, 272-286 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2006).

> success would be easy, an affair of pious wishes and moral incantations. They had few illusions of that sort, though they did have abundant—if cautious—hope. Their story, therefore, is not simply a tale of innocence rudely violated; it is a far more complex matter than that. Locked in deadly embrace with their paladin, Woodrow Wilson, the pro-war progressives began in the spring of 1917 to trace with him an ironic circle of history whose outcome would be the stuff of genuine tragedy.[51]

Not only does this outline the narrative of the war for the progressives like Wilson leading the American charge, it is written in story terms: "their story," "a tale of innocence," "genuine tragedy." Kennedy writes about an adventure that appears "fair" from a distance but is ironically doomed. But the war provided a victory for the Americans, and a fairly swift one. The American "doughboy" experience was not one consumed by years-long stalemate in the trenches as it was for British soldiers, but with movement, victorious battles, and heroic action.

"Safely distant from the war zone, [Americans] had unique opportunities for reflection."[52] Though the European powers had declared war in the late summer of 1914 and had reached a stalemate by the end of that same year, America had remained officially neutral until the spring of 1917. Progressive supporters of President Wilson had originally viewed the European war as a "regression to medieval violence, a kind of lunatic vestige from the feudal past that had incredibly intruded its way into the modern world."[53] When America finally entered, Wilson himself referred to the European conflict as "the most terrible and disastrous of all wars" but at the same time his

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[51] David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 52-53.
[52] Ibid., 45.
[53] Ibid., 49.

supporters hoped it would be an "opportunity to remake the nation along progressive lines."[54]

Kennedy writes at length about how the American soldier's experience differed greatly from his British counterpart. While Paul Fussell suggests that sunrise and sunset became favored metaphors for trench bound British soldiers, Kennedy responds that Americans focused on the panoramic landscapes, in thematic accordance with the relative mobility of the American army.[55] Americans' view of France was tinged with romanticism, and postwar accounts tend to take on almost mythical qualities with language befitting Sir Walter Scott: "crusade," "glorious adventure."[56] Kennedy continues, "What most strikes the reader of these personal war records is their unflaggingly positive, even enthusiastic, tone."[57] Needless to say, the American fighting experience was atypical.

Regardless of the American military victory and the "glorious" war experience of American doughboys, by 1918 the American Expeditionary Force had suffered over fifty thousand battle deaths.[58] As McGerr summarizes, even before 1917 the popular American impression of the European war was of a "ghastly stalemate, fought by old-fashioned monarchies, using frightening new weapons such as airplanes, submarines, machine guns, and poison gas, all because of colonial aspirations, national and ethnic enmities, and other, often murky reasons."[59] With vocal opposition having been suppressed through wartime legislation like the Sedition Act (1917), the end of the war

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[54] McGerr, 280-281.
[55] Kennedy, 207.
[56] Ibid., 208-213.
[57] Ibid., 212.
[58] Anne Leland and Mari-Jana Oboroceanu. "American War and Military Operations Casualties," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010). http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf.
[59] McGerr, 279.

revealed a divided and skeptical populace that swept Republicans into Congress in 1918 and into the White House in 1920, thanks to a campaign that labeled Wilson's wartime government "dictatorial and autocratic."[60] Far from the prewar meliorist spirit of John Dewey, the war years were characterized by one conservative journalist as "the greatest submission by the individual to the state that had occurred in any country at any time. It was an abrupt reversal of the evolution that had been under way for centuries." Moreover, economic conditions appeared to be deteriorating, including a rising cost of living—up 102 percent during Wilson's two terms—and the general failure of labor negotiations, a cause dear to the hearts of progressives.[61]

Though the Progressive spirit had never been one of anti-individualism, but rather of self-denial in pursuit of the common good, the conservative reaction was hostile. After the war, the opposition repeatedly used the language of "individualism" to connote patriotism or Americanism. Former Secretary of War and U.S. Senator from New York, Elihu Root, redefined America's victory as attributable to the country's individualist spirit: "Our part of this war was won by the American private in arms and by the American private, man and woman, creating the material supplies and furnishing the moral power behind the American private in arms."[62]

Perhaps the most poignant test case of the progressive narrative, and by extension, the war narrative, is the decline of Theodore Roosevelt. The 1912 presidential nominee for the Progressive Party, Roosevelt was an ardent supporter of American intervention in the earliest days of the war, all the while a harsh critic of Wilson's foreign policy. His youngest son Quentin, a lieutenant in the Army Air Service, was shot down over France

[60] Ibid., 302.
[61] Ibid., 303-304.
[62] Quoted in McGerr, 311.

in July of 1918. Roosevelt himself, "prematurely aged" by poor health and grief, died at the age of sixty in January of 1919.[63]

Disregarding the nuanced political history that accompanies it, Roosevelt's story may be the ideal model for the "doomed adventure" narrative because it is a microcosm of the rise and fall of hope in a cause greater than oneself, and while the hero may survive the travails of the adventure, victory comes at too great a price. His downfall recalls Greek tragedy, the hubris of a great man that leads to the death of his loved ones and the spiritual—and here, literal—death of himself. It is this emotionally powerful narrative, this thesis argues, that was co-opted by Hollywood in the following years for a variety of film genres.

Hollywood and the War

> "He had heard so much of the horrors of war. Here was something different, something bright and vibrant with youth and adventure! Here at last was the thrill of war, the part he had always read about!"
>
> - Ernest Poole, *His Family* (1917)[64]

The "thrill" of war was something most American men had experienced only through art by 1917, and their first great cinematic example was the wartime film *The Birth of a Nation*, made by D.W. Griffith in 1914 and released early the following year. Though it is an American Civil War drama, *The Birth of a Nation* is arguably the first World War I film made in Hollywood, if only due to its timing. Shooting of the major battle scenes began on July 4—six days after the assassination of the Archduke in

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[63] McGerr, 309.

[64] Ernest Poole, *His Family* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1926), 182. *His Family* was originally published in 1917 and won the inaugural Pulitzer Prize for the Novel the next year. These lines refer to Roger Gale, a man who at the outbreak of World War I is in his early sixties. Yet his enthusiasm even as a nonparticipant in the war is as instructive as the early scenes of "patriotism" in *The Big Parade* because of his naïveté.

Sarajevo—and actual production lasted into October, after the First Battle of the Marne had made headlines in September and trench warfare had made its ignominious debut.[65] That Griffith's film is about the destruction of a society through war, and was made during a destructive war, seems to go unnoticed by many commentators; Melvyn Stokes calls the war "an inescapable backdrop to the making of *Birth of a Nation.*"[66]

The film was additionally a box office phenomenon that famously expanded the legitimacy of the cinema through its serious subject matter, theatrical exhibition schedule and inflated ticket prices. This war film was an event, a re-imagining of the cinematic experience, and this caused its battle scenes to become a primary source of information about warfare for many would-be soldiers. Significantly, the Civil War setting invites a reading of brother fighting against brother, rather than American men fighting a bloodthirsty foreign enemy, as would be the case several years later. Though the film infamously has its share of racial stereotypes, in his analysis Stern writes that the story has no "heavy," but that enemies in battle are embodiments of "ideological or political doctrine;" the real enemy in *The Birth of a Nation* is "political and racial dictatorship."[67] From the film's Southern perspective, Reconstruction is a form of "doom" on top of already great war losses, and the attempt by Northerners and African-Americans to "crush the white South" creates a need for a newly formed Ku Klux Klan to save the region from anarchy.[68] The film is both a doomed adventure and a revenge narrative.

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[65] Seymour Stern, *The Birth of a Nation*: An Assessment," in *American Classic Screen: Features*, edited by John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, 125-135 (Lanham, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), 126.
[66] Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation*: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 208.
[67] Stern, 131-132.
[68] Ibid., 131.

Richard Koszarski describes the time of the film's release as a period of artistic transition: "In a sense, *The Birth of a Nation* was the culmination of a vogue for Civil War military melodrama that ran back to the early nickelodeon days, but World War I soon offered a more topical replacement."[69] Despite his enormous successes and popularity, Griffith's style and content would look old fashioned to movie audiences of the 1920s.

The remainder of America's neutrality period saw a growing divide between films pushing military preparedness and those arguing against intervention. 1915 saw the release of J. Stuart Blackton's *The Battle Cry of Peace*, which theorized the invasion of America by a foreign power—a thinly veiled Germany.[70] A stern warning for Americans concerning the threat posed by Germany—the attack on the Lusitania had occurred just four months before the film's release—*The Battle Cry of Peace* had the ardent support of interventionist Theodore Roosevelt, and in England the film was shown outdoors, in Trafalgar Square, "as a recuiting aid."[71] Meanwhile, neutrality was preached in two movies in 1916: Griffith's *Intolerance* and Thomas Ince's *Civilization*. Andrew Kelly writes, "Both were important in American political debate and in promoting peace; both were Wilsonian in the views they put forward."[72] Ince wrote that his film "does not concern itself about which side is right or wrong, but deals with those ranks which are paying the grim penalty—the ranks of humanity."[73]

After American joined the fight in 1917, films were compelled to show support for the cause. James Chapman writes, "Hollywood performed a volte-face and turned out

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[69] Koszarski, 186.
[70] Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978), 36.
[71] Ibid., 33-36.
[72] Kelly, 19.
[73] Quoted in Kelly, 22.

a cycle of bellicose anti-German melodramas, such as *Daughter of France* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* in 1917-18. The fact that the film industry could switch from anti-war to pro-war films within such a short period of time might suggest that the pacifist sentiments expressed in the earlier films were not entirely sincere. This would probably be unfair."[74] Such an assumption would indeed be problematic in Griffith's case.

Griffith was able to view the war for himself while in France in May 1917 on a commission from the British War Office. The great director was unprepared for what he saw:

"As you look over No-Man's Land, there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness. At first you are horribly disappointed."[75] Perhaps that is why the film that resulted, *Hearts of the World* (1918), resorts to a romance narrative, shot mostly in the studio. An American boy (Robert Harron) and girl (Lillian Gish), both living in France, fall in love. The boy joins the French army when the war begins. Germans eventually capture the village and, in the film's most celebrated sequence, the distraught girl wanders through the battlefield at night "in a state of somnambulant shock" and discovers her lost love, who has fallen unconscious.[76]

Griffith's disillusion with the aesthetic reality of the front, along with the pacifist leanings of his previous films, may have played a part in the tone of *Hearts of the World*, which despite its required support for the war effort and the vilification of Germans, aimed at being "a much more elevated kind of film." Kevin Brownlow continues, "Griffith never falls into the trap of romanticizing war. There are no false heroics, and the

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[74] James Chapman, *War and Film* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 118.
[75] Quoted in Brownlow, 149.
[76] James M. Welsh, "Innocence Abroad: *Hearts of the World*," in *American Classic Screen: Features*, edited by John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, 136-139 (Lanham, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), 137.

horrors of war are shown as powerfully as possible."[77] *Variety* ends its original review of the film by saying, "From the standpoint of a propaganda feature, *Hearts of the World* is second to none… it should prove a material aid to recruiting."[78] However successful the film was at the box office or the recruitment center, Brownlow concludes, "it could never have persuaded them that war was rewarding or romantic."[79] Instead, argues James Welsh, "Griffith succeeds because he is reworking the materials—the characters and the formula—he knows best, fashioning a melodramatic story, as only he could, about a boy, a girl, and a village."[80]

August 1918 saw the opening of *The Hun Within*, starring Dorothy Gish. Griffith did not direct this film—that role was filled by his assistant Chester Whitey—but he did take a writing credit under his pseudonym "Granville Warwick" and the film was produced by his studio. Lillian Gish biographer Stuart Oderman records that "Dorothy played Beth, a young orphan torn between two young admirers: one a school chum, the other a German-American who turns out to be a spy."[81] Here is contained the sort of xenophobic paranoia of Blackton's earlier preparedness film *The Battle Cry of Peace* and later advocated by the Committee on Public Information—the federal propaganda agency, headed by George Creel—but rejected in Griffith's immediate directorial work;[82] *The Hun Within* deals with "the effect of enemy work within our own borders."[83] Unlike Griffith's previous work in spirit, it was nonetheless so much a Griffith film that *Variety* felt able to call it "one of the best things he has ever done, … certain to enjoy success as

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[77] Brownlow, 153.
[78] *Variety*, April 12, 1918.
[79] Brownlow, 155.
[80] Welsh, 139.
[81] Stuart Oderman, *Lillian Gish: A Life on Stage and Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 77.
[82] See Kennedy, 61-62.
[83] Quote from *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, in Arthur Lennig, *Stroheim* (Lexington, Kent.: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 50.

long as the war lasts."[84] Unfortunately for the film, the war only lasted a further two months.

Lawrence Suid writes that during the 1920s, disillusionment concerning America's participation in the war led to a shrink in the size of the armed services in addition to increasing political isolationism. Accordingly, "Hollywood found little reason beyond isolated efforts … to produce a serious film about American involvement in the Great War;"[85] between 1919 and 1925, the war rarely appeared on American movie screens. The first year saw the release of several late-entry propaganda films, including Allen Holubar's *The Heart of Humanity* and Marshall Neilan's *The Unpardonable Sin*. By 1920, the war begins to serve as background for various unrelated stories, such as when a gifted violinist is sent to fight in France and receives a devastating arm wound in Frank Borzage's *Humoresque* (1920).[86] *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921) was a rare box office hit that focused on the war, but Kelly notes that its success "failed to inspire producers who knew that it was Rudolph Valentino who attracted cinemagoers and not the war scenes."[87] That inspiration was to come four years later with *The Big Parade* and, as David Robinson concludes, the passing of the Locarno Pact that normalized relations between the Allied nations and Weimar Germany.[88]

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[84] *Variety*, August 30, 1918.
[85] Lawrence H. Suid, *The Big Parade*: A Standard for the Future," in *American Classic Screen: Features*, edited by John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, 140-145 (Lanham, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), 140.
[86] AFI Catalog of Feature Films, www.afi.com.
[87] Kelly, 29.
[88] David Robinson, *Hollywood in the Twenties* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1968), 38.

The Big Parade

Lewis Jacobs, writing in 1939, concludes, "*The Big Parade* was on the whole a superficial, if impressively executed production."[89] With its romantic scenes given as much weight and screen time as its scenes of combat, Jacobs likely finds the film a weak critic of war after fourteen years of more vociferous antiwar releases like *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930. But this debate had raged since the film's premiere in 1925. Vidor argued against the picture's antiwar stance, but the original *Variety* review called it "one of the greatest pieces of propaganda ever launched against war."[90] The film's attitude towards the enemy soldier certainly bears little resemblance to the "evil Hun" pictures of the previous decade, and yet the main character is not given a grand speech denouncing warfare and the duplicitousness of his elders like that given to Paul Baumer (Lew Ayres) in Milestone's later film. Vidor recalls in his autobiography,

> I wanted it to be the story of a young American who was neither overpatriotic nor a pacifist, but who went to war and reacted normally to all the things that happened to him. It would be the story of the average guy in whose hands does not lie the power to *create* the situations into which he finds himself but who nevertheless feels them emotionally. I said that the soldier doesn't make war. The average American is not overly in favor of it, nor abnormally belligerent against it. He simply goes along for the ride and tries to make the most of each situation as it happens.[91]

Antiwar or not, Vidor's description of his main character reveals a quintessential doomed adventurer. Jim Apperson (John Gilbert) goes to war of his own volition but he has little influence over the direction or handling of the war itself. This central element of risk is perhaps stronger here than in Milestone's film because the latter treats enlistment as practically inescapable. Every young man seen in the opening sequence becomes a

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[89] Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 455.
[90] *Variety*, November 11, 1925.
[91] King Vidor, *A Tree Is a Tree* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977), 111-112.

soldier, and so the eventual argument against war is made stronger by the suggestion of total patriarchal-nationalist control. Vidor's film displays societal pressure to join the army through a patriotic parade, but Jim's mother (Claire McDowell) weeps upon hearing of his enlistment—in fact, he is hesitant even to tell her—and his brother (Robert Ober), also of age, chooses to stay home. Unlike Paul Baumer, Jim has a clear choice, and he chooses the war. His turning point, though not vocalized as sharply as Paul's, is more profound.

The Big Parade focuses on Jim's personal growth not just from naïveté to disillusion, but also from passivity to action. His various disappointments make him a more resilient, forthright man. Durgnat and Simmon argue that a "mixture of defeat and growth is the moral theme of the film."[92] Jim's physical and psychological wounds allow him the mental clarity to find happiness for himself at the end of the film. When Suid writes that Vidor wanted "human values" to be the most prominent element of the story, rather than jingoism or cynicism, he is referring to the personal moral context the film constructs.[93] The doomed adventure may be derived from a great world event, but as in *The Big Parade* it is manifested most effectively through individualized experience.

The film opens with an act of disillusionment, as the country is woken up by the declaration of war. What had been a country in "peaceful progression," with booming industry symbolized visually by rising steel skyscrapers, is doomed to participate in the terrible conflict of its European allies. Jim Apperson is the scion of one wealthy industrialist, and like his friends he is pulled into the war by a sudden patriotic fervor that overtakes his town. Jim enlists impulsively, to the delight of his father (Hobarth

[92] Raymond Durgnat and Scott Simmon, *King Vidor, American* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 71.
[93] Suid, 140.

Bosworth) who has thought him an aimless, unmotivated boy, and the dismay of his mother who worries for his safety. His girlfriend Justyn (Claire Adams) is thrilled at his enlistment, though she clearly has a romanticized conception of the military; she tells him how handsome he will look in his officer's uniform.

Jim, the rich man's son, joins riveter Slim (Karl Dane) and bartender Bull (Tom O'Brien), and though the film does not emphasize class conflict or reconciliation, it does suggest that Jim develops clear emotional bonds with these two men. Once in France, he also makes a connection with humble French girl Melisande (Renée Adorée), and the two strike up a romance before Jim has to leave for the front. This central section of the film is lighthearted despite the proximity of the war, and it establishes an alternative domestic environment for Jim. Eventually the two lovers are separated, though they promise to reunite after the war.

The film now enters its darkest section, as several scenes of intense combat are depicted unflinchingly. Jim and company march through Belleau Wood—the forest in which screenwriter Lawrence Stallings himself was wounded—and American men begin to die in front of Jim's eyes. Soon they reach the front and Jim, Slim and Bull crouch in a shell hole during a spectacular nighttime battle scene. Slim crawls out to attack a German gunner but is shot and killed. Jim, thinking him still alive, crawls out to help and is himself wounded in the leg. He shoots the German sniper and chases him into a shell hole; seeing the German soldier for the regular young man that he is, Jim has pity and instead of finishing the man off with his knife he lights him a final cigarette. After this tender moment, the battle scene ends with long shots of a mass of faceless men and violent explosions, the horror of modern war.

Jim wakes up in a hospital bed, his leg in a cast. Learning that Melisande's village has seen harsh fighting, he goes in vain to find her but is instead knocked down by an exploding shell and collected by American soldiers. Jim returns home with his left leg amputated and finds that Justyn has taken up with his brother Harry. Jim's mother suggests that he return to France to find Melisande, and in a final romantic scene, the lovers are reunited and the film fades to black.

"As a motion picture it is something beyond the fondest dreams of most people," writes Mordaunt Hall in the *New York Times*.[94] *The Big Parade* was and remains known for its enormous scale, not just in terms of dramatic scope but also in box office receipts. Though the film's budget was higher than average (around $380,000) Kelly cites the total earnings at $22 million, making it one of the most successful films of the silent era and certainly the most popular contemporary depiction of World War I.[95] Suid notes that Vidor was concerned with accuracy; he picked the brain of veteran-turned-screenwriter Lawrence Stallings, hired other soldiers as technical advisors to the film, pored over hours of combat footage, and with the participation of the War Department photographed a large convoys of trucks "parading" through a vast landscape.[96]

Studies of American culture in the 1920s tend to characterize the film as part of a minority realist trend in Hollywood film that presented "important social and cultural issues," as opposed to the "escapist entertainment" that dominated theaters.[97] This is arguably borne out in the film's war scenes, if not its traditional romantic plotline. An early review in *Variety* mentions, "If one wanted to perform a post-mortem from the

[94] Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *New York Times*, November 20, 1925.
[95] Kelly, 35.
[96] Suid, 141.
[97] Drowne and Huber, 233.

military technical standpoint plenty of fault can be found with it," but these "details" would not distract lay audience members. "Everything one can expect from real war is in this picture."[98] In his study of the American cinema between 1915 and 1928, Richard Koszarski only briefly mentions the film, but writes, "*The Big Parade*, while establishing such war-film conventions as the variegated platoon (with its assorted character types), actually moved away from melodrama in its realistic characterization of the film's hero."[99]

Old and New Families

Jim Apperson ["a-person"] is in many ways an anonymous hero. He does not come supplied with much of a backstory beyond a history of being noncommittal. Nearly every decision he makes is viewed through the lens of the war and he therefore develops into a convincing disillusioned soldier, in keeping with the popular war narrative. The only real exposition provided is of his relationship with family members, and clear parallels are formed between the original biological family and the group of brothers he makes in the army.

Jim's enlistment is shown to be a product of impulse driven by peer pressure and the flag-waiving enthusiasm of a boisterous town parade. His biological brother Harry does not join him in this decision but instead decides to "do his part" by working in the administration of the family mill. In the end, Harry pretends to overlook his brother's injury—which offends rather than comforts Jim—and he has callously taken up with Justyn in his absence. The two brothers may have a shared genetic makeup but their

[98] *Variety*, November 11, 1925.
[99] Koszarski, 186.

character is oppositional. After Jim is exposed to the war, "family" has taken on a new meaning: he feels a fraternal connection to men like Slim and Bull—both now deceased—while his biological family's preoccupations no doubt seem as superficial and uninviting as before he left. The film's brief boot camp depicts this new family's literal formation. Over a series of dissolves the recruits develop into disciplined soldiers. They march together to the tune of "You're In the Army Now," and visually form a new big parade, in sync and monolithic. More significant is that the misfit group, which starts as a collection of men of different classes and backgrounds, is transformed seemingly overnight into a cohesive whole. Extending further, Jim does not only perceive brotherhood among his unit but also with the German soldier whom he pursues into a shell hole. This more universal sense of fraternity is key to his disillusion with the war. Interestingly, a similar shell hole sequence later appears in *All Quiet on the Western Front.*

Jim's mother is the only clear-eyed character in the film's opening homefront sequence, and Melisande is an equally discerning woman. The French peasant girl is not a superficial, romantic figure like Justyn. Jim meets her after having helped clean her family's pig sty, which is one of his first impressions of wartime France and his first scene of disillusion with the war. Melisande treats him not as a potential mate or a rich heir of whom she can take advantage, but as a typical naïve American boy. They develop their love as equals, both finding emotional refuge from the threat of war around them. Melisande's moments of caregiving echo the connection Jim shares with his mother who, in a brief subjective montage, is seen caring for him as a boy. Melisande loves him despite his embarrassments—she becomes endeared to him as he traipses ridiculously

around the village with a barrel over his head—and this sets her apart from the shallow and self-serving Justyn.

Robert Sklar places the character of Melisande within the context of the willful, emotional European that was predominant in silent film. "Europeans were more sensual, decadent, emotional, sinful than Americans, and also more calculating, rational and willful." They are depicted as, "direct and clear in their intentions… charming, fascinating, beguiling, dangerous and possibly evil." The evil Hun propaganda features are forthright examples of this, conveniently aligning with xenophobic stereotypes of America's real world German enemy. When Jim is leaving Champillon for the front in the film's most emotionally charged scene, Melisande runs after his truck, clings to his leg, then to a chain hanging off the truck, and eventually falls down in the road, unable to stop the convoy—or, metaphorically, the tide of history. Of this display of passion, Sklar writes, "The silent movies would not have risked depicting an American woman acting in the same open, vulnerable, loving way."[100] Melisande clings to Jim like his mother did in the opening homefront sequence, in a futile attempt to keep him close and safe. Justyn, in contrast, was eager for him to go to war, like his father. Her name, just shy of its masculine form, betrays her alliance with the paternal set of pro-war homefront characters—along with the patriotic forces of the nation itself—against whom Jim rebels.

For Jim's conflict is also implicitly with the American war machine, which becomes another sort of father figure. The town's parade sequence, the first of the film's "big parades," is a patriotic frenzy on which the film wryly comments; patriotism disappears for whole generations but it can suddenly "becomes life's greatest emotion!" Marching in step with others becomes a motif in the film; Jim is stone-faced, but a close-

[100] Sklar, 96.

up of his feet reveals that he is being drawn in by the rhythm of the parade. Lewis Jacobs writes, "In the opening, men and women are shown being stirred to war, without knowing why, the men seeing in it a chance for heroics, the women for romance."[101] Durgnat and Simmon write that Jim is "driven to a cause that is not his own."[102] Instead, it is one implicitly driven by economic opportunity, of which his industrialist father is a symbolic figure. The war is not Jim's cause, nor was a career in the mill or a college education. These are not his personal pursuits, but goals forced upon him by paternal pressure. He cannot commit to a future career, but he does commit to Melisande, and he loses his leg as a result of having left the hospital to find her.

Jim's "Big Parade"

The film's title refers to a series of literal parades: the patriotic town parade before the war, the marching of soldiers-in-training, the trucks driving men to the front, the ambulances leaving the war zone, the rows of hospital beds, and the line of pedestrian refugees that includes Melisande. Considering that the western front of World War I is traditionally defined by its static nature, with forces dug in for years at a time, a parade metaphor is perversely ironic. And yet it works within the larger context of social transformation mentioned earlier. Prewar progressive philosophy saw a potential for positive social change given collective human action, and this lockstep mentality is what Jim responds to when he enlists, just as thousands of young American men did in 1917. When Lewis Jacobs writes of a "big parade to the battlefield," he refers not only to a literal march to the front but also to a metaphorical parade in which the patriotic fervor

[101] Lewis Jacobs, 455.
[102] Durgnat and Simmon, 64.

surrounding the declaration of war leads to a place of irony in which the soldier's romantic notions are ended.[103] The "big parade" is a doomed adventure.

But Jim does return from the war, and the homefront sequences of the film reveal character changes just as they seemingly depict the lack of the physical effect the war has had on American soil. The opening section is brief and in certain ways abstract. The city of "industry" with which Vidor begins the film does not line up visually with the town's parade section shown later on, for example. Lawrence Stalling's original outline sets the film in Charleston, South Carolina. He describes the protagonist: "Jim at 21 has attended five colleges in succession, carrying nothing home with him but his suitcase. Jim is big and blond, completely irresponsible. Hasn't a grain of respect for family traditions, and practices few fleeting manners of the Old South."[104] In this first treatment, Stallings seems to harken back to *The Birth of a Nation* by structuring the homefront sequences in terms of the Civil War-era transition between Old South and New—a sort of Old America and New America, separated by the war. The finished film does not name Jim's town, relying instead on its generally affluent but nonspecific small-town atmosphere to stand in for any particular viewer's conception of regular America. The town is pleasant and green, and this verdancy is especially associated with Justyn; she represents fertility and life. But Jim ultimately leaves her along with the lucrative career he could have within his father's company.

Stallings' inclusion of "Old South" traditions suggests that the Apperson family is a long-standing pillar of its community. Jim feels no connection to this tradition but the film does not explain why beyond youthful indecision. Looking forward, his return from

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[103] Lewis Jacobs, 455.
[104] Figure 29 in Durgnat and Simmon, 63.

the war reveals not so much a changed society as one whose hypocritical points are newly apparent to him. Justyn never really loves him, for instance; she is merely a romantic. Kelly writes, "Initially an idler, his experience of death and injury leads him to reject the lifestyle he once enjoyed and move to a simpler life in France and his real love."[105] More to the point, Jim's lifestyle allows him to be an idler, to move noncommittally from college to college, and to date a similarly wealthy girl who has no interest in the real Jim Apperson. The eventual change is not in Justyn, nor in his hometown, but in himself.

Warfare

The battlefield of the western front in World War I has certain thematic significances. Trench lines were set up in parallel and stretched from Belgium to the Swiss border. This oppositional struggle remained largely unchanged—geographically static—for over two years, and the "no man's land" in between the opposing armies became a hellish mixture of mud, shrapnel, corpses and barbed wire. The phrase "no man's land" connotes a place without humanity, and by extension without the law and order that governs humanity. Like the Western frontier—or the desert island, or the Klondike, as this thesis will argue in Chapters 2 and 3—the front is a place where men are free to act without traditional social or moral consideration. Because many of the European monarchs were in fact related by blood, the real-world conflict contains an element of suggested fratricide—brother fighting against brother—much like Jim's struggles against his own family and his sense of pity and self-recognition in the dying German soldier. Later, impersonal weaponry and mass destruction take prominence for the final spectacular combat

[105] Kelly, 38.

sequence. As Brownlow notes, the modern war introduced the motif of the "terror weapon": the machine gun, zeppelin, airplane, and submarine.[106]

Significantly, the climactic battle scene allows for the turning point in Jim's attitude towards the war. A German sniper shoots down Slim in no man's land, and Jim lets loose with his lengthiest speech: "I came to fight—not to wait and rot in a lousy hole while they murder my pal! Waiting! Orders! Mud! Blood! Stinking stiffs! What the hell do we get out of this war anyway? Cheers when we left and when we get back! But who the hell cares… after this?" Uncharacteristically taking the initiative, Jim goes "over the top" to rescue Slim, but finding his friend already dead, he pursues the enemy soldier into a nearby shell hole for his second moment of enlightenment. With the anonymity of the trenches eliminated by the proximity of the enemy, Jim sees not the "evil Hun" of the movies, but a regular guy doing his job.[107] James Chapman describes this scene in terms of alienation. "There is little sense of fighting for a cause… instead there is an acute sense of alienation and disillusionment… they have no clear reason for fighting other than vague notions of doing their duty… there is no hatred for the enemy."[108] This sequence is a microcosmic example of finding disillusion in one's adventure; Jim is distraught and angry, pursues his enemy, and then discovers that his preconceptions of that enemy—reinforced by nationalist propaganda and the institutionalizing practices of the army—were incorrect. Neither Jim nor the German is a natural enemy of the other.

Jim comes to this realization, and yet he does not turn against the war itself. Chapman compares this scene with the similar one in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but Jim's speech is carefully written so as to not suggest rebellion or mistrust in authority. He

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[106] Brownlow, 24.
[107] Kelly has much to say about this scene, and he includes several contemporaneous opinions, 39-40.
[108] Chapman, 124-125.

complains about "they" who murdered Slim, and about the "stinking stiffs" that litter the battlefield. He is frustrated with his apparent helplessness, stuck in a shell hole while his friend dies a few yards away. Even after his moment of enlightenment with the German soldier, Jim cheers as the Americans charge through no man's land above and around him. In a reversal of sorts for his normally passive character, Jim celebrates this forward movement rather than a cessation of hostilities.

The resulting battle scene is made all the more intense by the use of superimpositions, which place images of violent explosions directly on top of lines of soldiers. This special effect gives the men a hazy translucence, and like dead men they are unfazed by the exploding shells as they continue to march forward. Jacobs praises Vidor in his 1939 study of the American cinema, listing several impressively directed scenes including the slow march through Belleau Wood with its rhythmic editing pattern, timed to the beat of a march; such innovation is surely part of the film's "new packaging" to which Michael Isenberg refers. The Belleau Wood scene, Jacobs notes, is noticeably unsympathetic, as American bodies fall at random and generally in long shot.[109] For all the *sturm und drang* of the later combat sequence, this scene takes a more impersonal, objective approach.

Amputation and Rehabilitation

World War I saw a shift in popular attitudes towards wounded veterans. Beth Linker writes how reformers in the 1910s pushed for official rehabilitation programs in response to the fiscal inefficiency of the pension system that had existed since the Civil War and the loss of economic manpower associated with disability. "Rehabilitation officials did

[109] Lewis Jacobs, 455.

not shun men with permanent disfigurements and missing limbs. They sought instead to educate the nation to accept disabled soldiers while also providing the injured with the tools to reintegrate into 'normal' life as seamlessly as possible."[110] Those arguing for rehabilitation linked hard work with happiness and, more importantly, production of income with masculinity.[111] The rehab process was also a test of a soldier's manliness, framed in terms of battle bravery. "Injured soldiers were supposed to attack their disabled bodies, to fight them, much as they had fought the enemy on the front lines."[112]

The loss of Jim's leg is a persuasive example of the war as doomed adventure. Two narrative threads are identifiable within the film: one is passivity—the war comes regardless of Jim's desire for it, society pressures Jim into enlisting, he is then trained in boot camp to surrender his individuality and become one part of an orderly fighting team, and then at the front he is subjected to bullets, gassing, bayonets and general misery. His leg is amputated, and he returns home to a brother and girlfriend that have betrayed his trust. Another narrative thread contains Jim's moments of activity, in which he defies his father's wishes, enlists willingly, romances Melisande, goes to Slim's rescue in no man's land, and finally returns to France to find his true love. These threads are of course intrinsically connected; Jim decides to enlist and thereby forfeits much of his agency. If this second thread is underdeveloped in the film's first half, it is not hindered by his amputation in the last section of the film. Romance is central to the film's happy ending, but it is aided by a prosthetic limb that allows Jim to literally track down Melisande. This restoration of male agency through prosthesis is the fulfillment of a Progressive dream.

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[110] Linker, 2-3.
[111] Ibid., 4.
[112] Ibid., 125.

Disillusion

Isenberg, writing about *The Big Parade* and anti-war film in general, notes that "our evidence of the antiwar and antimilitarist condition of the period is drawn largely from professional cultural critics" who were concerned with less pervasive art forms than that of Hollywood film in the 1920s.[113] He describes the average American's relationship to the war as "ambiguous," citing war's persistence as "a legitimate theater for heroism and nationalistic endeavor." He describes the American World War I narrative:

> America had confronted Europe with ancient European wrongs; having righted them on the battlefield, the young giant of the West rejected involvement in the corrupt diplomacy of a decadent continent. Thus, the feelings of frustration and disillusion strengthened the climate of isolation, which was indeed strong throughout the interwar period.[114]

The war was fought for "high ideals" and lacked appreciable benefits like, for example, the reunification of the country after the Civil War. Americans become disillusioned with the war, as violent and shocking as it was. And yet Isenberg writes, "isolationism is not antimilitarism."[115] Americans can recognize the value of military action even through the disappointment of recent tragedy.

Isenberg's argument is that disillusion with war does not equate to anti-war sentiment. This nuance is key to the doomed adventure narrative in Hollywood film, and is as important for *The Big Parade* as much as the films to be analyzed in subsequent chapters, *Male and Female* and *The Gold Rush*. The doomed adventure is chiefly characterized by the disillusion of its protagonist, a sentiment that is exclusive from the pro- or anti-war attitude that a story might ultimately take. A film can thus feature a doomed adventure narrative even when it ends in a military victory like Vidor's war

[113] Isenberg, 153.
[114] Ibid., 153.
[115] Ibid., 153.

drama, with a new beginning in a more equitable land for the butler Crichton, or with its hero becoming an unlikely millionaire like Chaplin's comedy. Such happy endings are often connected with romantic satisfaction, which seems to assuage the narrative of doomed adventure by offering a consolation prize, in the classic Hollywood fashion.

CHAPTER TWO
DeMille's *Male and Female*: Doomed Adventure in the South Seas

The World War I combat film was already in its infant stages by 1918, as evidenced by the last chapter's discussion of *Hearts of the World*. A mixture of propaganda film and sentimental weepie, Griffith's wartime film resonates with *The Birth of a Nation*—made during America's phase of neutrality—as an elegy for a lost world and lost men. But regardless of the approach taken by Griffith or others in the film industry prior to the reassessment made by *The Big Parade*, American society had by this time decided that the war was indeed a general waste. Though America had helped win the war for the Allies, secured peace in Europe and stabilized its own international interests—as evidenced by Hollywood's new dominance over international film markets, among other industries—an element of regret permeated discussions of the conflict. In other words, the sense that World War I was a "doomed adventure" for both the warring nations and for the men who fought it was already in place by the late 1910s.

To test the relevance of the "doomed adventure" narrative outside of the war genre, this thesis now turns to the immediate postwar era and to a film—Cecil B. DeMille's *Male and Female* (1919)—that lacks mention of World War I. *Male and Female* is a lavish production, a battle of sex and class made as part of a series of films by DeMille that reevaluate marriage in the modern age. But it is also, crucially, the story of an overseas adventure that deposits its heroine in a desperate and unexpectedly paradigm-altering situation, ultimately revealing her own prejudices as well as fatal cracks in the British class system.

The Sex Comedy

Scholarly literature on *Male and Female* tends to place it within the context of sexual liberation that DeMille filmed repeatedly in the late 1910s and early 1920s. DeMille's screenwriter on most of these films, including *Male and Female*, was Jeanie Macpherson, and together they documented rapidly shifting ideas of the purpose and practicality of marriage. Sumiko Higashi notes, "At the center of his sex comedies, specifically *Old Wives for New* (1918), *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), and *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920), was the transformation of the sentimental heroine, piously devoted to family and community, as she became a clotheshorse and sexual playmate. An inveterate consumer, she became the symbol of the modern Jazz Age."[116] This analysis roots the films in the post-progressive period. In the three films Higashi mentions, the "doomed adventure," another construct of postwar America, is present but less potent than in *Male and Female*.

The most audacious of the three is the first, *Old Wives for New*, which posits that divorce is an efficient remedy for unhappy marriage. Condemned in the press as "disgusting debauchery,"[117] the film begins with an exhortation to its female viewers: "It is not enough for Wives to be merely virtuous any more, scorning all frills: We must remember to trim our 'Votes for Women' with a little lace and ribbon--if we would keep our Man a 'Lover', as well as a 'Husband'!" Oil magnate Murdock (Elliott Dexter) values love, but his family mainly values his wealth. His wife Sophy (Sylvia Ashton) is a dowdy, frumpy thing, and she is first shown reading newspaper comic strips and

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[116] Sumiko Higashi, "The New Woman and Consumer Culture: Cecil B. DeMille's Sex Comedies," in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, edited by Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer, 305-317 (London: Routledge, 2004), 305.

[117] Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, edited by Donald Hayne (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959), 209.

munching on chocolate. Daydreaming, Murdock remembers when he met Sophy as a young man while fishing. Unhappy with the present condition of his marriage, he proposes some time apart and sets off on another fishing trip with his son (J. Parks Jones). This adventure culminates with Murdock meeting and romancing dressmaker Juliet (Florence Vidor). Upon hearing of this affair, Sophy divorces him and decides to rejuvenate her life and her appearance. She does so, and ends up marrying Murdock's male secretary (Gustav von Seyffertitz). Murdock and Juliet marry as well, and the film ends with the new sets of lovers in happy relationships. Gloria Swanson, star of *Male and Female* as well as several of DeMille's sex comedies, explains in a 1919 interview with *Motion Picture Magazine*, "Yes, I believe in divorce as an institution! It has formed the foundation of many a good plot for a moving picture. Without it we would go back to the same old milk-and-water 'hokum' again."[118]

In *Don't Change Your Husband* and *Why Change Your Wife?*, adultery and divorce replace marriage as a doomed actions. Feeling dissatisfied with merely adequate marriages, characters discover after divorcing their spouses that marriage had in fact been healthy and beneficial. Disillusion comes from time apart, not time together. In the latter and more expressly misogynistic of the two films—*Why Change Your Wife?*, made just after *Male and Female*, and one of the few DeMille sex comedies not written by Jeanie Macpherson—the married characters are in a near-constant state of bickering. When Robert (Thomas Meighan) surprises Beth (Swanson) with a new dress, it becomes clear that the revealing gown is more a present for him than her. Beth feels exposed, and puts on a slip to make the dress less sheer; Robert responds that it looked "thinner" in the shop.

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[118] Elizabeth Peltret, "Gloria Swanson talks on divorce," *Motion Picture Magazine*, December 1919, 33-34, 74.

She shields her bare shoulders and chest with her arms; he tells her to expose them. She is offended, and covers herself with a blanket. He tells her that a woman wears clothes to "delight" her mate. She accuses him of drinking. And so on.

Robert begins courting shopgirl Sally (Bebe Daniels) and Beth divorces him. Like Sophy in *Old Wives for New*, she then enters a makeover phase. She takes up with classical violinist Radinoff (Theodore Kosloff) who "seems to make celestial love to her soul" with his music. While she shops for a new wardrobe, a dressmaker shows her the latest model of strapped gown. She nods and says, "I'll take this and six more; and make them sleeveless, backless, transparent, indecent—go the limit." Meanwhile, Robert and Sally marry and, the intertitle announces, "For the second time Robert learns that wives will be wives" (emphasis in original). Sally becomes a shrill annoyance to Robert, and he begins to reevaluate his old life with Beth, who is coincidentally having doubts about a happy future with Radinoff. Robert and Beth eventually run into each other and rekindle their love. When Sally finds herself divorced, she announces bitterly, "There's only one good thing about marriage anyway—and that's alimony." But the two main characters are wiser now, and by reuniting the original couple DeMille's ending seems to rebuke *Old Wives for New* and its celebratory stance on divorce.

Higashi ties DeMille's sex comedies to consumer culture of the postwar period. This is made explicit in the overt display of elaborate fashion and prolonged, luxurious bathtub scenes; it is implicit in the way in which romantic partners, even in marriage, are treated as objects of value to be traded, to the advantage of one party or another.[119] *Why Change Your Wife?*, in its discussion of consumerism, is notably topical: it references

[119] See Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 146-158.

women's suffrage in its opening titles; Prohibition, with one character's illegal stash of alcohol; and postwar hardships. For example, Beth asks Robert why he spends money on expensive liquor when there are "millions starving in Europe." The film is thus unlike its predecessor *Male and Female*, which is devoid of explicit references to current events. Instead, the earlier film is arguably closer to the *spirit* of the war through its clear doomed adventure narrative.

DeMille and the War

Concurrent with his sex comedies, DeMille and Macpherson made a trio of explicitly war-related pictures. The first of these, *The Little American* (1917), "plays like Allied propaganda."[120] Designed as a star vehicle for Mary Pickford and sped into production by Jesse Lasky in order to capture the popular mood, the film tells of a young American girl, Angela Moore (Pickford), who nurses wounded soldiers in France. She finds herself torn between the affections of two men—one French (Raymond Hatton) and one German (Jack Holt)—who not only stand in metaphorically for their respective nations but also end up fighting on opposite sides in the film's war narrative. Before the war she had chosen the German man, Karl, but the story goes on to depict unforgivable German atrocities; the once-loved Karl similarly "succumbs to the traits of the Hun" and even attempts to rape Angela in a moment of abject weakness.[121] The three main characters cross paths in France during the fighting. The Frenchman is an amputee—reflective of

[120] Leslie Midkiffe DeBauche, "1917: Movies and Practical Patriotism," in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Charlie Keil and Ben Singer, 183-203 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 187.
[121] Ibid., 189.

the state of his nation—and the American girl, in retaliation for Germany's actions, becomes a spy for France.

The film went into production April 13, 1917—one week after Congress declared war on Germany—and the narrative is blatantly indicative of America's relationship to the war; for example, the ship "Veritania" is torpedoed as it carries Angela to France, a clear reference to the 1915 sinking of the Lusitania by a German U-boat. Reflective of America's official neutrality that would later give way to Allied support, Angela is sincerely conflicted about her romantic allegiances. Though it is not unusual for political themes to be couched in romantic plot structures—*Hearts of the World* is an example—it is noteworthy that DeMille's work just prior to his sex comedy period and the production of *Male and Female* in 1919 was in tune with America's new place on the world stage.

His work outside of film confirms his engagement with the war effort. In his autobiography, DeMille writes that he was made captain of a Home Guard unit whose recruiting station was the Famous Players-Lasky studio; the unit was eventually sworn into the California militia.[122] He and the studio were totally supportive of American involvement, but he writes, "battles within the motion picture industry still seemed closer to us than battles on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean."[123] Unable to actively serve overseas, DeMille participated in relief fundraisers at home; he contends that he always wanted to "get to France somehow" and suggested to Lasky and studio head Adolph Zukor that movie exhibition at the front could relieve "boredom" experienced by soldiers between bouts of fighting and thus be a boost to morale.[124] He was not allowed to go to France to oversee such activity, but was "allowed" to make a war film for the studio in

[122] DeMille, 184.
[123] Ibid., 185.
[124] Ibid., 206-207.

mid-1918.[125] Called "rubbish" by the *New York Times*,[126] *Till I Come Back to You* focuses on a Belgian woman (Florence Vidor) who is unhappily married to a German soldier (G. Butler Clonblough) and later falls in love with an American officer (Bryant Washburn).[127] After receiving an invitation from the War Department to record the activities of the Army Air Corps, DeMille finally appeared to be headed for France. Zukor and Lasky granted him permission, but it was then November of 1918 and the Armistice intervened.[128]

DeMille was never a direct participant in the conflict, but the tragic consequences of the war did surface in his 1919 feature, *For Better, For Worse*. Here, an American woman (Swanson) is again torn between two army enlistees. When Edward (Elliott Dexter), a doctor specializing in "children's diseases," decides he is needed in his hospital ward more than in combat, she thinks him a coward and marries the other man, Richard (Tom Forman). Eventually Richard is declared killed in action, and when the heroine realizes Edward's true courage in staying home to help care for sick children she falls in love with him. Just before they are to marry, Richard reappears—alive, but with a wooden arm—forgives Sylvia, and marries another girl.[129]

For Better, For Worse resonates with the plots of several films already discussed. The love triangle is lifted from *The Little American*; *The Big Parade* presents a similar story of the amputee-soldier returning home to a lost love; DeMille's *Old Wives for New* and *Don't Change Your Husband* have female characters who require multiple marriages in order to find happiness. "If *For Better For Worse* is remembered at all today, it is

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[125] Ibid., 207.
[126] *New York Times*, August 26, 1918.
[127] AFI Catalog.
[128] DeMille, 207.
[129] AFI Catalog.

probably lumped together with the other marriage-and-divorce pictures of that era," DeMille writes. "But it had another serious and purposeful theme, at once timely and daring for a film released only five months after the signing of the armistice that ended World War I."[130] The film, as he describes it, is a response to the wartime "white feather" phenomenon, in which a man who neither was drafted nor enlisted voluntarily was given a white feather—the sign of a coward. DeMille continues, "The story brings out dramatically that the man who stayed home was not necessarily a coward or a slacker: it may have taken more courage to stay and do a needed work at home than to go to the fighting front."[131] This explanation is clearly resonant with DeMille's own attempts to reach the front.

Male and Female

To my knowledge a thorough examination of *Male and Female* has not been published, though for example, Ben Singer and Sumiko Higashi have both provided analyses within their respective articles,[132] and Scott Eyman provides some keen observations and interesting production information in his recent biography of DeMille.[133] Because of a general lack of in-depth narrative analysis, I provide a more extensive look at the film that deviates at points from a strict connection to the war narrative. Within this analysis, I also include observations from the film's source material: the 1902 play *The Admirable Crichton* by J.M. Barrie.

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[130] DeMille, 221.
[131] Ibid., 221.
[132] Ben Singer, "1919: Movies and Righteous Americanism," in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Charlie Keil and Ben Singer, 225-248 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Higashi, "New Woman."
[133] Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams: The Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 156-158.

In his autobiography, DeMille describes *Male and Female* as "the amusing and touching story of how a butler's natural leadership asserted itself when the noble family he served was shipwrecked on an island in the South Seas." He also explains the film's title: "I settled on *Male and Female* as best expressing the elemental situation of the story, when the primitive necessities of life on a desert island knocked out the class distinctions between lords and butlers, ladies and maids, and left them all merely men and women."[134] I argue that the central doomed adventure of *Male and Female* is Mary's unforeseen journey to disillusion with these class disparities, and therefore my intention with the following narrative analysis is to show how the film—primarily narratively, but with occasional references to visual style—draws comparisons and distinctions between its higher and lower class characters.

The film's brief opening sequence is full of Biblical allusion, starting appropriately with images of the heavens and the earth. A dramatic shot of the sun's rays bursting upwards through clouds dissolves into a shot of rolling ocean waves. The sea will have special significance for the events in the film; the heroine journeys across water, marking the ocean as both literal space and a transition between worlds. It is also a mystical space, as Genesis suggests: "the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."[135] Over a final image of a desert canyon—the jagged, cruel earth—the film's moralizing epigraph appears in typical DeMille fashion: "So God created Man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; Male and Female created He them. (Genesis 1:27)"

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[134] DeMille, 222.
[135] Genesis 1:2, NRSV.

The film's religious posturing provides the film with a Judeo-Christian moral foundation, and the return to the Biblical Creation suggests that the battle of the sexes has been occurring since the dawn of time. What is noticeably absent from the Creation is any discussion of social class, which is therefore a human—or lesser—construct. Barrie's play is devoid of Biblical or divine allusion. Instead, the characters refer to Nature—always capitalized and feminine in gender—as the ultimate arbiter of social hierarchy.

The next intertitle moves the film to the present day and affectionately describes the character of Tweeny (Lila Lee) as a part of this "Divine Creation," while the title card's background image features a feather duster and a mop half submerged in a metal pail. Rather than introduce the film's glamorous female lead, the film begins with this young maid, dressed in a drab uniform, mouth constantly agape in girlish wonder. Barrie refers to her as "humble and frightened," and the play emphasizes her inexperience as a maid to a stronger degree than the film.[136] Tweeny tends to her meager pot of flowers and a homemade birdcage outside her attic window, displaying her role as a nurturer and a kind soul and letting both the fresh air and the film's audience into the upper-class Loam house. As Robert Sklar writes of postwar Hollywood film, "Overwhelmingly, films of contemporary life, crime movies, melodramas and love stories centered on men and women from the upper-middle and wealthy classes: people who lived in large spacious houses, kept servants, owned cars and earned their money from business, finance or the professions. This was as true before World War I as after."[137] DeMille's sex comedy period deals exclusively with the wealthy. Because *Male and Female* depicts the

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[136] J.M. Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, in *Peter Pan and Other Plays*, edited by Peter Hollindale, 1-71 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 11. Tweeny's name is also explained; it is derived from her status as an "in between" maid, who has yet not been assigned a specific duty or position within the house, and it reflects her youth and immaturity.

[137] Sklar, 89.

subversion of God's Creation through the establishment of the unmeritorious British class system, the wealthy Loams are eventually shown to be unworthy of their status by both their lack of practical skills and their snobbery.

The various members of the Loam house are now introduced. Lord Loam (Theodore Roberts) is a proud aristocrat; his cousin, Ernest Woolley (Raymond Hatton), is a spendthrift; Lord Loam's youngest daughter Agatha (Mildred Reardon) is preoccupied with maintaining her own beauty. Lady Mary (Swanson) is the equally self-centered older daughter, but an intertitle makes it clear that she is destined to overcome her naïveté: "...who is to learn, that hands are not only to be manicured, but to work with—heads not only to be dressed, but to think with—hearts not only to beat, but to love with!"

The film introduces the "admirable" butler Crichton (Thomas Meighan) as his white-gloved hand detects grime on the banister. He makes the first of his characteristic grimaces and heads for the guilty party—the shoeshine boy (Wesley Barry)—who is caught spying through a keyhole into the bedchamber of his upper-class master. In a display of his power, Crichton's hand reaches into the camera frame, grabs the boy's jacket from behind, and slowly raises him in the air to eye level. The butler is the keeper of order in the Loam house; he scares the boy into correct behavior, in a reflection of how DeMille operates as an arbiter of morality. He declares, "Young man, you are taking a short cut to the gallows." Crichton then lets the boy go and continues checking the house for dust and disorder.

Barrie describes Crichton as "devotedly attached to his master, who, in his opinion, has but one fault: he is not sufficiently contemptuous of his inferiors."[138] The play's butler is absolutely devoted to upholding the master-servant relationship and believes wholeheartedly in this social stratification. *Male and Female* omits the major conflict between Loam and Crichton that is introduced in the play's opening act. Each month, Loam hosts a night in which he and his family wait on the servants—Crichton, Tweeny, and the others—according to his philosophy that "our divisions into classes are artificial." He tells Crichton, "if we were to return to Nature, which is the aspiration of my life, all would be equal." Crichton objects, saying, "The divisions into classes, my lord, are not artificial. They are the natural outcome of a civilized society. There must always be a master and servants in all civilized communities… for it is natural, and whatever is natural is right."[139] Their time on the island will eventually alter Loam's perspective—never again will he host such a dinner—but Crichton's reverence for social hierarchy remains intact throughout the play, despite the two characters' role reversal. As island king, Crichton believes that his leadership is natural, and therefore right.

The film is famous for its elaborate bathroom sequence, and it helps to establish Mary as a major character in the film; the play obviously has no such scene. As two maids prepare a bath and shower, Mary, lounging in her bed, summons one of them with a loud bell. Chiding the maid for being "careless" lately, Mary demands that her bath not be above ninety degrees, and lays back onto her pillows while the women fix the temperature and add "rose water" to her shower. Barrie describes Mary as being "of a

[138] Barrie, 4.
[139] Ibid., 11.

natural hauteur. […] If she chooses she can make you seem so insignificant that you feel you might be swept away with the crumb-brush."[140]

DeMille crosscuts the bathroom routine with the servants' breakfast, overseen by Crichton. For the sake of Gloria Swanson's modesty, the two maids hold Mary's robe between her naked body and DeMille's camera as she gracefully descends into her marble pool. Meanwhile, Tweeny is shown attempting to eat a large slice of bread covered in butter and jam; Crichton takes it from her and slices it in two, disturbed by her childish eating habits. The two women are foils for each other, on opposite ends of the social ladder; one insists on formal bathroom ritual, while the other is unconcerned with basic table manners.

A note from the aristocratic Lord Brockelhurst (Maym Kelso) informs Mary of his intent to marry her, incidentally referring to her as "My Lady of the Roses." As Mary reclines on a chaise, Tweeny notices—through subjective close-ups—that Mary's shoes are beautiful and well-maintained while her own are worn and tattered. DeMille repeatedly trains his camera on characters' shoes in *Male and Female*, and the emphasis draws attention both to material class difference and the metaphorical paths down which his various characters walk. In the case of Brockelhurst, a diagonally-masked shot shows a maid's feet descending a staircase from the perspective of his wandering eyes; in the play, their romantic affair ensues. His character symbolizes aristocratic abuse of power while suggesting that lust follows no social rules.

Having already compared Mary and Tweeny, an intertitle suggests further connection between the classes, borrowing from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Morituri Salutamus": "The love of Learning, in sequestered nooks—And all the sweet

[140] Ibid., 6.

serenity of Books, Make High and Low, and King and Peasant, kin." Crichton and Tweeny have made their way to the Loam family library for a scene central to the film's conflicts of sex and class. Crichton, performing his usual dust inspection, pulls down a volume by William Ernest Henley, an English Victorian poet. He opens to a stanza from "Or Ever the Knightly Years" (1888) about a king and his slave who are blinded from their mutual love because of class and cultural differences: "Or ever the knightly years were gone / With the old world to the grave, / I was a King in Babylon / And you were a Christian Slave." Tweeny remarks that she would never be a slave to anyone, an ironic comment in light of her career. Standing below Crichton's ladder, she unthinkingly places her hand atop his shoe as she suggests out loud that she would be *his* slave. Crichton is flattered and amused, but the film's romantic tension is clearly strongest between the butler and Lady Mary. To affirm this, Mary is shown searching around the house for the very copy of Henley's poems that Crichton has just taken off the shelf. This serendipitous appreciation of Henley brings Mary to the library where they reflect on his poems together. Tweeny is noticeably distressed. Moments later Crichton is equally distressed to see Brockelhurst present Mary with an engagement ring.

The differences between the play and the film recall Paul Fussell's literary analysis. Before the war, a line from the play like Mary's comment to Crichton—"It makes me hot to look at you"—would not have been meant as sexually suggestive, but rather an act of presumption that was inappropriate between master and servant.[141] The postwar film plays up their mutual attraction, and practically every glace contains a sexual suggestiveness.

[141] Barrie, 26.

Male and Female unsubtly introduces a third interclass relationship in its first act with the character of Eileen, Mary's friend and confidante. Eileen confesses her own affair with her chauffeur—who waits outside—and asks Mary if there is any chance of their happiness. Mary visibly mouths "Oh my God, no!" She gestures towards a birdcage and says, "It's kind to kind, Eileen—and you and I can never change it!" Her examples are, appropriately, two little caged birds whom social tradition has kept locked up from flight.

DeMille is not necessarily arguing for the natural equality of the classes, but for a more egalitarian society in which basic human equality is at the foundation—a sort of "all men are created equal" democratic ideal, which is of course suggested by the film's denouement in the American heartland. Nevertheless, the film's various romantic entanglements are meant to challenge initial class divisions on an emotional level. In addition, Crichton delivers the ethical argument: "One cannot tell what may be in a man," he tells Mary. "If all were to return to Nature tomorrow, the same man might not be master—nor the same man servant—Nature would decide the matter for us!" This line returns not only to the film's Biblical epigraph, which preached equality rooted in divine creation and unhindered by millennia of social stratification, but it connects *Male and Female* to the social consciousness of *The Big Parade*, in which boys from various social levels are delivered to a setting—the trenches and no man's land—fit for primal behavior, where they are wounded or killed without prejudice. Crichton's words foreshadow the film's eventual descent into Darwinian social chaos.

As in Vidor's film, DeMille has used the opening act to establish the rigid social system in which its characters are compelled to act. From England, Lord Loam and his

family embark on a leisurely yachting trip to the South Seas. In *The Big Parade*, Jim leaves his home with certain reservations: his mother is distraught, he senses shallowness in his girlfriend, and it seems he can only please his father by enlisting. Mary's engagement to Brockelhurst, her burgeoning interest in Crichton, and her innate preoccupations with class difference provide her with emotional and intellectual dimensions, but her yachting trip is little more than a vacation, not an adventure with obvious perils or with implicit political themes. The journey itself does not constitute the film's "doomed adventure" narrative, although the ship does wreck. Rather, the film's various iterations of class structure—first the traditional English model, then the meritorious island version—are undermined as alternately unnatural or unsustainable. A crude allusion can be made between the Loam yacht and the Lusitania; both are wrecked, but the events that result from these wrecks are of heavier thematic import. Mary's romantic and intellectual journeys are underscored by the rolling ocean waves; her firm English foundation is gone and she is at the mercy of nature. An intertitle confirms this: "Winds of Chance" are blowing her into uncharted seas "with Destiny, unsmiling, at the Wheel."

It is at this point in the film that the doomed adventure becomes partly a literal adventure, and it also yields several important visual metaphors for Mary's journey that are important to mention. The shipwreck is sudden. Tweeny, upset by Crichton's cold shoulder, distracts the captain just as the yacht is gliding near a rocky coastline. The impact is first depicted below deck, where Mary and her friends are interrupted from a moment of musical gaiety by an explosion in the hull. Water begins to pour in, and she becomes trapped in the rapidly flooding interior; eventually she manages to swim out

through the impact site. As the boat overturns and crumbled into debris, Crichton picks her up and carries her to dry land with the other shipwrecked aristocrats. Meanwhile Lord Loam, still in his dressing gown, floats in open water atop a chicken crate; one bird sits next to him, and both man and beast look around helpless and bemused. This heightened ridiculousness is the film's first real indication of the vulnerability of the upper class. A series of long shots reveal the characters to be dwarfed by their unforgiving natural surroundings. Crichton, virile and dominant, carries a limp Mary into a sandy cave, and both characters are shot in silhouette beneath the vast craggy arch that they assume promises safety. In reality, the threshold they cross is one of great social upheaval. An intertitle concurs: "Suddenly—like mists melting before the sun—she was no longer a great lady to him—but just a 'woman'—a very helpless and beautiful woman." As Lewis Jacobs would later note, *Male and Female* "emphasizes the supremacy of sex over class barriers" and this intertitle is perhaps the most overt expression of that opinion.[142] Crichton raises Mary's unconscious face to his, and lets her fall back down in his arms. He then lowers her to the ground and buries his face in her body, overcome with emotion. When Mary comes to, she is a different woman. Fearful and ragged, her tight hair has fallen loose and flows down below her shoulders.

In sync with nature, Crichton wakes the next morning with the rising of the sun. While the idle rich are snoozing, he and Tweeny retrieve items from the ship's wreckage. In the process, he comes across the Henley volume and carries it ashore. When Lord Loam awakes, he spots coconuts in a tree and makes an ill-fated attempt to retrieve some. His plan is to anger a group of monkeys into tossing them down at him, but he ends up

[142] Lewis Jacobs, 400.

comically fleeing from the monkeys instead. Loam's mistake was to rely on—as an intertitle tells us—in a remembered passage from *The Swiss Family Robinson* in which an identical scheme is successful. Though the film connects him with Henley's narrative poetry, Crichton proves the superiority of real-world skills over those of fiction. Through a series of practical acts, including the dismantling of a pocket watch in order to light a fire with its glass surface, the domestic laborer is shown to be the man most able to comprehend and adapt to this new landscape. He demands the help of the family members; they reject this as insubordination.

A line is crossed when Crichton asks Ernest to fetch some water. When the cousin refuses Crichton personally drags him to the brook, fills the pail, and submerges Ernest's head in the water. With this act of dominance Crichton warns the horrified onlookers that refusals to help with basic chores will not be tolerated. Tweeny is visibly impressed by Crichton's tenacity, but the Loams are not, and Crichton is soon "fired" from service. He tells Mary, "My Lady—all of us may spend the remainder of our lives on this island; the only coin that any one of us with be paid in will be Service! Those who are not willing to serve—are apt to find themselves both cold and hungry!" Crichton's defiance amounts to a revolution, and the film surely resonated with audiences in 1919 that were familiar with current events in Russia, for example, who would no doubt find significance in what appears to be a workers' revolution in *Male and Female*.

The shockwaves of the Russian Revolution included an early "red scare" that Ben Singer notes was already hitting American movie screens in 1919. Referencing the film *Bolshevism on Trial* and its assertion that socialism favors the "survival of the unfittest" and thus is an unethical system, Singer describes *Male and Female* as "survival of the

fittest revisited."[143] DeMille's film does reject Crichton's revolution as an authoritarian misstep—his kingship may be benevolent but it is also a regression to feudalism—but in Singer's estimation the film's depiction of the British class system suggests that even in a capital-oriented society the "fittest" is not necessarily that who has "well-being," or high social standing.[144] An aristocrat like Ernest is apparently incapable of taking care of himself and yet social tradition deems him superior to Crichton.

I hesitate to draw too much of a parallel between the fantastical island and the complexities of the Russian Revolution; Crichton's "revolution" here is a practical response to clear environmental changes; he is ultimately pragmatic, not vengeful or even politically motivated. The butler's social experiment allows for love to naturally blossom regardless of class difference and values those who help to produce for the good of society. The dark side of socialism that *Bolshevism on Trial* warns against—equal distribution of goods regardless of merit—is not discussed on *Male and Female*'s island. "Survival of the fittest" reigns instead, but it is doomed because old habits continue to assert themselves. Even Crichton, the meritorious king, later acknowledges the illusoriness of his new position and decides that a return to England is best for all parties.

After Crichton's defiance the characters separate, and the film invites further contrast: Crichton builds an sturdy lean-to while the Loams' shelter of palm branches easily collapses; Crichton makes a cozy campfire while the rich shiver, even in their expensive clothes. It is pointed out that an Oxford educated gentleman, more so than a mere butler, should know how to take care of a lady. This irony hangs over the rest of the film, and it compels the wealthy characters—excepting Mary—to humbly ask Crichton

[143] Singer, 234.
[144] Ibid., 234-235.

for help. He feeds and shelters them, and when Mary still refuses to bend for these material needs, he protects her when dangerous animals are spotted lurking. She accepts his help and is grateful.

After a fade out the film resumes, two years later, with a shot of the islanders chasing a pair of goats along a coastal mountainside. They are now are clad in animal skins, having literally shed their English customs and adapted to the demands of their new home. Mary, in an elaborately woven "native" dress, uses a bow and arrow to down a leopard. An intertitle announces that Crichton's "Kingship" has gone unchallenged, and the film then cuts to the interior of his spacious island hut, primitively built by Western standards but lavish given the available resources. The extent to which the group has made the island habitable is evident when the camera moves outdoors; their small village is complete with goat-milking pen, a well with a working pump, and elaborate cookery. Crichton calls the tribe to him with a horn, and they bring him the fruit of their day's efforts (Mary brings him a large bird, for example). He then shows them his latest invention: a lever that will light a "signal fire" atop the island's highest cliff in the event of a passing ship.

That Crichton has concocted a way for them to return home suggests that he would welcome a physical return to England despite his "kingship" on the island. Along with this return to civilization would be return to society's laws and structures—in other words, Crichton would be again demoted to the role of servant. In some ways old habits are still in place; though Mary's social status with Crichton has been altered, she is still in love with him and is now—thanks to that alteration—able to show her affection openly. Tweeny is still in love with Crichton as well. Lord Loam is as selfish as previously

suggested. He steals a bit of food, and in order to please Crichton, Mary tears off into the jungle to replace it. Concerned for Mary's safety, Crichton follows her and saves her from a leopard attack. He seizes her and moves in to kiss her, but stops short. He says, "That wonderful look of fear in your eyes, makes me almost forget—England!" With the slain leopard draped over his shoulders, he recalls Henley's poem aloud: if he were the Babylonian King, he suggests, Mary was the Christian Slave.

An opportunity for DeMille to place his characters in gaudy costumes and monumental sets, the ensuing Babylonian story-sequence recalls the visual awe of Griffith's *Intolerance* from three years before. Crichton sits on a massive throne in an enormous arched hallway, flanked by columns, slaves and vaguely Mesopotamian statuary. He is dressed in a weighty golden headpiece and a flowing robe. Servants drag in Mary's Slave girl, dressed in the "traditional" leopard skin of a native tribe. The servants throw her at the King's feet in submission, and as she resists, Crichton grabs her by the hair and forces her to the ground. She runs away, and he drags her back, saying, "I'll tame thee... my pretty, snarling Tiger-Cat!" Holding Mary by the shoulder with one hand and rubbing her bare upper chest with the other, he leans down to her and finally kisses her on the mouth.

Crichton's dream-story is of one of sexual violence, devolving the forbidden romantic element of *Male and Female* into sadistic ritual as the King orders the Slave into a lions' den. Mary, in an ornate peacock headdress, is taken by the hand and told, "Choose thine own fate: yield thou to me willingly, or thou shalt know the fitting cage we've built for thee—O, Tiger Woman!" She rejects him, and he shows her to the lions. She warns him, "Through lives and lives, thou shalt pay—O, King!" She then walks

willingly into the lions' cage to her death. The King buries his head in her shawl, retrieved from the cage, and the film dissolves back to the island where Mary sits at Crichton's feet.

It is at this point that Crichton speaks his love for Mary aloud. They kiss, and return to the shelter to announce their engagement to the rest of the company. But as they prepare to marry, Tweeny spots a passing ship and Crichton hesitantly decides to light the signal. As he is about to pull the lever, Mary runs to him and begs him to reconsider, but he replies, "Babylon has fallen... and Bill Crichton must play the game!" Crichton removes his leopard skin shawl and acknowledges Mary with, "My Lady." He bows his head to her and social order is restored.

Back in England, the family returns to its old habits. Their island possessions—arrow, water pail, and leopard skin—have become mere souvenirs for a fascinated Brockelhurst. Crichton looms large as he dutifully delivers drinks to the various members of the family, but he remains in his subservient place. When he is asked about possible relationships on the island, Crichton answers truthfully though deceptively, "There was as little equality on the Island as elsewhere… In fact, I didn't even take my meals with the family!" This response is the film's acknowledgement that "natural" is not necessarily "equal;" Crichton was a "natural" leader but his rule as king, though presumably a benevolent one, was no more democratic than Lord Loam's "unnatural" superiority back in England. The Creator did not intend, DeMille suggests, a master-servant division for humanity, but a division between "male and female"—a "natural" distinction, and the inequalities of which the film does not challenge. In both cases a man assumes leadership and is the major controlling force in society.

Eileen visits Mary this same evening, and confides that her chauffeur husband is now unemployed and that his friends have not been accepting of their marriage. Her romanticism which once seemed to be clear sighted and true has ended in disappointment. Mary tells Eileen that she too loves someone and is willing to "give up everything for him," despite her impending marriage to Brockelhurst. Eileen tries to bring Mary to her senses: "Don't believe the story-books, Mary—Love isn't everything! There is Heredity—and Tradition—and London!" By now it is clear to Crichton that English society is rigid and unforgiving. He proposes to Tweeny, and they plan to sail to America. Mary wishes them "every happiness." Brockelhurst collects his fiancée and they exit.

The play ends with Crichton's resignation—there is no proposal to Tweeny—and a suggestion that if class stratification is wrong, then there must be something wrong with England ("the other island").[145] The film follows through with this line of thought. Mary reveals that she has postponed their wedding because of lingering feelings for Crichton. The film leaves her in her sad reflection and joins Crichton and Tweeny who are now happily married and running a farm somewhere in rural America. They embrace, and then Tweeny makes a gesture satirizing their old positions as domestic workers. Their expatriation from England has allowed them to transcend such labels, and as they share a final kiss in the democratic American "promised land," the film fades to black around them.

Travel

Of the three films analyzed in depth in this thesis, *Male and Female* takes the most fanciful approach to what Kevin Brownlow calls "the mainstay of the early moving

[145] Barrie, 71. "The Other Island" is the title of the play's fourth act, beginning on 58.

picture": travel.[146] Adventure narratives, as Taves has suggested, are predicated on leaving one's home for a distant land. The World War I narrative includes a journey to the front, understood to be French territory. For Americans, the war was explicitly linked with an overseas journey to a continent that most enlistees had never visited, and "over there" became not just a phrase but also a popular tune (as explained in the introduction to this thesis). The song promises victory and recalls John Dewey's prediction of a "fair adventure," tinged with a threat to America's enemies.

America did succeed, but the romantic view was a mirage. Cities and towns along the Western front were frequently ruined or partially deserted; in *The Big Parade*, the French village of Champillon features crumbling buildings and pocked, muddy streets. The reality of the trench and its surrounding topography was one of utter devastation. If Vidor's film sought to bring this reality to American screens, DeMille's is a voyage into the fantastical. The deserted island is akin to another of J.M. Barrie's imagined worlds—his 1904 play *Peter Pan* features his most famous island, "Neverland"—and in a similar way, Crichton's Babylonian story is another fantastical escape into a character's subjectivity. The juxtaposition of "Christian" and "Babylonian" is at the very least a considerable anachronism.

In this film's case, it is not the Americans who are coming to the site of foreign adventure, but the British. The closing moments of the film express the filmmakers' opinions on the difference between the old world with its class system and the equal opportunity discourse of America. Paul Fussell comments on bucolic settings in wartime literature, writing, "If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral. Since war takes place outdoors and always

[146] Brownlow, 405.

within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral."[147] Crichton and Tweeny become landowners in a dramatic and verdant Western valley. The sun shines upon on the two happy characters that have shed their servant costumes. American opportunity has allowed them to become their own masters, and they laugh at the old ways "over there" in England.

Identifying the Doomed Adventure

As suggested above, the doomed adventure presents itself in multiple ways in DeMille's narrative. The most literal is the doomed yachting voyage. A planned time of leisure for the Loam family, the shipwreck ultimately turns the masters into workers. Their mindset of entitlement is wrung from them by Crichton's firm hand, and the peerage system gives way to a monarchy with the former butler at its head. Ultimately the island experiment comes to an end, and Crichton has become so disenchanted with old-world inequalities that he takes his devoted admirer as his wife and escapes to America. Characters that remain in England seem fated for discontentment while emigrants—refugees from an oppressive culture—are able to find real fulfillment. The original class relations are theoretically maintained: butler weds maid, and Lord ostensibly marries Lady. But the film sides with the servants, both through its mockery of bourgeois entitlement and through the clear eyes of Crichton.

Ben Singer's interpretation is that the film is not condemning social hierarchies so long as they are based on merit. Crichton's island kingship clearly has a class component, but it is rooted in physical skill rather than meaningless heredity.[148] *Male and Female*

[147] Fussell, 231.
[148] Singer, 237.

thereby rejects both the British class system—and socialism, as described above—and instead suggests that by returning to nature and humanity's basic equality, a more just society can emerge. The film ultimately grounds its politics in a patriotic assertion of American egalitarianism in its final moments.

Michael McGerr notes that in 1917 many American progressives hoped that the war could "help erase social differences" by breaking down "distinctions of race and class and mold us into a new nation."[149] The war was a great class leveler in at least one way: men of all ranks enlisted and were killed indiscriminately. "Natural" order—survival of the fittest—returned in the guise of warfare from 1914 to 1918 and the result, at least indirectly, was the upheaval of much of Western society: the decline of American Progressivism, the birth of the "modern," and the Jazz Age have already been noted, but the 1919 Treaty of Versailles also brings an end to Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and German colonialism. *Male and Female*, for all its romantic preoccupations, endeavors to join this larger cultural conversation.

As a result, the film sits somewhat uncomfortably within DeMille's sex comedy period. The marriage between Crichton and Mary, for example, seems legitimate, based on the kind of mutual affection that the sex comedies value, and almost becomes a reality; ultimately, however, the two are not destined for one another. Marriage plays a role here, but not on the essential level of *Don't Change Your Husband*. Rather, *Male and Female* suggests that behind a faulty marriage lies a broken social system that subordinates real attraction or happiness to less romantic concerns like money and reputation—at least for the upper classes.

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[149] McGerr, 296.

"By all accounts, *Male and Female* could never have been made before World War I," writes Robert Sklar, though he argues that the popularity of Barrie's 1902 play is evidence to the contrary.[150] A new understanding of morality and sexual behavior was appearing on film screens after the war, accompanying what historian Lary May calls a "quest for private fulfillment" that replaced political and public reform.[151] May continues, "The Victorian home… had been stripped of its civic function, and now had no purpose other than meaningless discipline. […] Instead of reforming the external world to meet the Victorian ideal, now the screen depicted an internal domestic revitalization."[152] In *Male and Female*, no solution is provided for the problem of class difference except a physical escape to a more egalitarian America. In place of grand reform, such as the doomed social experiment on Crichton and Mary's fantastical island, the film is concerned with the personal contentment of its characters, specifically love, marriage, and self-governance. The system may not be reformed, but happiness can be gained through individual agency and self-determination. While *The Admirable Crichton* was a prewar creation, the social disillusion that occurs in *Male and Female* would not have had the same significance for an audience that had not lived through the doomed adventure of World War I and the succeeding cultural shift from public reform to private fulfillment that May describes.

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[150] Sklar, 92.
[151] Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 203.
[152] May, 208-209.

CHAPTER THREE
Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*: Doomed Adventure in the Klondike

There is little point in ignoring the well-established brilliance of Charlie Chaplin. As a filmmaker, as an actor, as a personality, he is roundly beloved by audiences and scholars alike, and his films—including the ones analyzed below—benefit from a full knowledge of Chaplin's work. Yet this thesis is not interested in auteurist readings of any film. While 1925's *The Gold Rush* has been acknowledged to contain autobiographical elements and to be in many ways a distillation of Chaplin's themes, my intention is to identify the basic narrative pattern of World War I in *The Gold Rush*, thus linking the two events and drawing parallels between the Lone Prospector's disillusion and that of postwar America. This does not presuppose that Chaplin was an unwitting vessel for social narratives, being controlled by invisible strings, nor that he lifted the war narrative consciously for this film, but simply that the story of the war made the leap from popular consciousness to comedy just as it did in—and in the same year as—a war film like *The Big Parade*. The doomed adventure is alive and well in Chaplin's self-styled "dramatic comedy," and this narrative connection merits illumination. This chapter will begin by looking at his 1918 comedy *Shoulder Arms*, which explicitly links Chaplin's work to the war. One of his great popular successes, *Shoulder Arms* provides a handy link between the "over there" of the European war zone and the "over there" of the Klondike in *The Gold Rush*.

In keeping with its stated aim, this chapter does not endeavor to enter into a full contextual dialogue with the many books, articles and films related to Chaplin and his work, but to deal only with certain scholars who either discuss Chaplin's relationship to the war or engage in pertinent thematic analysis of the two films discussed. I use David

Robinson's seminal book, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*, that itself incorporates Chaplin's autobiography. Robinson's shorter volume, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion*, is equally helpful for its study of pertinent critical literature up to its publication in the mid-1980s. Walter Kerr, Gerald Mast and Kevin Brownlow each provide a wealth of insight, as does Jeffrey Vance's audio commentary on *The Gold Rush.*

Chaplin's War and *Shoulder Arms*

Much has been written concerning Chaplin and the British war effort, mostly centering on the struggle he had as a British citizen living in the United States. He was the center of a very public "white feather" campaign, and a debate raged about whether he should be on movie screens or in the trenches.[153] Briefly, Chaplin publicly stated during the early days of the war that he had been rejected from the army for being underweight, but still supported the British cause. Many felt that he was shirking his national duty by working in Hollywood during a time of crisis, and his extraordinary fame earned him extra scrutiny from the press. While some denounced him as a coward or traitor, others gave him their support, including soldiers at the front who claimed that his comedies provided a much needed boost to morale—and Chaplin was able to support the American war effort through successful bond drives with friend Douglas Fairbanks and other Hollywood heavyweights.[154]

Chaplin's struggle to maintain his reputation during the war is pertinent to a discussion of his World War I comedy *Shoulder Arms* because the film, made from May to September 1918 and released just before the November armistice, has been aptly

[153] David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (London: Collins, 1985), 185-188.
[154] See Brownlow, 107-112.

characterized as "apatriotic" in tone.[155] It certainly does not fit within the paradigm of the "evil Hun" films that were being made in the war's final year, because Chaplin treats the Germans as little more than bumbling or ridiculous, save one scene in which an officer threatens sexual violence. One German soldier is chubby and bearded, another tall and gangly, and their leader is comically short and clad in puffy breeches. Perhaps characteristic of the Doughboy's dream enemy, they are proven to be no match for even a half-hearted recruit like him. But neither is the Doughboy a true hero. Socially awkward, the Doughboy treats his situation as an absurd extension of his normal life, making his trench bunker as livable as possible and reacting to the indignities of warfare with an attitude of annoyed disinterest. The end of the film, in which the unwitting Kaiser is captured by the Doughboy, is less heroic than fantastical. *Shoulder Arms* rips the soldier's experience from its tragic connotations and, perhaps in not as great a leap as it seems, creates comedy. Certainly lacking the fiery epilogue of *The Great Dictator* twenty-two years later, the 1918 film sticks to humor in the war zone itself and in many scenes plays the devastation of the war for laughs. Chaplin was not apatriotic in word, but a public debate raged around his nonparticipation; this film's patriotism is similarly ambiguous, or at least beholden to comedy.

Was the film a financial success because of its arrival in theaters just weeks before the Armistice? James Latham argues from a 1918 perspective that, "The film probably resonates with audiences who are weary of the war and its related rhetoric and who seek a release from it while simultaneously engaging with it—safe in the knowledge

[155] J. Hoberman, "After the Gold Rush: Chaplin at One Hundred," in *The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian*, edited by Richard Schickel, 297-304 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 301. DeMille is quoted as saying, "It's dangerous at this time to make fun of the war," in Kenneth S. Lynn, *Chaplin and His Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 221.

that Allied victory is likely or already had occurred."[156] In other words, Chaplin's reevaluation of the soldierly experience was essentially harmless at so late a date, and thus accepted and celebrated by the American public.

Chaplin's "Doughboy" figure is, as is usually the case, the comedic center of his film and he sets the tone for the audience's understanding of the American soldier. A new recruit, the Doughboy struggles to fit in during basic training. The character is essentially Tramp-like; he waddles as he marches, ungainly and amateurish, with the oversized shoes of the pre-established character. Given the fun made of its soldier protagonist it might be assumed that the film is mocking the American war effort rather than, a more likely conclusion, simply pointing out the absurdity of placing humanity within an inhumane war.

The Doughboy is being used for this precise purpose when he attempts to domesticate his trench. Upon entering his dugout, he treats it as just another domestic space—albeit one with dirt floors and crude bunk beds. One of his first actions is to hang a back-scratcher on the wall; comfort first. When the Doughboy awakens one morning, chest deep in water but apparently unbothered by his flooded shelter, he plops his soldier's helmet on his head and gives it an uncanny resemblance to the Tramp's famous bowler hat. This Doughboy, a holdover of the high-minded but desperately poor tramp, is only half at war. If part of the Tramp's charm comes from the comedic juxtaposition of a fancy coat and hat with the baggy pants, funny walk and secondhand cigar of an uncivilized hobo, the character rarely seems bothered by his poverty or even pays it notice. He attempts to act with respectability but is consistently undone by clumsiness

[156] James Latham, "1918: Movies, Propaganda, and Entertainment," in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Charlie Keil and Ben Singer, 204-224 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 214.

and misfortune. Here, the comedy is working in the same way. He is at war, but he does not seem bothered by it. He keeps up appearances, even fluffing his pillow before bed despite its being soaked in the flooded dugout, and he seems unfazed by the life-and-death reality of his environment. He is a childlike comic hero.

Yet he is capable of distinguishing the home front from the trench. In one sequence, the Doughboy stands alone in the trench as explosions occur nearby; he is daydreaming. The screen then splits into two halves: on the right the Doughboy faces forward as the trench extends into the background; on the left a city street appears, with buildings, automobiles and a streetcar. The two shots are arranged in parallel, and the visual similarity suggests that the street is an enormous gash, herding humanity through the unsympathetic brick and cement of the city. Both environments are unnatural, man made, and both contain a certain inhuman coldness. Clearly the Doughboy's trench reminds him of the city and loved ones left behind. As the daydream fades from the screen, his face is now dominated by a smile. What does such a scene suggest? *Shoulder Arms* is not a doomed adventure narrative as earlier defined, because its view of the war is not one of tragic disillusion. But it comes close with its placement of heroism and peace inside of dreams, creating an irony that is clear by the final revelation that the easy victory enjoyed by the Doughboy is the stuff of imagination, not the real world.

Other serious issues are played for comedy. In a sequence widely celebrated for its pathos, a soldier receives a letter from home.[157] As he reads it, the Doughboy stands behind him, reading the words over his shoulder and vicariously enjoying the soldier's heartwarming thoughts from loved ones. The Doughboy is obsessed with not only making the trench a domestic space, but also with making a connection with a real home.

[157] See Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life*, 245.

Having received no mail of his own, he is reminded of his own loneliness—a theme that will appear prominently in *The Gold Rush*. This heartwarming episode is capped with ironic humor when he finally receives a package. Opening it, he discovers a pack of stale crackers—whose printed wrapper suggests they are dog treats—and a round of Limburger cheese. Putting on his gasmask, an image representative of terrible new weapons of war, he opens the cheese but still cannot handle the obnoxious smell. With one arm, he hurls it out of the trench, across no man's land, and onto the face of the German commander. The enemy soldiers hold their noses and cower back, offended by the smell. In another sequence, the Doughboy enters a crumbling house and immediately locks the door, even though several walls are missing and the interior is almost completely exposed to the outside. The Doughboy's erroneous feelings of security mimic his attempts at civility in a desperate situation. He is reassured by a locked door despite its apparent worthlessness.

The unsanitary trenches are played for laughs as well, though the various gags reflect real misery and danger. Newly arrived in France, the Doughboy stands in the trenches at the intersection of "Broadway" and "Rotten Row," and wears a mousetrap attached to one of his coat buttons. Later, he raises a sealed bottle so that its top is just above ground level; an enemy sniper immediately clips off the bottle cap and the Doughboy lowers it to drink. He then holds up an unlit match; a bullet sets it alight and he is able to smoke his cigarette. These actions are performed with nonchalance indicative of their regularity. It is significant that the trench only exists as a dream; before the Doughboy ever actually sees the war, he imagines its horrors—poison gas, machine guns, the general misery of trench life—and it therefore occupies an important place in

the documentation of the First World War for film audiences, who themselves were only able to imagine it. The American public in late 1918 had yet to come to terms with the reality of modern warfare, as well as its repercussions, and this film today plays like a sly commentary on the matter. Grounding the film in a semblance of aesthetic reality, Chaplin added a few documentary shots of the front to add authenticity and patriotic validity to his comedy.

"The men at the front, far from being offended to see their miseries thus metamorphosed into comedy were delighted," writes Robinson. He suggests that, at least by the 1970s, Chaplin's depiction of the war was remembered while "the tragic dramas are forgotten."[158] Perhaps this is attributable to Chaplin's unique status as a comedic "artist," able to transcend mere slapstick to comment on human behavior with clarity and insight.[159] Critic Louis Reeves Harrison writes about Chaplin's particular talent as early as 1914:

> The comic spirit is entirely too deep and subtle for me to define. It defies analysis. The human aspect is certainly dominant. It is funniest when it is rich in defects of character. The incongruity of Chaplin's portrayals, his extreme seriousness, his sober attention to trivialities, his constant errors, and a constant resentment of what happens to him, all this has to be seen to be enjoyed..."[160]

The humor in *Shoulder Arms* does not inhibit its commentary. War is hell, and Chaplin does not dispute this. The mixture of the Doughboy's "extreme seriousness" with his constant embarrassment and unlikely final victory makes the film effective by characterizing the war as absurd. In broader terms, Chaplin's production of *Shoulder*

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[158] David Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 33.
[159] Ibid., 37-38. Charles J. Maland concurs with Robinson's conclusions regarding Chaplin's unique status, in *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 27-28.
[160] *Motion Picture World*, quoted in Robinson, *Mirror*, 37.

Arms shows that he was indeed considering the creative potential of the war and its themes as early as 1918. It clarifies his conception of the front as a lawless male space with an aspect of comedic absurdity, and therein lays the thematic transition to *The Gold Rush*, in which he transplants his Tramp-Doughboy to another lawless male space, full of its own ridiculousness.

***The Gold Rush*[161]**

Is *The Gold Rush* not simply about a gold rush? As Chaplin himself has admitted, the idea for the film came to him as he viewed photographs of a line of men progressing up Chilkoot Pass between Alaska and Canada during the 1896-1899 Klondike Gold Rush. From there, he learned about the ill-fated Donner party, a group of pioneers who in 1846 found themselves snowbound in the Sierra Nevada mountains and eventually resorted to cannibalism.[162] The war zone provided the environment in which the machine gun and the gasmask undermined one's traditional sense of ethics. Chaplin's film features a similar world, the legendary "Far North" where men journey to claim their fortune, to gain glory not through patriotism but through materialism.[163] Certainly the romance of adventure played a role for some men, as David Kennedy writes, concerning the war:

> For men like these, the war had provided a welcome relief from ordinary life. It had in large measure lived up to the romantic expectations encouraged by spokesmen for traditional culture like Holmes and Roosevelt. Like the legendary American West, wartime France was a place where men lived in the open, on the move, in the intensely male camaraderie of adventure and misery and threatening violence. Like the frontier West, 'over there' was a distant land, where men could give vent to dangerous impulses that must be suppressed in civil society. […] For

[161] For this paper I have chosen to analyze only the 1925 version, reconstructed by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill in 1993, digitally restored in 2011, and released by the Criterion Collection in 2012.
[162] Robinson documents this process in *Mirror*, 66.
[163] Gerald Mast lists a series of "Far North" films in *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Company, Inc., 1973), 101.

> many men, the true male character, including the fancied immemorial imperatives to hunt and to kill, could only be released in war. The mystery and allure of the battleground derived largely from the fact that it was *not* home. France figured as a kind of equivalent to Huck Finn's 'Territory,' a place to light out to in flight from the artificial constraints of civilized life.[164]

To frame World War I in these terms—the legendary American West, the frontier, Huck Finn's 'Territory'—is to acknowledge its connection to the classic adventure story. And such terms are equally as applicable to the story Chaplin tells of the romantic "Far North," in which his beloved Tramp is plopped down into a frozen landscape, having been removed from his natural urban environment—as he was in *Shoulder Arms* and, as Mast suggests, in many of his films with First National from 1918-1922.[165] Described in similar terms, with similar outcomes for their main characters, the war and the gold rush have obvious narrative corollaries.

As is the case in *Shoulder Arms*, the appropriateness of comedy in the lawless frontier of the Klondike might be questionable. But in terms of Chaplin's persona, how does the Tramp's brand of comedy translate to such a setting? He thrives on being civil, even respectable, when his very appearance suggests that he is below a certain class threshold. He eats formally and politely, even when he is consuming his own shoe. He dresses in a suit coat and tie while his pants are ridiculously baggy—they become the butt of a joke during the film's dance hall sequence. The Tramp's comedy hinges on his attempts to lead a normal life—with what Jeffrey Vance calls a "blithe unconcern" for the danger around him—and his failure to assimilate.[166] Simply, the Tramp tries to keep up appearances. The breakdown of societal norms in the Far North is a scenario that begs for

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[164] Kennedy, 217.
[165] Mast, 86-87.
[166] Jeffrey Vance, Commentary, *The Gold Rush*, DVD, directed by Charles Chaplin (New York: Criterion Collection, 2012), [00:04:27].

Chaplin's ironic comedy of manners because its extremities—in scenes such as the ones featuring a boiled shoe or an imagined chicken—deliver the greatest and most comedic distinction between performed social graces and gruesome reality.

The opening title card could almost serve for a war picture, at least in spirit: "During the Great Gold Rush of Alaska, men in thousands came from all parts of the world. Many were ignorant of the hardships before them, the intense cold, the lack of food—and a journey through regions of ice and snow was a problem that awaited them." The Klondike was a place for men to supposedly acquire "easy" wealth, but the experience was almost immediately disappointing according to the film. The acts of digging and panhandling would be hard work enough, but the trip itself was essentially a gamble; roughly 4% of potential prospectors were able to both reach the region and find gold.[167] The film opens with five shots of seemingly endless lines of men—a big parade—carrying supplies around and up the mountainside. In the sixth shot, a man stumbles and falls head first into the snow, weary from the march. In the seventh shot, the camera irises out on the parade of men and the film resumes on a studio-built set.

The Lone Prospector is, as the Doughboy was in *Shoulder Arms*, Chaplin's undisguised Tramp. The charm of his character in part derives from the audience's familiarity with the character; he is already beloved and thereby commands the audience's attention and affection. A bleak and dangerous cliff fills the left half of the frame, and onto its narrow, snow-covered path waddles the Tramp, complete with bowler hat, dinner jacket and cane. On the highest ridge of the trail, he leans a little too far to the cliff side and loses his balance slightly. But no worry, he keeps on his feet and is

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[167] Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), 396.

seemingly unconcerned with the very real possibility of falling to his death. He is momentarily followed by a large black bear, but he remains oblivious and the bear wanders away.

The film then introduces the second main character, Big Jim McKay (Mack Swain), who stakes his claim with a large crude sign. He has found gold, but he has also come prepared with the proper supplies and clothing. The same cannot be said for the Tramp, whose only addition to his usual dress is a pair of gloves; he sets his direction by an absurd hand-drawn compass, which is guaranteed to get him lost. He finds his way to a cabin during a violent storm, the severity of which is exaggerated by the bowing in of the wooden walls with each gust of wind. Wanted man Black Larsen, the cabin's occupant, returns and finds the Tramp inside. Larsen opens a door and orders the tramp outside, but the wind is too much for him, and the Tramp is unable to exit due to the strength of the wind; instead, Larsen himself is blown out the opposite door of the cabin. This repeated gag not only visualizes their powerlessness against nature, but it marks them as unable to progress in the same way that the war forced armies to remain in static trench lines for months at a time, in a seemingly endless fight. When Jim arrives, his tent having been blown away in the storm as well, the three men are obliged to share the confined space.

Hunger, argues Jeffrey Vance, is one of the chief themes of *The Gold Rush*, and it is connected to the film's parallel themes of loneliness and greed. After a few days in the cabin, the Tramp takes the candle from a lantern, tastes it, sprinkles it with salt, and finishes it off. Here again his attempts at respectability are apparent. He eats the wick just as he would any decent scrap of food, with seasoning. It is eventually decided that one

man should go out in search of food; Larsen is the unlucky one, and he leaves Jim and the Tramp alone in the cabin. Like the character of Slim in *The Big Parade's* major combat scene, Larsen goes "over the top" into the perilous landscape, leaving the other two men theoretically protected, and yet with a sense of helpless desperation. As in the war, inaction yields anxiety.

The ensuing boot-eating sequence is notable for showing to what degree man will bend in order to survive, but it is also a key to understanding Chaplin's Tramp. The gentility with which the boot is boiled, served at the table, carved, salted, and eaten by the tramp indicates his sense of self-respect and unshakable dignity. He sucks every last scrap of leather from the boot's nails with the thoroughness of a connoisseur. Jim is not as pretentious, but eats his boot because he is on the edge of starvation. Later, Jim complains openly about his hunger; the considerate Tramp offers to boil his other boot, but Jim waves him off. Typical of their personalities, Jim is boisterous and emotional, with wild eyes and expressive gestures; the Tramp's deep hunger is not shown but kept below the surface. The Tramp never complains, though his desperation can be understood by his pathetic actions—for instance, he sticks his bootless foot into the hot stove in order to defrost the limb. For the most part the Tramp remains psychologically impenetrable, but the film enters the mental subjectivity of Jim during a hallucination; he imagines the Tramp as a giant chicken. Jim is a stand-in for the film's audience here, who watches the Tramp as the film's showpiece—with the attendant to-be-looked-at-ness—and yet psychologically undefined enough to be open to the viewer's interpretation. At the same time, his physicality is broadly humorous like an animal's; when the giant chicken uses a foot to pull a stool out from under a table, it reflects the Tramp in its awkward, puppet-

like movement. The Tramp's shrug of the shoulder quite easily becomes the flap of a wing. It is only after Jim shoots the Tramp-chicken that he wakes from his hallucination and sees the humanity in Chaplin's character.

In terms of production design, the forlorn cabin seems a triumph of sympathetic setting, its inhabitants struggling to hold on to their lives and respectability. It is a sad little structure that is later tossed around by the wind and finally topples from a snowy peak. Richard Koszarski points out that the set design in *The Gold Rush*, when compared to the period detail used in Keaton's 1926 film *The General*, for instance, seems "a crude holdover from a simpler age of cinema," and that Chaplin cares "not a whit for the actual ambiance of the Far North and, in the old music-hall tradition, is satisfied to throw up a flat."[168] Koszarski is perhaps not incorrect when referring to the dance hall scenes of the film's middle act, but the sparse nature of the cabin is indicative of its nature as a moveable set—or indeed, a prop that glides over the snowy ground and falls to its destruction. It is the element of physical doom that matters in the cabin, not realism. With its bowing walls and icicles hanging from the rafters, it is as vulnerable and makeshift as the trenches.

The doomed adventure in *The Gold Rush* applies equally to the Tramp as to Jim—as it does to all the men who went to the Klondike. Some prospectors may be more successful than others; Jim finds a fortune and is able to share it with the Tramp in the film's conclusion. But all men are shown to be equally helpless against nature, that unrelenting and indiscriminate arbiter of fate, just as every soldier is helpless against the impersonality of modern warfare in the World War I narrative. If the Tramp remains an emotional blank slate on the surface, commanding pity but not tears, it is indicative of his

[168] Koszarski, 323.

comedic nature—to become an emotional figure like Jim would be to give way to melodrama. The Tramp is without a doubt a doomed adventurer, though by keeping his apparent misery and desperation in check he differs from John Gilbert's Jim Apperson, or Gloria Swanson's Lady Mary, or indeed from the other characters in his own film. The appeal of the Tramp, throughout Chaplin's work, is rooted in his eternal optimism. He does not brood over his hardships.

To the Tramp's chagrin, Jim later decides to go after him with an ax, "Chicken or no chicken." The Tramp grabs a rifle and the two men enter into a tense standoff inside the cabin, each sleeping with one eye open. The tension recalls a dugout on the front; men stay together, sheltered from the external storm, and sense of mortality pervades the space that in *The Gold Rush* is accented by the possibility of one's companion giving into a hunger-induced craze. When the two begin to brawl, and it is apparent that one man will kill the other until, to break the conflict, a bear wanders into the cabin—a timely deus ex machina—providing them at first with a scare, and then with a hearty meal. Perhaps arbitrarily, the film's first act comes to an abrupt close here as the two men's hunger is, for the moment, satiated. The men separate, "One to his secret mine. The other to his fate." The Tramp walks off-screen left, just as he had entered from the same side of the frame in his opening shot.

The break also marks a suspension of the film as a doomed adventure narrative; from here the Tramp returns to the miner's village and begins a slow-burning romance and the film itself becomes concerned with still other themes. The second reference to law in the film is an intertitle, which reads, "The North. A law unto itself." Black Larsen, having attacked Jim and made off with his claim, is killed in a freak avalanche—an

example of a man overtaken by forces beyond his control.

Meanwhile, the Tramp has made it to a town, "built overnight during the great gold rush." The first view of this town is a main street, with people milling about in the snow, horses and carriages lugging supplies, and a Bakery and General store visible. In the foreground is "Elizaroff Photos." In its form and function in the narrative, the town recalls the French village in *The Big Parade*. It is here that domesticity still reigns, where men's behavior is controlled by social convention so near the lawless and brutal frontier. Out there, men's dreams die—but here in the frontier village men can relax, recover, and enjoy that most prized of male comforts: women. Here women still live and work, though they often do so, as in prostitution, to serve the men. A new character is introduced, arriving by dogsled: "Jack. The ladies man" (Malcolm Waite). Another shot reveals a female character, Georgia (Georgia Hale), as she steps out of the photo parlor. On the wall outside are pictures of couples, well dressed and artfully arranged for their photographs. The film ties Georgia to the idea of romance and togetherness, despite her job as a dance-hall girl. By introducing these two particular characters in this short segment, the film suggests their potential connection.

The Tramp, whom the film now names the "disappointed prospector," is such an outsider that he is barely noticed by Georgia, or by anyone else in the busy town. He enters the crowded dance hall on the first evening and stands alone as he watches the spinning and jostling couples on the dance floor. Once again his interior state is represented not by speech or facial expression—for his back is to the camera—but by his stillness in a room full of activity; pity for his character is largely derived from the situations in which he places himself. Georgia, meanwhile, expresses her dissatisfaction

through dialogue: “If I could only meet some one worth while—I’m so tired of this place.” Standing only a foot away, the Tramp hears her words but does not respond. Later, she uses him as an impromptu dance partner in order to frustrate Jack, who is pursuing her. It is clear that her character is in the Klondike for the pleasure of the miners. This segment’s two prominent male characters are Jack, who wants her for the typical lustful reasons, and the Tramp, who identifies with her status as an unappreciated outsider in a world full of men on the edge of lawlessness. After dancing, the Tramp protects her from Jack’s advances, though he is clearly the physical inferior.

The relationship between Georgia and the Tramp grows, as the romance does in *The Big Parade*, in lighthearted scenes separate from the terrible reality that exists so nearby. The Tramp has befriended a man who owns a small cabin in town and he agrees to watch it while the man is away. Georgia and her friends happen upon the cabin while frolicking in the snow one day and the Tramp invites them inside to warm up. Georgia is charmed by the Tramp’s politeness—and possibly his harmlessness, which differentiates him from the aggressive men of the dance hall—and upon discovering her photograph under his pillow realizes that he finds her charming as well. The women decide to toy with him, and they invite themselves to his cabin for dinner on New Year’s Eve. After they leave, the Tramp rips the feathers out of his pillows and jumps around the room in one of the most joyous moments in the film; Georgia appears at the door and he is embarrassed, echoing the tone of John Gilbert’s barrel sequence in *The Big Parade*. The central romance in both films has thus been established through male embarrassment, and though the girls were deceiving the Tramp, her expressed dissatisfaction with her life and her interaction with the men of the town suggest that she would appreciate his genuine

affection. When New Year's Eve arrives, the Tramp has a wonderful time with the girls, until he awakens and realizes that it was a dream. Like his victory in *Shoulder Arms*, his greatest moment was only in his imagination.[169] At midnight, he sits alone in his cabin while, in the dance hall, the town link arms for the singing of "Auld Lang Syne" and then celebrates raucously. The Tramp peers dejectedly out of his door, then puts on his hat and coat and goes out into the cold.

A pervasive loneliness marks this section of *The Gold Rush*, similar to World War I pictures like *The Big Parade* and the later *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Vidor's film featured a man who was not truly appreciated by his girlfriend at home and was unable to make a real connection with Melisande until the war had ended and he returned to France. His war experience is characterized by his physical separation from those he loves. Milestone's 1930 film does not feature a romance at all, but instead tells of a single man who feels deceived by his elders and disconnected from his home, turned into an empty killing machine for a dubious cause. He dies alone at the end of his film while reaching out for a butterfly, a small piece of beauty and life in the middle of a lonely, barren landscape.

The Gold Rush, however, ends with vindication, reunification and joy. After a few more scenes, including a famously suspenseful sequence in which the original cabin teeters on the edge of a cliff, Chaplin's Tramp ends up splitting Jim's recovered gold claim and the two sail back home in luxury. Georgia is conveniently also on the boat, albeit in third class, and they have a humorous encounter when he puts on his Tramp "costume" for reporters. She believes him to be a stowaway and attempts to help him,

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[169] Vance, in his DVD commentary: "As in the older Chaplin comedies *The Bank, Shoulder Arms,* and *The Idle Class*, the Lone Prospector's great moments occur only in his dreams," [00:59:45].

and from this act of kindness their relationship—a potential romance—is reborn. The two share a kiss for reporters as the film ends.

The Tramp's double victory does not negate his doomed adventure narrative; if anything, it ties the film closer to the experience of the war and to *The Big Parade.* That the Allies achieved victory in the war or that Jim received a hero's welcome and succeeded in his romance with Melisande does not suggest that they suffered any less or were any less disillusioned with the effort. That Chaplin finds humor in tragedy is his comedic calling—his vehicle is not the realistic battlefield of Vidor or the fantastical island of DeMille. But his intent is similarly to show the prospect of human disillusion after the promise of an easy life, or wealth, or national honor. Mast claims that by setting this story in the Far North, Chaplin is asking a basic question about human nature:

> What happens to basic human needs and comforts in such a place? The torture endured by the human body to gather a few pieces of valuable rock underlies most of the comic routines in the film. Charlie suffers terrible comic tortures—comic hunger, comic cold, comic pursuit by beasts, comic panic in escaping from the teetering cabin. But these are tortures nonetheless. The metaphoric oppositions between cold and warmth, softness and hardness, flesh and ore, man and beast, are at the same time very clear and very unobtrusive in the film.[170]

The film's depiction of torture roots it firmly within the doomed adventure context. It is significant that Chaplin's comedy does not dilute the film's darker aspects—nor does it attempt to do so.

"Chaplin encouraged an autobiographical reading," of *The Gold Rush*, says Vance, citing Chaplin's immigrant success story as similar to the Tramp's unlikely success in the Klondike. "Indeed, this is one of Chaplin's deepest, darkest and most personal films."[171] Walter Kerr argues that the Klondike Gold Rush was "virtually the

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[170] Mast, 101.
[171] Vance, [00:01:20].

climax, hence an ultimate symbol, of a country's discovery and mastery of its natural resources;" it thus took on mythical implications—for Chaplin, surely—surrounding the immigrant's dream of "streets paved with gold."[172] After having met Chaplin in Europe in the 1930s, Sigmund Freud said in an interview:

> He is undoubtedly a great artist; certainly he always portrays one and the same figure; only the weakly, poor, helpless, clumsy youngster for whom, however, things turn out well in the end. Now do you think for this role he has to forget about his own ego? On the contrary, he always plays only himself as he was in his dismal youth. He cannot get away from those impressions and humiliations of that past period of his life. He is, so to speak, an exceptionally simple and transparent case.[173]

Freud refers, no doubt, to Chaplin's childhood and romantic life, including his series of failed relationships, about which this chapter is not concerned. But it is important that his work is rooted in real-world psychology as well as real-world events, especially in the case of *Shoulder Arms*, which is as close as Chaplin came to depicting the tragic effect of warfare on the mind of the average soldier. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Chaplin chose to rerelease *The Gold Rush* in 1942, with a personal narration and a new musical score, when America was newly at war with Germany and Japan.

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[172] Kerr, 247.
[173] Quoted in Stephen M. Weissman, "Charlie Chaplin's Film Heroines," in *The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian*, edited by Richard Schickel, 65-75 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 65-66.

CONCLUSION

The doomed adventure narrative is by no means the last word on the war's effect on film content in the 1920s. Taves' historical adventure genre, which in the 1920s consists of the films of Douglas Fairbanks, Ramon Novarro and others, is similarly born out of the popular psyche and this implicit connection is worth exploring in more detail. Taves himself asks why audiences respond to the particular myths that the adventure genre perpetuates.[174] He notes, "Adventure belongs to the style of politics promulgated by Theodore Roosevelt, rather than FDR, and is inextricably bound with activism and a belief in intervention abroad."[175] In other words, the historical adventure genre—even up to the present—has roots in the Progressive Era. Certainly the antiwar films of the late 1920s have not stopped other positive interpretations of the conflict from appearing on movie screens. American history has often featured an alternation between optimism and pessimism, sometimes simultaneously. Thus the booming economy of the 1920s is followed by the Depression of the 1930s, and thus Warner Bros. can make films such as *The Fighting 69th* (1940) and *Sergeant York* (1941) that frame the World War I battlefield as a venue for glorious heroism a decade after *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Several areas are ripe for further research. Lary May's contention that "modern heroes" in the 1920s began to take on foreign elements—"swarthy looks, physical graces, opulent dress, and the desire for dancing and fun"—looking beyond their own insular American culture for alternatives, seems to reflect America's new international presence, including Hollywood's dominance in foreign theaters.[176] At the same time, while visual style is not the focus of this thesis, I do mention several particular instances where the

[174] Taves, 200
[175] Ibid., 207.
[176] May, 215-216.

DeMille and Chaplin films resemble *The Big Parade*, such as the line of prospectors that snakes up the mountainside, parade-style, in *The Gold Rush*. Fussell's emphasis on the war's visual motifs within literature—sunrise and sunset, for example—begs for a similar study within film.

The symptomatic approach taken in this thesis lends itself easily to imitation. The Depression; World War II; HUAC and the Cold War; Vietnam, Watergate and "malaise;" the patriotic rebound of the Reagan era; September 11th: these historical touchstones have all had narrative influences in film because each event has a narrative of its own that is replicable within an individual character's story. The World War I experience is distilled into that of Jim Apperson or the Lone Prospector; in 1969 the character Joe Buck (Jon Voight) has not been to Vietnam but nevertheless sees his best friend die in his arms at the end of *Midnight Cowboy*.

The protagonists discussed in this thesis are doomed to dissatisfaction, which perhaps reflects a fundamental anxiety within 1920s American society that would seem to contradict its carefree facade. The stock market crash in October of 1929 vindicated such anxieties, and the Jazz Age entered its swift decline. The peace brought about by the Armistice was likewise temporary; American victory in World War I may indeed have warranted celebration, but twenty years later the nation would have to refight its battles, this time with a more aggressive Germany and Japan, and with much more than shipping routes at stake.

The symptomatic approach to film implies certain limitations of auteurism, inasmuch as the filmmaker is always working within a cultural system—and an ideology—that naturally affects his or her film. The filmmaker has no control over this

ideological system, but is forced to work within it; even to rebel against social norms or modes of production is to acknowledge their presence. Therefore symptomatic interpretations of a finished film, like my identification of disillusion narratives derived from the war, are logically separate from questions of authorship.

In 1948 Robert Warshow argued that the classic gangster film was symptomatic of an American anxiety regarding personal success. He begins by writing, "America, as a social and political organization, is committed to a cheerful view of life."[177] But, he continues, "there always exists a current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create."[178] Warshow identifies a central paradox in the American consciousness: outward celebration is intrinsically mixed with an underlying sense of paranoia. Like the gangster, to be successful is to be in danger of losing everything.

Warshow's assertions about American cheerfulness are similar to those made by Sinclair Lewis in his famous Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December of 1930:

> …in America most of us—not readers alone but even writers—are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as our virtues. To be not only a best seller in America but to be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; that although American girls may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers; and that, geographically, America is composed solely of New York, which is inhabited entirely by millionaires; of the West, which keeps unchanged all the boisterous heroism of 1870; and of the South, where everyone lives on a plantation perpetually glossy with moonlight and scented with magnolias.[179]

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[177] Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," in *The Immediate Experience*, edited by Robert Warshow, 127-133 (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 127.
[178] Ibid., 128-129.
[179] Sinclair Lewis, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," Speech, Stockholm, Sweden, December 12, 1930, Alfred Nobel Foundation. http://www.nobelprize.org.

Lewis, whose own novels were satiric of such American simplemindedness, is obviously speaking about literature. But his points are no less resonant with the American cinema of the 1920s, which worked likewise with standardized narratives and generic tropes. Thus genre conventions are inevitably tied to ideology, as Bordwell points out in *Making Meaning*: "The genre is… not a mass of inert material but a historically, ideologically structured set of subjects, themes, and values."[180]

Bordwell cites Barbara Deming's 1950 study, later published as *Running Away from Myself*, as treating "even the most apparently optimistic Hollywood film as offering images of loss and futility at odds with official American values."[181] The results of her symptomatic reading of the American cinema seem to be in line with Warshow, with the previously mentioned icons of mourning in the films of Val Lewton, and with the doomed adventure narrative.

Still, American society seems predisposed to appreciate or expect optimistic film narratives. *The Big Parade*, *Male and Female*, and *The Gold Rush* all end on positive notes. But if the happy endings of all three of these films seem tacked-on, it is because the doomed adventure works against dominant Hollywood optimism and renders the realistic representations of American unease. Is the grief of the war assuaged by the reunification of lovers in *The Big Parade*? Does a sudden escape to egalitarian rural America make up for British social ills in *Male and Female*? If given a second chance, would the now wealthy Lone Prospector choose to go on his journey? These ironic happy endings are merely consolations for disillusion, and all include a romantic component typical of Hollywood's hetero-normative ideal.

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[180] Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 80.
[181] Ibid. 75.

In a way, meliorism did not die with the war but remained alive, transplanted to American movies in the guise of overwhelming optimism. Until the Great Depression jolted audiences back into reality at the end of the decade and cinema began to depict brutal "reality" in the early 1930s in the form of Warner Bros.' gangster films, for example,[182] the doomed adventure narrative was a convenient avenue for social anxieties to oppose the dominant meliorist ideology, while acquiescing to the status quo in the film's resolution. All ends well, but the journey is fraught with peril.

With this thesis I have argued that World War I affected particular film narratives in the postwar decade, but perhaps there is a bigger claim to be made. If American film production became standardized during the war years and its "basic premises" have endured ever since,[183] then it would seem that World War I has had at least an indirect effect on *all* American films made since 1918. Lea Jacobs' *The Decline of Sentiment* has already begun to test this hypothesis—changes in critical taste during the 1920s have no doubt been passed down through the succeeding decades—and I hope that my thesis will likewise be useful in the symptomatic study of postwar American film.

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[182] See Lewis Jacobs, 509.

[183] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "Happy birthday, classical cinema!" *Observations on Film Art* (blog), December 28, 2007, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/12/28/happy-birthday-classical-cinema/.

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