**"Un Long Dimanche de fiançailles" ("A Very Long Engagement")**

Released in 2004 and making the first reprise of any selection for our international film series, **“A Very Long Engagement”** is the work of Jean-Pierre Jeunet, one of French cinema’s most perceptive and talented *cinéastes*. He is known best for Amélie, which garnered a number of Academy Award nominations and is perhaps France’s most popular film in the US. This film, also nominated for an Academy Award for cinematography for its battle scenes, is based on a detective novel of the same name, and despite the setting in WWI and the love story it depicts; this is, in fact, a mystery story.

In *A Very Long Engagement*, the heroine Mathilde fights for love and life in a climate of hate and death. What makes both the film and the novel remarkable, according to NY Times critic Manohla Dargis, is the dark rage that seethes in Mathilde just below the surface. Apart from that success, Jeunet seems more preoccupied with his plot, characteristic special effects, and attention to detail than to characterization.  However, watch for Jody Foster, who, in the middle of the film, delivers an excellent secondary performance, all in French of course.

There’s also the aspect of the war itself, which robbed France of more than 1.4 million of the 7.5 million military men it mobilized. 4.25 million more were wounded. That’s a 75% casualty rate. To put this into perspective, that means that of the 32 million inhabitants of France in 1918, 5% of them were killed as soldiers in that war. Indeed, being deployed to the trenches amounted essentially to a death sentence, a fact that makes itself clear in the opening scene, where we see a severed arm hanging from a shattered cross.

Extending these percentages, as an exercise, to modern American demographics, imagine 15 million men between the ages of 17 and 44 being killed in a war and another 40 million wounded. That’s a lot, of course, but imagine the number of children that would never be born because their fathers never came home to marry. That’s some dry spell, eh, ladies? Indeed, people who wonder why the French capitulated so quickly in WWII may not realize that much of the generation of soldiers who would have fought in it were simply never born. They also may not understand the profound effect this loss of a generation of young men had on the French psyche, especially when it comes to war.

Finally, it should be noted that the American firm Warner Bothers financed the film, thus leading some critics to question its French credentials. It was made in France, with French actors, Jodie Foster aside of course. It has also enjoyed mixed reviews; critics seem to either love it or hate it. I leave it to you to decide. And the ending? Can Mathilde spend the entire movie looking for her lover and never find him? I’m not going to tell you, but the pleasure and pain associated with the last few minutes of the film are likely to visit you more than once before you fall asleep tonight.

**Questions and comments for students to consider:**

* **This film has gained a new relevance in recent years due to the profound effect of sustained combat experience – now called PTSD instead of “Shell Shock” (WWI), “Battle Fatigue” (WWII), or “Post Vietnam Syndrome” – upon a military fighting force. Do the five soldiers’ motivation and method of freeing themselves from continued service in the trenches seem reasonable to you? Why or why not?**
* **How does the relationship the between the horrors of the battlefield and the joys of life manifest itself throughout the film?**
* **Comment upon the incidence and role of revenge in the film.**
* **The ending of the film cannot really be called a surprise ending, but it is surprising in the way that it is portrayed. How? Would you expect this kind of an ending in an American film? Why or why not?**

**Write a paper of 250-300 words (in English or French) that answers one of these questions and turn it in before Spring Break to receive full replacement credit for a missing (lousy?) assignment or quiz grade.**

**Deadline: 3/11/2011**