

## Germany's 'Douaumont' (1931): Verdun and the depiction of World War I

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It is no exaggeration to say that nobody in Europe during the 1920s came to terms with the end of the war and its consequences. The peace accords that were finally reached remained an economic, political and a moral problem—certainly for the defeated Central Powers, but also for the victorious Allies. As Modris Eksteins notes:

Faced by the horrendous idea that the war might not have been worth the effort, people simply buried the thought for a time. And if one was to bury that thought, one also had to bury the war. So be it. The war was buried... . One mourned loved ones, but avoided thinking about the object for which one had paid such a price. Nine million dead. Twenty-one million wounded. Economies in ruins. Godless Bolshevism in Russia and threatening central Europe... . 'Lest we forget' was intoned on every conceivable occasion, but forget was exactly what everyone wanted to do [1].

Forgetting had its limits, however; dealing with the European disaster in everyday life could not be avoided in Germany, for example, when it came to the question of coping



FIG. 1. Publicity photo. Germans attacking French positions. *Douaumont* (Germany, 1931). Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv Berlin.

with the results of the war. In this respect dealing with World War I remained problematic for large parts of German society throughout the Weimar Republic. One could constantly detect this in the 'question of war guilt' and the refusal—even by the democratically inclined parties—to accept the sole responsibility for the war as was stated in the Treaty of Versailles. It also surfaced in discussions about who was responsible for starting the war or why Germany had lost it.

Given the highly symbolic meaning of World War I for political discourse within the Weimar Republic it is only surprising on first sight that film turned to the battles which had taken place not long before relatively late and not very often. Actually Germany was no different from other countries in Europe that had participated in the war [2]. Around 1930 a much stronger and direct approach to the war started. Compared to the first decade after the war, there was almost a wave of war films. One can agree with Modris Eksteins and say that—starting with the spectacular success of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*—a war boom began in literature and film [3]. This is particularly true for Germany and her film industry. There are very few silent films which deal with World War I [4]. An increase in the number of films, now with sound, about the war occurred in 1930; between 1930 and 1933, and again under National Socialist rule between 1934 and 1939, more than 20 films were made in which World War I was of major significance to the plot. There are many reasons for this 'delayed reaction'; it seems plausible that the ability to maintain the distance necessary for depicting the traumatic events developed slowly, particularly in Germany during the Weimar Republic. In addition to that, the integration of sound into the film medium was an innovation that went far beyond solving just technical problems. One can consider this innovation as making possible a more complete aesthetic reproduction of war memories by including the noises of shells exploding and men shouting [5].

The technical possibility of depicting specific experiences of the participants of the war, for example 'drum fire', did not mean that the films became politically less explosive. The spectacle that the National Socialists in Berlin instigated under Joseph Goebbels' leadership over the showing of *All Quiet on the Western Front* demonstrated that the interpretation of the war was not just debated: it was possible to mobilise a considerable number of sympathisers, causing such an enormous public outcry that authorities banned Lewis Milestone's pacifist film because it allegedly threatened the public peace. All this happened, although more level-headed commentators emphasised with the sympathetic characterisation of German soldiers in the film [6]. The fight over Milestone's film had a symbolic value (and was instigated by Goebbels for tactical reasons), but it is symptomatic for the background of the other films about World War I. Although they did not provoke similar incidents, all were judged politically and necessarily so. To the viewers they appeared as attempts to come to terms with the war. In view of these very apparent public sensibilities it is hard to imagine that the films were made without taking them into consideration (and with speculation to take advantage of them).

This is also true for the film *Douaumont*, first shown 15 years after the battle of Verdun in July 1931 in Vienna, then on 13 August 1931 in Berlin in two Ufa first-run cinemas [7]. The date of the film's first showings coincided with the fifteenth anniversary of the battle of Verdun, an 'anniversary film' that dealt with the attack of German troops on Verdun which began on 21 February 1916 and ended in failure in October. The failure was less that the Germans were unable to break through—strategic planning had not defined that as a major goal—it was rather that the French did not have the decisive casualties that the Germans had hoped for. Almost the same number of

German casualties made the 'battle of attrition' for Verdun, which lasted 6 months, an example of a perfectly cynical strategy. Falkenhayn's plan was not to gain territory or to achieve a decisive breakthrough [8]. Its sole purpose was to bleed the French forces to death.

According to General Ernst von Falkenhayn:

Behind the French sector in the Western Front there are targets within reach for the defense of which the French leadership will be forced to use the last man. If it does that, the French resources will bleed to death, since there is no possibility of evasion. It does not matter if we reach our target itself or not. If the French do not make this sacrifice and the target falls in our hands, then the impact on French morale will be immense [9].

Actually the battle hurt the German army as much as it did the French army. One reason for that was that both sides were unable to give up places that were more of symbolic rather than strategic value, such as Fort Douaumont, because they feared the 'disastrous consequences' for the morale of the troops if they did. As two East German military historians noted in 1977:

The battle of Verdun was the first major battle of resources of World War I. Fighting took place in a very small area—about 15 to 30 kilometers wide and 10 kilometers deep. About 21 million shells fell on this area from the German side, 15 million from the French. According to official estimates, which were probably too low, the German army listed 337,000 soldiers as dead, wounded, or missing in action; the French, 362,000 men [10].

The attack which the High Command (Oberste Heeresleitung or OHL) initiated under General von Falkenhayn and which was finally stopped by his successors von Hindenburg and Ludendorff had a number of episodes in which both sides suffered unusually heavy losses. Memoirs published later emphasised these in various forms [11]. None of the arenas in which the fighting took place was visually as evident as Fort Douaumont, which was reduced to unrecognisable rubble in the course of the fighting. This fort was captured by German troops at the beginning of the attack, remained in German hands in spite of heavy bombardments and counterattacks, but was finally lost again. None of this had significance in any way for the course of the battle. The contrast becomes absolutely clear when one compares aerial photographs that were taken before the fighting with the ones that show the results of the many bombardments and the complete levelling of all surface structures of the fort; the German Photo and Film Bureau (Bufo) published a before and after photographic comparison [12].

In view of the symbolically charged significance which Fort Douaumont—or in more general terms Verdun—had for the memories of many Germans (and at least the same number of French) it would not have been surprising if the film had found special attention within the context of the battle's anniversary [13]. The press, however, did not treat it mainly as an 'anniversary film'. The number 15 hardly plays any role in the reviews. Nobody perceived and reviewed the film as a conscious attempt of historical remembering 15 years after the event. This was certainly also due to the rather poor overall quality of the film and a budget too modest for a large-scale production. It never seems to have been the producers' intention to lay claim to a similar spot that Leon Poirier's documentary *Verdun, Vision d'Histoire* (France 1928) occupied in France [14]. *Douaumont* is for Germany in no way 'the major historical reconstruction of the war'. When reading the following remarks, one should keep in mind that this is a small-

budget project with limited appeal as a film [15]. Compared to other films about World War I that had been made in Germany and in other European countries previously, its quality was simply inferior. It may be surprising that a more adequate attempt was not made to present this battle, which carried with it such traumatic memories for the survivors as well as the public in general, in a way that may have been more adequately made for the occasion during the Weimar Republic. One could argue that this was the result of a far-reaching scepticism towards perceiving the battle of Verdun as an element of the nation's remembering [16]. It rather seems to be a typical example for remembering a national disaster. Heinz Paul's [17] film emphasises the heroic fighting for the forts and the town, an outlook which few Germans shared. All felt the loss of the war and many had come to regard the war as senseless. Poirier's film defined the spirit of the French defenders 'in terms of suffering, sacrifice, respect for one's enemies, and a desire to return peacefully to the past' [18]. It is possible to apply the first three attributes to Paul's film, but since the director focuses exclusively on the fighting soldiers, there is no room to long for a peaceful past. This not only makes him the exception to the rule of German film makers during the Weimar Republic, but to most international productions. The ones that dealt with World War I during the late 1920s and early 1930s did not emphasise the heroic struggle but focused on the war's victims.

There are two peculiarities about the first showing of the film in Berlin: reviews briefly mention the historical events on which the film is based and then attempt to categorise its 'political tendency'. It is possible to interpret the recounting of the battle of Verdun as a reaction to a blind spot in the film: *Douaumont* in no way attempts to shed light on the sense or non-sense of the strategic decision to attack. This means that it does not take into consideration the main point of discussion in the historical debate; it also forces the journalists to look back. Different political convictions of the reviewers influence the retrospective and therefore must result in different evaluations. According to the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*,

When the first order to attack was given in February 1916, our great army in the West was a wonderful and very strong instrument; when Fort Douaumont was abandoned on October 24 after Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's order to stop the offensive at Verdun, the German army's flower which had given it the ability to carry out its thrust, had been broken. In the history of war the name of Verdun will always be connected for us with the glory of unheard-of heroism, but also with the thought of a leadership whose decisions were hard to understand ... [19]

Herbert Ihering expressed such doubts more forcefully: 'It is now well known that the army leadership under Falkenhayn fell as a result of the offensive at Verdun, and that Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's first action was to stop that offensive. Falkenhayn had not made a bold but a wrong decision' [20]. The papers with a nationalist orientation made the relationship between the depiction of the German soldiers and their real achievements a crucial point in its reviews of the film; the *Kreuzzeitung* made this issue the yardstick on which to measure the possible success of the film: a 'Douaumont film' was supposed to be different from other films.

Douaumont! This word in big, heavy letters above the entrance of a big city's movie theater appears out of place. A stream of people pours into the building. One sees the same picture as always before a show starts. Will the hundreds

of faces not become more serious, does not a sudden chill of remembrance spread among them?—No!—‘Show the program, please! [21].

Other critics did not regard the film as an absolute failure. The *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* noted ‘a simple and honest depiction of the events’, while the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* felt that, ‘As far as dealing with reality is concerned, the film hardly deviates from the facts’. Even the Nazis’s *Vorwärts* found the basic structure of the film quite acceptable—it argued that it did not glorify the war, possibly contrary to the intentions of its creators [22].

An interesting point of this praise is that the depiction as a whole satisfied the viewer because it revealed the cruelty of the fighting, even if the combination of screenplay and contemporary documentary material was not resolved in an ideal manner [23].

The *Berliner Börsen-Courier* noted that

When one sees the battle of war materiel rage for months just for one single fort, when this fort is taken apart by artillery, blown to pieces and at last pulverized before our very eyes, when an increasing number of human beings storm in and out again exhausted, wounded, suffocating in gas clouds, then those facts are stronger than some touching pieces of text and even the remark that the decision of the army command had been ‘daring’ [24].

The *Vorwärts* commentary indicates that the film received mostly favourable reviews. The Social-Democratic paper termed it a ‘Hugenberg-film’. It did not do so because Germany’s largest film studio, which in 1926 had become part of the media empire of the ultra-conservative German National Party’s leader, had produced the film. It also did so because the film was first shown in two Ufa theaters (Ufa-Theater Universum and the Ufa Pavilion at the Nollendorfplatz). Once the film was labelled in such a way, the *Vorwärts* reporter seems to have assumed that the film had to have a tendency to glorify war to be considered worthy of showing in a Ufa film theatre. To his surprise he found that it did not have the very quality he had expected. This is why the *Vorwärts* concluded that *Douaumont* was an anti-war film, perhaps in spite of the producers’ intentions [25].

Other reviewers accepted this interpretation: to them *Douaumont* appeared to be a film ‘without tendencies’ [26]. They regarded as ‘a good omen that even such a film does not carry nationalistic excesses anymore’ [27]. In other words, the surprise that this was not a pro-war film moved most critics towards a rather positive assessment of the film, even if they did not consider it to be very well done. The review in the conservative *Kreuzzeitung*, whose headline claimed ‘failed film experiment’, also makes this clear. It demands exactly what the *Vorwärts* or Herbert Ihering were afraid had happened before they saw the film, namely that its depiction of war could be used against pacifist arguments. The *Kreuzzeitung* saw another danger:

One finally has to make an end to the attempts to line up sounding pictures in which the reasons and the results of different battles are shown in sound and picture reproduction that try to capture realities as closely as possible. Such attempts will always leave the impression that we are dealing with a completely senseless chain of events, that there are ‘blindly’ raging forces at work with which pacifists very much like to discredit everything that is in any way connected to the issue of war. It is our impression that—in spite of numerous scenes and a handful of sketches—the film *Douaumont* was bound to fail and in fact did fail. [28]

Since the attitude towards the film essentially depended on the critic's view of World War I—something hardly surprising—the film was a pleasant surprise for opponents of the war, but a big disappointment for those who expected to see a patriotic depiction. The reviews reveal that the assessment of the film is completely detached from judgements about *Douaumont's* artistic quality. Almost all reviewers agreed in particular that bringing Colonel Haupt in as an actor was one of the weakest parts of the film—a correct assessment, even today. Other judgements about the quality of the film as such can rarely be found; discussion of the political implications dominates the reviews.

A clearer understanding of the film's form would have helped to create a better foundation for criticising it. It also could have resolved the puzzle of why Ufa cinemas were permitted to show a film which the *Vorwärts* thought to have pacifist tendencies and which the *Sozialistische Bildung* recommended to its readers. This surprises us because the argument made in the images is not pacifist at all. Director Paul chose a form of portrayal which clearly separated it from other films that were made at the same time, both German and foreign. To help the audience comprehend the war experience better, a remarkably large portion of the films that were made at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s about World War I used the same artistic trick. A small number of soldiers, mostly from the lower ranks, are the focus of the action. The history of this group in the course of the war, ever more members dying, provides the narrative means for bringing the realities of the war home to the audience. The pattern was first laid down in *J'accuse* (director Abel Gance, France 1918) and was also used in a number of silent films, particularly in the US (*The Big Parade*, 1925, director King Vidor; and *Wings*, 1927, director William Wellman). However, only sound films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (US, 1929, director Lewis Milestone) and *Westfront 1918* (Germany, 1930, director Georg Wilhelm Pabst) formulated the pattern so effectively that they became a model for most war films all the way into the present. Films about other armed conflicts follow the model of the small, easily recognisable group; almost all of the relevant war films (or anti-war films), whether they are set during World War II, the Korean War or in Vietnam, base the plot on few select persons whose experiences (and deaths) permit a compression of events which otherwise would be hardly manageable. In addition to that, this formula includes one of the most important conditions for successful films, the emotional involvement of the spectator. If one takes the aspect of a reconstruction through film into consideration, individualising the events brings with it the disadvantages of all conventional forms and cannot satisfy because it almost always avoids asking for the reasons behind the conflict. For entertainment films, however, the tested pattern has almost no disadvantages; its sentimentality, leaving out concrete historical contexts and the stereotyping of the figures, make those films acceptable to a wide audience.

Within the contemporary context, decisions for forms that deviate from the tried and true solutions are remarkable. The prototype of all anti-war films, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, had led to scandal that ended in censorship, in particular because the National Socialists had organised a campaign against pacifistic films in Germany and Austria [29]. *Westfront 1918*, a German film whose structure is comparable to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, had not met a similar fate and had even received a favourable reception by the critics. Both films formulated a certain standard which referred to depicting the experience of war. Klaus Kreimeier analysed this for Pabst's film: 'Within the character of the Lieutenant (Claus Clausen) the armor-clad ego of the machinelike soldier human mutates in an exemplary way into the exact opposite: a creature that is shouting with no inhibitions and completely loses control

through fear and madness' [30]. Both films stand at the beginning of a tradition of coming to terms with World War I through films, most of which presented it as completely senseless. Hardly any film ever endeavoured to justify World War I, which is quite a contrast to World War II, for example [31]. The reason for this remarkably consistent critical attitude, at least of the most important films about this war, has its foundation in the reality of vain offensives which caused hundreds of thousands of victims, a fight that had frozen in a system of trenches and the very apparent cynical attitude of commanding officers towards incredible losses [32].

Turning away from the established pattern is directly connected to a change in understanding the war itself. This is also remarkable because director Heinz Paul himself made another film according to the prevalent model: *Die andere Seite (The Other Side)*. That film was first shown in Berlin only 2 months after *Douaumont*. It is based on a theatre play by the English author R. C. Sheriff. Its individualisation and concentration on the situation of the front-line soldier, as well as its sceptical and ultimately anti-militaristic attitude, are certainly in step with Milestone's and Pabsts's films, even if perhaps it does not achieve their quality [33]. In contrast to this, there is no group with clearly defined individuals and types at the centre of *Douaumont*—just as its primary objective is not capturing the war experience of the soldiers. The director chose to leave the 'group' in *Douaumont* anonymous and did not provide them with characteristics that go beyond the military. The group is completely absorbed in the military routine, and is a conglomeration of the 'human' machine. The decision not to individualise history is connected to the attempt to reconstruct one specific event of the war: the course of the war, not the human experience, is meant to be the centrepiece of *Douaumont*; the film did not intend to explore the experience of war, but rather its mechanics. When we take this contrast into consideration, it is consistent that *Douaumont* puts the soldier at centre stage instead of a typified individual. The creature is replaced by the 'human' machine. While other films portrait the group as a unit in which human beings with different degrees of education and different histories are bound together and while those films emphasise regional origins and different ways of coping with the experience of being in the trenches, *Douaumont* renounces these elements almost completely.

The film's opening titles emphasise its special concerns:

This film attempts of a reconstruction of the crucial battle for Fort Douaumont from February to October 1916 which took place in the context of the attack of Verdun. In this respect it does not purport to be a feature film. It was created without any biases and, is based on authentic film material and the personal participation of former participants, among them two who captured the fort, Colonel Haupt, and Reserve Lieutenant Radtke. Please take into account the technology and the degree of preservation of the original documents from 1916. They should be regarded as documents of the time.

Compilations of contemporary film documents and the use of trick film which help clarify different troop movements at first bring the film in to the vicinity of films such as *Der Weltkrieg* (Germany 1926/1927, director Leo Lasko) [34]. In that film Ufa showed for the first time a compilation of contemporary 'documentary' [35] material which reconstructed the course of the war together with trick photography and several acted scenes. *Douaumont*, however, focused on a much shorter period of time and on



FIG. 2. Special effects insert, *Douaumont*. The location of the fort and its design. Frame enlargement. All frame enlargements courtesy of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.

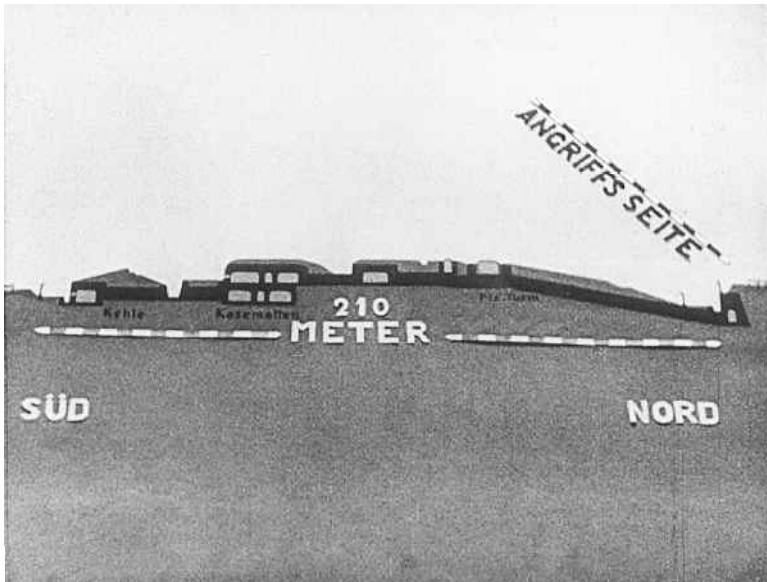


FIG. 3. Special effects insert, *Douaumont*. The location of the fort and its design. Frame enlargement.





FIG. 4. Captain Haupt, actual veteran of the battle, who portrays himself in the film. Here, he studies plans for the attack. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 5. The beginning of the battle. German troops leave their fortified positions. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 6. The next stage: German troops in no-man's-land. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 7. The attacking troops. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 8. German troops under heavy attack, in difficult terrain. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 9. Captain Haupt. Close to Fort Douaumont; direct view. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 10. Archival documentary footage, with new intertitle, to exaggerate the strength of the opposing French forces. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 11. Archival documentary footage. Intertitle explains that the bombardment of the area around Verdun came at the command of the French Army. Frame enlargement.

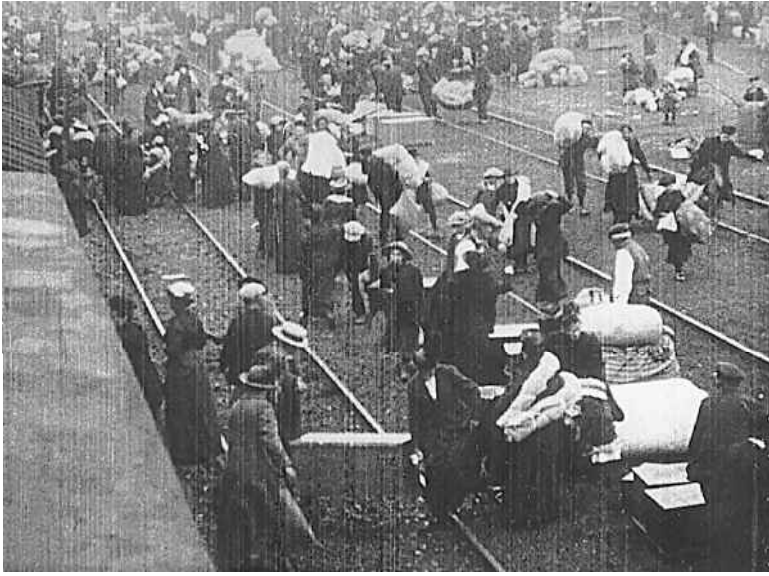


FIG. 12. The same scene. The few possessions of civilians fleeing the city of Verdun. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 13. Everyday life in the fort. German soldiers playing cards. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 14. One of the most significant sequences in the film. Roll call after a French attack; the two dead German soldiers—dismembered by the machine gun (Fig. 15) and against a backdrop of barbed wire (Fig. 16)—cut into the roll call scene. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 15. The image of death. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 16. The image of death. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 17. The unending defence of the fort against repeated French assaults. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 18. Defeat. Retreat from Fort Douaumont. Frame enlargement.



FIG. 19. End title: 'They died for their Fatherland.' Frame enlargement.



one specific episode: it chose for its compilation a limited area and time period within the offensive around Verdun, the fighting for Fort Douaumont. The perspective intended to elevate the men to heroes—even the choice of words occasionally reminds one of the contemporary press releases. It is also no coincidence that the official army reports are often quoted [36]. This means that the film does not deal with the question of whether the decision to make Verdun the target of an offensive was strategically justifiable or not [37]. The director's view of the fighting emphasises the soldiers' 'courage to sacrifice' and completely avoids the question what purpose the sacrifice had. This fact alone distinguishes the film from all other cinematic attempts of those years. The experiences of the different offensives, which often enough regarded only the losses of the enemy as the decisive factor—and therefore turned into a sacrifice of one's own troops—provided the reason for making 'pacifist' films which depicted the war as indeed completely senseless. For this reason the filmmakers were able to pick the troops of the former enemy as the main figures without difficulty (for example *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Die andere Seite*): those films were never meant to glorify 'one's own side'.

As a consequence of the lack of interest in the reasons and purposes of the Verdun offensive, the director is content with just a dry comment. 'At the end of the year 1915/1916 the high command of the army (Falkenhayn) decides to attack Verdun'. The narrative about the preparation of the offensive takes refuge in changing some historical facts and suggests that the German attack initially did not meet any dramatic success because the French had finally been warned and reinforced their troops after rain had slowed down preparations. Another title comments on the postponement of the attack: 'The tragic part of this decision is that the French High Command learns about the impending attack and prepares on her side the strongest reserves'. Now the whole operation no longer assumes a strategic perspective but rather becomes a matter of fate. It becomes the 'great struggle'—a metaphor which was used in Germany during the war to describe the 'greatness of the task'. The use of this metaphor does not permit any question about the meaning and purpose of this 'struggle'.

The exposition serves as a vehicle to prepare the viewer for the great battle in a didactic fashion. A map shows Verdun and its surroundings—all forts, villages and forests in the area are marked: 'Surrounded by a double ring of forts around the old city of Verdun' (title). The compilation that follows emphasises the 'calm before the storm'. French soldiers are standing in front of a gate, smoking their cigarettes, and relaxed. A long camera pan shows the buildings along a canal; scenes of houses and ruins follow. The war may seem to be far away, but it already reached the city before. The pictures of the ruins, among them the destroyed cathedral, document this.

This town—according to the film—will be the main target of the German attack: 'Fort Douaumont is the northwestern anchor of the permanent main defensive positions'. The famous aerial photograph of the fort when it is still intact is shown in a shot that suggests that the fort and other fortifications are being scouted from above. Trick shots and a sketch of the fortifications clarify the fort's structure. The following title reads 'Until the attack is ordered on February 12, 1916, the Verdun front is quiet'. Once again a map which shows the distribution of the German troops testifies to that. A long shot reveals explosions on the horizon—as if to demonstrate the distance between the town and the main areas of action.

Contemporary French documentary material shows the inhabitants busily conducting their daily affairs in the streets. This also suggests normality which exists in spite of the destruction. Typical pictures of German soldiers follow: they are taking an

improvised shower; one German soldier plays a piano in the open air; others fill a town square. These are typical stereotypes of the soldiers' everyday lives. They are not meant to be idyllic, however. They form the background which will provide an even stronger contrast between peace and the fighting which follows.

*Douaumont* then uses compilation film to reconstruct the preparations for the offensive. There are pictures of troops getting ready to march away, of guns pulled into position by horses, of gigantic railroad artillery, of rising hot air balloons, armoured trucks, machine gun operators, and marching soldiers. The film combines all these shots into a montage that uses contemporary material quite effectively. It is important to characterise this use of contemporary documents to understand the elements of the film that come into action later. All of the material incorporated into the film had been shot at the rear of the front and therefore was material that could already have been available in 1916. With certain restrictions, cameramen had access to events of war which took place far away from the front lines [38]. This is not to say that the footage came directly from the actual preparations for the battle, the material signals a certain authenticity.

The next sequence starts with the map of deployment and is made in a similar way. After dealing with everyday occurrences (including the field kitchen, weapons lined up in a row, and marching soldiers) a transition introduces the plot. Starting at the fireplace in a field office, the camera moves on to a soldier who is shaving and introduces a principal character of the film: Haupt receives an order. He reads it and walks over to two comrades playing chess. One of them says 'check' and comments, 'they broke through the defensive positions'. Haupt joins them and informs them about the order to attack. This awkward scene demonstrates the break between the documentary material and the plot. The reason for this is the poor quality of the acted scenes. The critics at the time did not like Haupt's wooden performance—it certainly disturbs the carefully constructed impression of authenticity. Indeed *Douaumont* would have left a far more emotional impression if the producers had used professional actors instead of the 'fort's conquerors' [39].

The following scenes, waiting for the order to attack, did not turn out well for different reasons: compared to the technically convincing *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Westfront 1918*, the small budget of the film is obvious. Later fighting scenes demonstrate this fact even more, but even troops standing in the rain cannot hide the backdrop. In particular, the scenes depicting the attack are nickle-and-dime stuff. Once again the comparison with Hollywood is interesting. Later compilations often did not worry about historical accuracy and used Milestone's feature film as 'historical material'. They did this because it could fill the gap of missing archival footage, but also because the dynamics of his battle scenes have become a generally accepted image of what that war 'really was like'. No scene in *Douaumont* comes close to this transmitted authenticity. The film tries to juggle images which would be more suitable for a less mechanised war [40]. During the attack sequence an officer is hit. After falling, he continues to urge on his men until he finally dies. These scenes always appear unconvincing. This is also true for the storming of the fort: Haupt and his men reach the barbed wire—but it never seems to be the barbed wire of Fort Douaumont. The film's rather idyllic depiction of the advance contradicts its message of the 'great struggle' [41].

Ultimately the contradiction cannot be resolved. The maps show the advances of large units whereas the staged scenes show relatively few soldiers in field exercises (the German *Reichswehr* cooperated in making the film). The limited authenticity of the

documentary material, which can only provide pictures of the rear, still maintains the upper hand compared with the staged scenes because there was not enough money for a large-scale production. The monotonously repeated scenes of the storming and defence of the fort become counterproductive to the claim that it is a 'reconstruction of the constantly changing struggle'. The film fails less because of its 'semi-documentary' form than for its shoestring budget. Even the scenes representing the rooms in the fort are too flimsy to be believable.

The most noticeable limitation that a small budget imposes on this production is a lack of variety. The film *Die andere Seite* at least demonstrates that Heinz Paul possessed greater capabilities than he showed in *Douaumont*. In this film he produced some remarkable scenes, for example that of the roll call after one of the many attacks by the French. Only a few of the sergeant's soldiers answer to the list of names which he reads. Brief shots are intercut to show those who remain silent: they lie dead in their positions (Figs 14–16). The film reaches another intense moment in the scene in which a shell hits the field hospital, which presents suffering and dying better than some heroic will to sacrifice. The scenes that the viewer remembers most vividly are those in which the action focuses on the individual from a particular military unit. The young soldier who is dying and dictates a letter home is a recurring theme. On this occasion Paul has the camera move away from the soldier at the very moment in which he dies: death becomes visible only in the reaction of the medic who hears no words to continue the letter. This solution, which achieves a higher degree of intensity by consciously limiting itself aesthetically, is a good example of Paul's talent in small scenes. The statement that 'the war unveils its horrors in the film' [42] relates best to episodes like these. Since they are more memorable than the scenes of the storming or the counterattacks, the impression of some critics who interpreted the film basically as an anti-war film becomes understandable. The structure of the film itself, however, does not leave any doubt about its attitude towards the battle of Verdun. Ideological reasons are not the main cause for its failure; it failed primarily because its budget did not permit the heroic staging of mass scenes [43].

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## NOTES

- [1] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, 1990), pp. 253–254.
- [2] See Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990* (New York, 1991), pp. 24ff.
- [3] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, pp. 275–299.
- [4] *Der Weltkrieg*, a prestige laden Ufa production, is probably the best known. The film had two parts and was produced by Leo Lasko in 1926–1927. This compilation film largely consists of material which was shot during the war to which some acting scenes were added. It seems that only an incomplete copy of the film exists today. Another silent film—*Unsere Emden*—produced by Louis Ralph (1926), limits itself to a popular episode that happened during the first months of the war: the raids of a German cruiser that was ultimately sunk by British ships.

- [5] It is apparent that this 'completeness' only resulted in an 'incomplete' form. See the description of the 'Troglodyte World' in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1977), p. 49. The film audience was spared the smell of decomposing bodies.
- [6] See Bärbel Schrader, ed., *Der Fall Remarque, 'Im Westen nichts Neues'—eine Dokumentation* (Leipzig, 1992) for a chronology of the staged 'scandal' in Germany and Austria and for different opinions about the film and this case of censorship. Milestone's film was again screened in Germany at the end of 1931.
- [7] *Douaumont* (director Heinz Paul; script Karl-Günter Panter and Heinz Paul; camera Victor Gluck, Georg Bruckbauer and Siegfried Weinmann; music Ernst Erich Bruder; sets Robert Dietrich and Bruno Lutz; producer Karl Günter Panter) passed censorship on 8 August 1931, length 2444 m; first showing 13 August 1931 at the Ufa theatre Universum and the Ufa pavilion at Nollendorfplatz in Berlin. A copy of the film is preserved and can be viewed at the Ufa-Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv, Fehrbelliner Platz 3, 10707 Berlin, Germany. HVW Filmvertriebs GmbH in Munich began distributing a video copy of the film in 1991. In America, the film (5JJC5F) is available for \$39.95 from The Scholar's Bookshelf, 110 Melrich Road, Cranbury, NJ 08512; fax: +1 609 395 0755.
- [8] Ernst von Falkenhayn was the field operations chief of the general staff during the first years of the war; he was relieved of that post at the end of August and assumed the command of the ninth army which was engaged in operations against Rumania.
- [9] See Falkenhayn's memorandum in Wolfdieter Bühl, ed., *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Darmstadt, 1991), p. 175.
- [10] Helmut Otto and Karl Schmiedel, *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Militärhistorischer Abriss* (Berlin, 1977), p. 209.
- [11] Even short histories of the war which hardly have any room for individual occurrences, still mention Douaumont. Karl Dietrich Erdmann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg* (Munich, 1991). Gebhard, *Handbuch der Deutschen Geschichte*, vol. 1, gives approximately four and a half pages to the military occurrences of 1915 and 1916. This is what he has to say about the fighting in Verdun: 'After rapidly changing and deadly fights for the forts, Douaumont, which acquired a gruesome fame, remained unconquered.' German Werth's compilation, 1916: *Schlachtfeld Verdun, Europas Trauma* (Berlin, 1994), includes excerpts of many memoirs.
- [12] Jean Renoir's masterpiece *La Grande Illusion* also refers to the Douaumont myth, but in a typically indirect approach: first he depicts French prisoners of war reading a poster about the capture of the fort by German troops in their camp. They later learn about the reoccupation by French troops from a German newspaper. The Marseillaise, which an Englishman begins to sing as a result, only seemingly fits the patriotic programme. The news of recapturing Douaumont hardly finds any resonance within the French troops. Consequently, the film does not even mention the final outcome of this struggle, French control of the fort.
- [13] Bernd Hüpauf, 'Schlachtenmythen und die Konstruktion des neuen Menschen,' in Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich and Irina Renz, eds, *'Keiner fühlte sich hier mehr als Mensch': Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), pp. 53–103, compares the different functions of the 'Langemark myth' and the 'Verdun myth'.
- [14] Richard Abel, *French Cinema: the first wave 1915–1929* (Princeton, 1987), p. 202.
- [15] 'Those responsible for making the film did not have even a very small six digit figure at their disposition for putting it together'. *Filmkurier*, 14 August 1931.
- [16] 'By then the soldiers around Verdun had lost the illusions of their youth and did not think in terms of winning the war with one single battle. At least they were certain that the Germans would not be able to break through anymore. They all had served together to save their country and all of France knew about their sacrifice because the press celebrated their victory like no other. Was this not indeed the first victory which had been accomplished by an entire nation?' Marc Ferro, *Der große Krieg 1914–1918* (Frankfurt-am Main, 1988), p. 143. In his propaganda, Hitler also portrays the fighting as an experience which changed the soldier, robbing him of his youthful enthusiasm. See Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole* (Vierow, 1996), pp. 99ff.
- [17] Heinz Paul—real name Heinrich Egid Robert Paul—was born on 13 August 1893 in Munich and died on 14 March 1983 in Rothschaige. He began his career as director in 1924 (his first film was *Des Lebens Würfelspiel*). To a certain degree he specialised in themes dealing with World War I and in 1927 directed *U 9 Weddigen* and worked on Poirier's film *Verdun, Vision d'Histoire*; in 1931 directed *Douaumont* and *Die andere Seite* (based on the English play 'Journey's End' by

R. C. Sherriff) as well as *Tammenberg* in quick succession. During the following years he worked in different genres. Among other films he directed the (rather weak) Nazi propaganda film *Kameraden auf See* (1937–1938) and during the 1950s the inevitable *Heimatfilme*. None of his films seem to be of special aesthetic interest.

- [18] Abel, p. 204.
- [19] Episode des Heldentums. Der Film von DOUAUMONT im Universum, *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, 14 August 1931.
- [20] Herbert Ihering, Der Douaumont Film, *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 14 August 1931. The *Welt am Abend* published the strongest attack on the film. The headline reads 'The Slaughter of Verdun: Does the Film *Douaumont* Tell the Truth', but there are few references to the film. The author who wrote as K. Kn. makes his opinion abundantly clear: for him the battle of Verdun was one of the 'most gruesome slaughter of humans in the history of mankind'.
- [21] Douaumont: ein verfehltes Filmexperiment, *Kreuzzeitung*, 14 August 1931.
- [22] See Herbert Ihering, Der Douaumont Film, *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 14 August 1931, Episode des Heldentums. Der Film von DOUAUMONT im Universum, *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* (14 August 1931); in addition to that, Hugenberg's Antikriegsfilm. Pazifismus wider die Absicht oder aus Geschäftssinn? *Vorwärts*, 14 August 1931.
- [23] 'As far as the film itself is concerned, there is much to criticise. It is clear that combining the documentary material from 1916 with the arranged scenes of 1931 could not be entirely successful. Interestingly, the old, real, primitive pictures (for example, those showing the civilian population evacuating Verdun) have much more to teach us and are much more absorbing than the new ones', *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 14 August 1931. The *Filmkurier* (see note 15) emphasised the depiction of the cruelty of the fighting as well: 'The film succeeds in showing the German as human, how he suffered, lived, and died in the hell of Verdun. It shows him without mask, deadly serious, dutiful, ready to help. This permits him to find fulfillment, faithful even in the last horrors which the fight against him unleashes.'
- [24] *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 14 August 1931.
- [25] A similar remark can be found in *Sozialistische Bildung* 4 (1931) p. 273:  
If Ufa had had its way, then we would have had a 'heroic' film. One would have asked 'military experts' from the great general staff and one would have had the colonel and the lieutenant, who had commanded that completely useless and yet incredibly bloody storming of the fort at Verdun, repeat their actions. Apart from that, the makers would have been satisfied with low quality film material from the war archives. But it has happened before: the camera delivered something different from what was expected. It caught an incredible confusion among friend and foe alike—the senselessness of the modern machine warfare in which artillery slaughters its own infantry and 'victors' and 'vanquished' alike become victims of this murdering technology. No matter if the French made *Verdun* or the Germans *Douaumont*: It will never become an 'epos', only a cry of warning: 'never again war!'
- [26] 'There is not one unnecessary word, political tendencies are not present, the front line lives again, and one could notice a great shock in the audience', *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, 13 August 1931.
- [27] *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 14 August 1931.
- [28] *Kreuzzeitung*, 14 August 1931.
- [29] See Schrader, *Der Fall Remarque*, p. xx.
- [30] Klaus Kreimeier, 'Trennungen. G. W. Pabst und seine Filme,' in Wolfgang Jacobsen, ed., *G.W. Pabst* (Berlin, 1992), p. 102.
- [31] A similarly critical attitude exists in the American productions dealing with Vietnam, which in most cases is also depicted as a senseless war which was fought at the cost of the 'ordinary soldier'.
- [32] Of course the exception to the rule are the films which were produced under the National Socialists which strove to make the war a heroic experience. One of the first consequences of this policy was the prohibition of all pacifist films, among them *Westfront 1918*.
- [33] It is not surprising that the office of film control prohibited *Die andere Seite* on 27 April 1933, shortly after the Nazis came to power. See Klaus, *Deutsche Tonfilm. 2 Jahrgang 1931* (Berlin, 1989), p. 16.
- [34] Other countries also produced compilations: see *Met onze Jongens aan en Yser* (Belgium 1929–1930, director Clemens de Landtsheer) which criticizes the Walloons. See also *Gloria* (Italy 1932).
- [35] The problems that the surviving film material from World War I (and not just that material) pose have often been discussed with regard to the 'authenticity' which those scenes supposedly

transmit. They are also present in the film *Douaumont*. This article focuses not on questions of authenticity but rather of effect.

- [36] One of the special features of *Douaumont* is its technical ‘imperfection’. The film uses techniques from the silent film era by including titles—the narration one would expect from a sound picture is missing. It could be that the titles were regarded as a more detached and omniscient solution. The example of *Der Weltkrieg* may have influenced the decision. The soundtrack has a strange quality: dialogue hardly exists and the music dominates together with the sound of machine gun and artillery fire. Even that, however, is not used synchronically but rather appears to be added to achieve a degree of ‘realism’.
- [37] See the conclusion of J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (London, 1988), p. 88: ‘In 1916 the chief of the German general staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, proposed to win the war in an indirect manner. By attacking the French salient at Verdun he intended not to make any major breakthrough, but rather to bleed the French army white. This was war of attrition with a vengeance, and it left the battlefield strewn with the corpses of over half a million men.’
- [38] See Hans Barkhausen, *Filmpropaganda für Deutschland* (Hildesheim, 1982), for the policy of the High Command towards film teams.
- [39] ‘... it is impossible to “reconstruct” events such as the heroic struggle for Douaumont, and it is certainly the worst idea to use those who participated in the events. Time alone is a factor against such a decision: 15 years is too late to force Colonel Haupt to do again what he did then (as an actor!)’ This was the judgement of the *Kreuzzeitung*. The *Berliner Börsen-Courier* also found the acting performances questionable: ‘It is certainly debatable whether the cooperation of Colonel Haupt as an actor was a correct decision or not’.
- [40] In this way *Douaumont* continues the tradition of depictions which were created during the war itself in which contemporary observers already noticed the ‘anachronism’. See Rainer Rother, ed., *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit: Bilder des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin, 1994), for the development of the representation of the war in general in pictures and in the media.
- [41] In this scene it becomes obvious that it is impossible to let the colonel do once again as an actor what he had done 15 years before as a soldier: he walks slowly and he uses a cane. All this was certainly adequate for his age but not for ‘storming’ the fort, which was supposed to be depicted in the scene.
- [42] *Filmkurier*, 14 August 1931.
- [43] One notes the aesthetic failure of *Douaumont* in comparison with the contemporary French documentary of Verdun, Leon Poirier’s *Verdun, Vision d’Histoire* (1928).

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