

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Joyeux Noël - 2005

Director: Christian Carion

Screenplay: Christian Carion

Cinematography: Walther van den Ende

Music: Philippe Rombi

Producer: Christophe Rossignon

Spieldauer: 116 minutes

Cast: Diane Krüger (Anna Sorensen), Benno Furmann (Nikolaus Spink), Guillaume Canet (Lieutenant Audebert), Gary Lewis (Father Palmer), Dany Boon (Ponchel), Daniel Brühl (Horstmayer)

Precis – Allen Krumm

‘Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori. This venerable summons to sacrifice is alleged to have first been uttered by a patrician who was long on sword futures. Horace polished it up and put it in his Odes. Since then it has reverberated down through the centuries in a variety of national echo chambers in one form or another, repeated by statesmen and reiterated by warriors, most recently by a battle tested *Frontschwein* whose colloquial rendition (“Bring ‘em on.”) rivals the calm conviction if not the eloquent symmetry of the original.

Quentin Roosevelt responded to the reverberation in his time, becoming an enthusiastic believer who was altogether willing. Wilfred Owen did not believe, but he was willing as well. The same was true of Ernst Jünger, Richard Sorge, Louis Ferdinand Destouches, Siegfried Sassoon and millions other soldiers fortunate enough to be eligible for the war to end all wars. It is simply amazing that so many sought membership in the “last full measure of devotion” club.

At Christmas time in 1914 there was little peace on earth and virtually no good will among men in Europe, but there was a *Waffenstillstand* in a small stretch of *Niemandsland* where soldiers on both sides lay down their arms and stopped killing each other. During this time, they had pause to reconsider a lot of things. As George Orwell said, apropos a later conflict, “if the war didn’t happen to kill you, it was bound to start you thinking.”

Christian Carion puts proper pieces into proper places in telling the story of this extraordinary episode. Little boys with charming voices recite targeted *Fremdenhass*. Candles blow out as two young men rush out of a church to enlist, a premonition of all the lives that will be snuffed out and perhaps an unintentional evocation of the remark attributed to Edward Grey: “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.” An enchanting incident which serves to trigger the ultimate trajectory of the plot occurs in the call of the

Dudelsäcke and the response of the *Adeste Fideles* solo. There are subtle bits of comic relief sprinkled amidst an abundance of emotional transitioning.

The character ensemble indelibly limns the wasting dynamics of war. The sincere faith of the dedicated priest forces him to finally renounce his vocation. The haunted artist knows that art is only art and cannot cover over the abyss that the war has opened within him. The Scottish general personifies the absurdly blind arrogance of the generals who administered the war. The trio of young lieutenants struggle to avoid being psychologically crushed between the irresistible absolutes of patriotism and the immovable horrors of the war.

With the penultimate climax of the mass in no man's land, the soldiers have seemingly passed the point of no return. They have put down their weapons and stopped fighting. The story is moving and we respond accordingly. But no good deed goes unpunished during war, and things are set right with the subsequent counter climax of censure and punishment. So the catharsis is incomplete, but not just because the soldiers are punished for not killing. It is rather because one is compelled to dwell on the enduring fratricide between Christian nations which serves as the framework for this story, and dwell on it again.

Eventually the real soldiers involved in this story returned to their respective trenches and became once again *Menschentiere*. The so called fortunate ones might be best described as merely undead by the end of the war. From there, they had the privilege of returning with their shattered lives ("*Der Krieg hat uns for alles verdorben*") to a shattered world. If they lived long enough, they had the privilege of hearing political pied pipers re-invoking the 'pro patria' incantation to their sons. The less fortunate, the dead, might be divided into those who were at least candidates for burial, as they were still corpses, and those who served as the raw material for the vast quantities of *Fleischbrei* and mincemeat which the tactics and technology of the war produced. *Befehl ausgeführt!*

Sadly the famous fraternization of Christmas 1914 was a rare event. For the most part, through mud, wet, cold and disease, most of the men dutifully kept killing and getting killed for the duration of the war. If brave men such as Ernst Jünger and Siegfried Sassoon were sometimes terrified, we can take that as the norm for almost all soldiers in the filthy trenches. Yet these soldiers kept on fighting and killing. They kept fighting for reasons defined essentially by negation rather than affirmation. They killed because they did not want to be killed, and they did not want to be punished, and they did not want to lose face and, most sadly, because they did not want to recognize the humanity of the enemy. Their reasoning was in a sense sound; there are rarely any positive reasons to fight.

Wilfred Owen certainly didn't think there were. In one of the poems which ensured his enduring reputation, he describes the effects of a gas attack, and then assures the reader that if he had ever seen such things...

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest,
to children ardent for some desperate glory,
the old Lie: 'Dulce et decorum est,
pro patria mori*

Owen was killed in action on November 4th, 1918, a week before the armistice.

Shortly after arriving in the war theater Quentin Roosevelt had written to his fiancé Flora "I love you too much not to come home". Notwithstanding his ardor and determination, on July 14th, 1918 two machine gun bullets ripped into his brain as he engaged in a dogfight with the *Boche*, as he called his foes. The Germans were able to identify his body by letters from Flora which they found on his body. He was buried with full military honors. It is not known if he was dreaming of home that day.