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Movie Review: 1917

Joshua Matthews

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Abstract

"1917 might seem like it's in the distant past. But, the war's horrific effects will extend long into the future, making Mendes' movie relevant for a long time into the future."

Posting about the movie *1917* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

January 31, 2020

Movie Review: *1917*

Josh Matthews

★★★

Title: *1917*

Directed by: Sam Mendes

Written by: Sam Mendes and Kristy Wilson-Cairns

Starring: George MacKay, Dean-Charles Chapman, and several surprise cameos from famous actors

Music by: Thomas Newman

The most striking aspect of Sam Mendes' new World War I movie, *1917*, is the backgrounds. Rare as it is for the backgrounds to shine brighter than the actors and foregrounds in movies, Mendes has achieved it; I believe that was his goal.

Although it has some CGI, *1917* is an ultra-realistic-looking tour through the battlefields of WWI. I think that it ought to become a staple of high-school and college classes because of its profound depiction of war and its history. Any history class would benefit from how it amazingly recreates the world of early twentieth-century trench warfare.

The plot of *1917* is so simple that even if you can't hear what the characters are saying—due to quiet speaking and thick British accents—you'll still figure out that two British soldiers must go on a mission to stop another British company from

assaulting a German position. They have to travel over enemy lines, through a ruined town, and into a forest—a journey of several miles—with limited time.

Those two soldiers—ably played by George MacKay and Dean-Charles Chapman—walk, crawl, and sprint through a number of landscapes while encountering nearly everything you think of when “WWI” comes to mind—trenches, rats, barbed wire, ruined buildings, and aerial dogfighting (think “The Red Baron”).

The movie has a formal gimmick—indeed, *1917* looks like it is shot all in one take, with no cuts. This is a technique occasionally used in recent years but also an old one, dating back at least to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 movie, *Rope*. The careful viewer will spot dozens of transitions; yet, the effect of the single-take look makes *1917* look something like a videogame. In a primitive way, viewers are getting a 3-D virtual-reality experience.

The choice of making *1917* look like a single-shot movie is a severe formal limitation, hampering the usual capacity of a movie to cut to other scenes and show other perspectives. Throughout *1917*, we are never sure where the characters are headed, although we’re told that they are trying to find a forest behind enemy lines.

The formal limitation makes this movie surprisingly slower than most blockbuster war-movies. In fact, there’s a leisurely arthouse pace in a good portion of *1917*, which I was happy to see but which might put off casual movie-viewers.

As I mentioned, the background of *1917* stands out the most. For me the movie is about the ecological devastation of war. As the characters wander through varied landscapes, signs of wreckage and destruction are everywhere. The first shot of the movie depicts a lush field filled with flowers, where the characters are napping under a tree. But then the camera ever-so-slowly moves back into the trenches, and eventually it goes over those trenches, through a wasteland of dead bodies and mud and craters—a place where there is a total absence of life.

Yet, viewers can tell that that wasteland was once a lush field in France, fruitfully multiplying flowers, grass, and crops. At the movie’s beginning it is April, recalling T.S. Eliot’s opening-line of his famous post-WWI poem “The Wasteland”: “April is the cruelest month.” It certainly is the cruelest month for the two main characters in *1917*.

The theme of ecological destruction continues when, about a third of the way through the movie, the characters come up to a small farm where all of the cherry trees have been chopped down. Those trees, blossoming with white flowers, signify both the characters' nearly obliterated sense of heroism and manhood, as well as the ecological devastation caused by the armies. These armies destroy the land by digging trenches, planting mines, and obliterating all vegetation to make space for their artillery and other weapons of war.

1917 offers some glimpses of hope that maybe these characters will survive, or that the war will end. Four times there are awakenings where characters seem asleep or dead, and yet wake up. These pseudo-resurrections occur in key spots, mirroring the stated possibility, as one character puts it, that the cherry trees will not only respawn but will also grow back so that they will be more abundant than they once were.

I did not feel that *1917* achieved more than depicting the vision of the WWI battlefields of France. It is good for one viewing—and make sure you watch it on the largest screen possible. It does not approach the top-tier of WWI movies, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Paths of Glory*, or the sad tragedy of *Gallipoli*.

Yet, *1917* solidly depicts what people do to nature when they try to kill each other.

Thanks to untold numbers of unexploded munitions planted during WWI, innocent people still die from the war when they accidentally dig up an explosive or run over a landmine. Every year, even in 2020, at least 20 tons of such munitions from WWI are found and detonated. The estimates are that it will take 700 years to get rid of all of them.

1917 might seem like it's in the distant past. But, the war's horrific effects will extend long into the future, making Mendes' movie relevant for a long time into the future.