

# LES SENTIERS DE LA GLOIRE

by Stanley KUBRICK

## FICHE TECHNIQUE

Titre original : Paths of Glory

Pays (country) : USA

Durée (running time) : 1h28

Année (year) : 1958

Genre : Drama

Couleur (color) : black and white

Scénario (screenplay) : Stanley KUBRICK, Calder WILLINGHAM, Jim THOMPSON based on a novel by Humphrey COBB (which in turn was based on accounts in newspapers about compensation paid by the French government after the war for unjust executions of soldiers) published in 1935

Directeur de la photographie : George KRAUSE

Costumes : Ilse DUBOIS

Military advisor : Baron VON WALDENFELS

Montage : Eva KROLL

Musique (music) : Gerald FRIED

Coproduction : Bryna Production / Harris-Kubrick Productions / United Artists

Distribution : Ciné Classic

Interprètes (cast) : Kirk DOUGLAS (Colonel Dax), Ralph MEEKER (Capitaine Paris), Adolphe MENJOU (Général Brulard), Georges McREADY (Général Mireau)

Sortie : 26 mars 1975

Reprise : 10 novembre 2004

## SYNOPSIS

The film is set in France in late 1916 somewhere on the Western Front. In keeping with the strategy advocated by Grand-Maison (« l'attaque à l'outrance » – attack to the bitter end) General Brulard plans an attack on a fortress hill, the Anthill, in the middle of “no man’s” land for the dubious reasons of publicity-seeking and career promotion. When the attack inevitably fails, General Mireau orders his artillery to fire on his own men in order to force them out of the trenches saying, “if the little sweethearts won’t face German bullets then they will face French bullets”. Later he insists that 10 men from each regiment be tried (for “cowardice in the face of the enemy”) and executed, but reluctantly settles for a symbolic one man from each group. According to traditional French practice, each man is chosen by lot from his unit (some variation on this in the film). General Staff are under pressure to carry out executions because of pressure from newspapers and politicians for evidence of progress in the war. Colonel Dax realizes that the officers will not permit a fair trial. When he discovers General Mireau’s orders to fire artillery on his own men he uses this information to get back at him. Brulard interprets this to mean Dax is ambitious for Mireau’s position and offers it to Dax who angrily refuses it.

The 3 soldiers are executed without a murmur from their colleagues. This took place before widespread mutinies in the French army in 1917 which were a result of weariness with the war, anger at their incompetent leadership and the influence of the Russian Revolution.

## AUTOUR DU FILM

### Contexte historique (historical context)

World War I was caused by strong feelings of nationalism, economic rivalry between nations, the existence of large armies on all sides, and a history of hostilities in previous centuries that left countries and peoples with a feeling that they needed to get even with each other. The rulers of the German nation, united only since 1871, wanted to become a sea power and acquire a colonial empire. To fulfill these ambitions, Germany built up its navy triggering a naval armaments race between the two countries.

In 1870 the French army had been crushed by the German army. Paris had been besieged and starved into submission. France was forced to pay vast sums to Germany in “reparations” and to give up Alsace-Lorraine, a large economically important region on the border between the two countries.

Europe was divided into two military alliances: the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France, and Russia and the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. In 1908 Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. The nationalist movement in Serbia wanted to acquire the southern part of Bosnia and was hostile to the annexation. Serbia, however, was too weak to fight Austria-Hungary without the support of Russia. When Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Serb terrorists in Sarajevo, Austria-Hungary used the event as an excuse to invade Serbia. Russia mobilized to defend Serbia. Germany and Austria-Hungary declared war on Russia and France. Great Britain then declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Great War was on.

The Western Front ran some 300 miles across the face of Western Europe, from Belgium to Switzerland. The Front consisted of opposing trenches, sometimes only yards apart. The trench warfare of World War I lasted for three years and took several million lives. The Battle of the Somme, an attack by the Allies trying to break through the German lines, took more than four months. The Allies gained only six miles. British and French casualties were 95,675 Britons killed and 60,729 Frenchmen killed. The defense cost the German army 164,055 soldiers killed.

Overall German casualties during the War (wounded and killed) were 7,142,558, some 65% of all German soldiers who were mobilized. French casualties were 6,160,800, an astounding 73% of all men mobilized. British Empire casualties were 3,190,235, “only” 36% of men mobilized. U.S. casualties were 350,300, a “minimal” 8% of mobilized personnel. Counting all combatants over the entire war, 65 million men were mobilized, 8.5 million killed, 21.2 million wounded, and 7.7 million taken prisoner or missing in action.

The trenches were muddy ditches often flooded with water. The bodies of dead and wounded men and animals fouled them. Corpses lay in the no man’s land between the trenches. Enemy snipers, rats, lice, and stench from the decaying bodies contributed to the misery of the trenches.

An attack was preceded by bombardments, some lasting for days. In order to mount an attack, soldiers carrying rifles and packs had to go “over the top.” Once in the no man’s land they faced barbed wire entanglements, machine guns, bombardment (often by their own misdirected guns), grenades, poison gas and fire from the opposing trenches.

The Western Front was in stalemate until the U.S. entered the war. Fresh troops and abundant hardware and supplies from the U.S. tipped the scales decisively in favor of the Allies. An armistice was signed on November 11, 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles was imposed on Germany in June 1919.

### **Stanley Kubrick (SK) and war**

SK was born in New York in 1928, became an apprentice photographer for *Look magazine* (1946-50), and made his first film in 1950. From 1974 SK has lived and worked in England in order to have complete independence from Hollywood. Since he insisted on complete control over every aspect of his films he could not work for a major film studio. SK has had no direct experience of war (other than living through the Cold War of the late 1950s to the late 1980s) yet he has made 4 films about war.

Films about war:

- *Fear and Desire* (1953) about the assassination of a general by a lieutenant done in order to seize a plane to escape
- *Paths of Glory* (1958) about the court martial and execution of three French soldiers in WWI
- *Dr Strangelove* (1964) about an accidental nuclear war between the US and the USSR
- and his Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

### **Meaning of the title**

Ironic reference to the not-so-glorious “path” (political not on the battlefield) taken by some officers for the fulfillment of their careers and ambitions, which results in enlisted men going to their graves. Quoted from Thomas Gray’s (1716-1771) *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*:  
*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,*

*And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave  
Awaits alike the inevitable hours:  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

### **Main characters**

- General Broulard (Adolphe Menjou) who plans the attack,
- General Mireau (George McReady) who orders the shelling of his own men and insists on the court martial for cowardice,
- Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) who acts as the 3 men's defense lawyer,
- Lieutenant Roget: an incompetent officer whose drunkenness leads to the death of one of his own men,
- Major Saint-Aubon: the army chief prosecutor,
- the three soldiers who are court martialled:
  - Corporal Paris picked because he witnessed Roget's mistake,
  - Private Arnaud who was picked by lot,
  - and Private Ferol picked because he was a social undesirable.

### **Movie quotes**

- "If the little sweethearts won't face German bullets, they'll face French ones." (Gen. Mireau)
- "There are few things more fundamentally encouraging and stimulating than seeing someone else die." (Gen. Broulard to Col. Dax)
- "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." (Col. Dax)

### **Things to note**

- The movie was shot at Bavarian Filmkunst Studios, Munich, Germany; the hundreds of French soldiers were played by German policemen.
- The movie was banned in France until 1975 ; the Swiss army censored it until 1970.
- The film opens with an ironic rendition of the French national anthem "La Marseillaise" and a voice-over commentary. Gerald Fried composed a different theme song for countries that might be offended by hearing the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise", which appears as the theme song in most versions of the film.
- When SK asked Kirk Douglas to star in *Paths of Glory*, Douglas responded: "Stanley, I don't think this picture will ever make a nickel, but we have to make it." Douglas's own production company, Bryna Productions, produced the film.
- SK argues that the real division which separates men is not national but one of class and status. In this case the leaders vs the led. War is seen as a continuation and intensification of civil class conflict. Contrasts made between the world of the senior officers (the 18<sup>th</sup> century chateau, a place of order and symmetry, elegance, decadence, home of the old nobility) with the trenches where the enlisted men are forced to live.
- SK's interest in symmetry and regularity: note the geometrical shape of its courtroom which is like a chessboard with human beings as pawns being moved about (SK's great love of chess – origins as a war game). Here the deliberate and selective killing of the military courtroom replaces the random killing of the unordered battlefield. Note also the symmetry of the chateau's grounds in the execution scene. Regularities of nature uncaring even destructive of human life ; the symmetry of the trenches – long, narrow and confined.
- The attitudes of the officers to war and to loss of life. War provides a "path" for the fulfillment of careers and ambitions – the "path of glory". The generals cynically and scientifically calculate the numbers of expected casualties (personal ambition vs 8,000 men): they are more concerned with themselves and the opinion of the press and politicians than with the enlisted men's welfare. General Brulard says that the executed men died "wonderfully" (i.e. before the press photographers without causing a fuss).
- SK's attitude to religion. A priest visits condemned men but is challenged by Arnaud who calls religion a "drug" like alcohol. The execution scene is like the crucifixion of Christ who is surrounded by two criminals. The priest urges the men not to question the will of God.
- The meaning of the final scene. Initially the brutalized and exhausted soldiers mock and jeer a German girl (SK's wife in real life). Slowly they respond to her predicament – she is human like them and just as much a captive as they are. They then join in singing her song about lovers separated by war: the vulgarity of men vs the ambition and ruthlessness of general officers. Dax is disgusted with both.
- The references to enlisted men and children or animals: the herd vs the human instinct ; lower animals ; Children who require discipline ; the vulgarity of men vs the civility of officers.

- The idealism of Dax vs Machiavellianism of Brulard: Dax's confrontation with Brulard when he realizes that the men have died for the sake of personal ambition. He denounces Brulard as a "degenerate and sadistic old man" and says he is ashamed to be a member of the human race. The Machiavellian Brulard pities Dax's naivety, ignorance of the rules of the game and his reluctance to play by them.
- The trenches built for the film were six feet wide instead of the standard WWI width of four feet in order to allow room for tracking shots.

## PISTES PÉDAGOGIQUES

### Pre-viewing activities

#### 1. Homework:

On the Internet, do some research about the movie *Paths of Glory*.

- When was this movie shot?
- Who directed it?
- Who plays in it?
- What is the story?

#### 2. Check what information students have on World War I.

### After viewing the movie: discussions, debate or essays about the movie

#### 1. General questions:

- What was the theme of this film? What were the film-makers trying to tell us? Were they successful? Justify your answer.
- Did you learn anything from this movie? What was it?
- Was there something you didn't understand about the movie? What was it?
- What did you like best about the movie? Why?
- What did you like least about the movie? Why?
- Select an action performed by one of the characters in the film and explain why the character took that action. What motivated him or her? What did this motivation have to do with the theme of the film?
- Who was your favorite character in the movie? Why?
- Who was your least favorite character in the movie? Why?
- Describe the use of color in the film? Did it advance the emotions the film-makers were trying to evoke? How would you have used color in the movie?
- Analyze the use of music in the movie. Did it enhance the story that the film-makers were trying to tell? How would you have used music in this movie?
- Did all of the events portrayed in the film ring true? Describe the scenes that you found especially accurate. Which sequences didn't seem to match reality? Why?

#### 2. History: the first half of the movie (45 min)

- Describe the trenches, the no man's land and an attack during WWI as they are shown in the movie: do you think this representation to be accurate?
- Compare soldiers' and officers' living conditions and attitude: what did the director try to show us?
- Is this movie a fiction or is it based on real facts that happened during WWI?

• Il existe de nombreux sites Internet proposant aux professeurs d'Histoire-Géographie des exemples d'exploitation du film en classe de Première :

- [http://www.cinehig.clionautes.org/article.php3?id\\_article=69](http://www.cinehig.clionautes.org/article.php3?id_article=69)

Site animé par Jean-Pierre Meyniac, professeur d'Histoire-Géographie au Lycée Marie Curie d'Echerolles (près de Grenoble).

Il fournit des documents d'accompagnement, en particulier un article très intéressant intitulé *Les Sentiers de la Gloire, de l'histoire à l'historicité* répondant à la problématique suivante : de quelle manière *Les Sentiers de la Gloire* est-il un film « historique » ? On y trouve de nombreuses informations sur l'intérêt du film du point de vue historique.

Il propose un questionnaire d'étude en classe et un questionnaire « Devoir à la maison ».

Il indique également d'autres sites d'exploitation ou d'information sur le film.

- [http://www.ac-strasbourg.fr/sections/enseignements/secondaire/pedagogie/les\\_disciplines/histoire-geographie/lycee/histoire/la\\_grande\\_guerre\\_a\\_l/view](http://www.ac-strasbourg.fr/sections/enseignements/secondaire/pedagogie/les_disciplines/histoire-geographie/lycee/histoire/la_grande_guerre_a_l/view)

Travail de Emmanuel Noussis.

Le site fournit de nombreux documents (articles...) et le découpage séquentiel du film.

Le site propose aussi une exploitation pédagogique sous forme d'un tableau à compléter par les élèves (aspect documentaire, message du film, critique).

- [http://www.cndp.fr/tice/teledoc/dossiers/dossier\\_sentiers.htm](http://www.cndp.fr/tice/teledoc/dossiers/dossier_sentiers.htm)

Travail proposé par Philippe Huneman, professeur de Philosophie.

Ce site propose une fiche de présentation du film, le contexte historique, l'analyse de séquence (en particulier l'assaut), une réflexion sur la censure...

### 3. Justice / Ethics: the second half of the movie (45 min)

- Describe the trial: what was wrong with that trial?
- Describe the role of the priest in the movie: in your opinion, what is the director's attitude to religion?
- Should Colonel Dax have accepted the promotion offered to him?
- Was Colonel Dax naive to think that justice could be found in war?
- What is the meaning of the last scene (men drinking and listening to a German woman who is a prisoner and who sings for them a famous German song about lovers separated by war)?

### **Enlarging the study: other movies**

*All Quiet on the Western Front*, directed by Lewis Milestone, USA – 1930 – 2h11

This is an acclaimed antiwar film of the First World War told from the German perspective. The movie is based on the classic novel by Erich Maria Remarque. Its message is contained in the legend displayed on the screen at the beginning of the film: "this story is neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. [This story] will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells were destroyed by the war..."

There is a 1979 remake but the 1930 version is better.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* shows the effects of the war on the individual soldier, whether friend or foe. It describes the horror of trench warfare and the drawbacks of unquestioning patriotism.

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