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An Uncompromising Vision of War

By Joy Gould Boyum

1918. A corpse-strewn battlefield somewhere in France on the edge of which stands a huge, rudely carved crucifix. Here, in grainy black and white, we see an American infantryman stumbling over his dead comrades and coming upon a German soldier who cries out repeatedly, "Don't shoot, the war is over." Believing this a ruse, the infantryman fires, only to find out moments later that the war is indeed over. Rather than having killed a soldier in war, he has murdered a man in peace.

The prologue of "The Big Red One" (the insigne and name of the infantryman's division) is also the sequence that serves as the film's epilogue. Only at the end the scene is in color, the year is 1945, the young infantryman has grown into a gray-haired sergeant and the German manages to survive the bullet. This time, discovering his mistake, the American frantically dresses the German's wounds, screaming, "You're gonna live you s.o.b.! You're gonna live or I'll blow your head off!"

On Film

"The Big Red One"

This is a curious pair of scenes, oddly combining as they do the grisly and the comic, the sentimental and the tough-minded, the symbolic and the real. But they are also apt. For the movie they frame – written and directed by Sam Fuller, that quirky and singular filmmaker responsible for at least one or two of everybody's favorite B movies (among them "Pickup on South Street" and "The Naked Kiss")–is also a curious mixture of these ingredients. At certain moments, they don't quite jell–parts of the movie are awkward and heavy-handed–but on the whole they work, making for a remarkable film that is above all a true original.

The film's form itself is unusual. Spanning the period from 1942 to 1945 and stretching from North Africa to Sicily to the Normandy beaches and beyond, the film at first seems to be taking us on a truly epic journey. But as lived through by the sergeant we have met in the prologue and four members of his platoon, the journey instead comes across as intimate and essentially picaresque.

There is the concern and competence of Lee Marvin's superbly played sergeant, the perfect leader and the even more perfect father to his emphatically boyish company; the wry fatalism of the cigar-chomping young writer (David Carradine), who is also our narrator and guide; the wiles of the Italian-American (Bobby DiCicco); the spunkiness of the clean-cut blond (Kelly Ward); the delicate sensitivity of the troubled young moralist (Mark Hamill).

But if these soldiers are sharply particularized and delineated, and their adventures vital and exciting, both the characters and their actions are also rich with resonance–even emblematic if you will. As musketeers, these boys are an army in small, whose adventures tell much about the nature of war. Certainly a sequence in which the Vichy French, rather than continue to fire on the Americans, throw down their arms and embrace them, is more about the arbitrariness of enemies than about a particular moment in history. A scene in which the five must deliver a baby in a tank is there not simply for its wild comedy but to affirm life in the midst of carnage.

But whatever points are scored, they are rarely pressed too heavily. They come through as directly, simply and straightforwardly as death in battle. For throughout, the movie is characterized not only by a striking understatement (this is a war movie in which the faint-hearted need never close their eyes, in which the soft-hearted need no handkerchief) but also by an equally striking toughness. When a young soldier trips over a mine and loses a testicle, the sergeant simply tells him, so what, he has two. When boys must be sent systematically to what is almost certain death in order to establish a beachhead, well so be it–this is the way it is. Yet if it's tough, the movie isn't hard. In fact, at times it has a sentimental edge to it that is inescapably touching. Wherever the sergeant goes, he seems to attract children–children who decorate his helmet with flowers, who offer him grateful hugs, who die, if not quite in his arms, at least on his shoulders.

Such sharp contrasts as this film is made of clearly create complexity and richness. But these contrasts do something else. They establish the film's attitude as essentially ironic, especially as regards war itself.

Shot after shot may underscore war's awful wastefulness. We see the sea growing red with blood, forests as filled with dead bodies as trees. Sequence after sequence may illustrate war's total irrationality–one, for example, in which an inmate of an asylum where a skirmish has taken place grabs a machine gun and opens fire, crying out triumphantly, "I am one of you. I am sane, I am sane." Yet, what has seemed almost to the end a powerful indictment of war, turns out at last to be an equally powerful, albeit reluctant, acceptance. The last mission the men go on is to liberate a concentration camp. Together with them we see first the vacant eyes of survivors, then the bones and ashes of the dead, and are thus made to understand that if wasteful and mad, war is nonetheless sometimes necessary.

It's a terrible irony all right. And it is the heart of a strong and uncompromising vision, which together with the film's other rare qualities–its lucid photography, its exemplary performances, its literate script–helps to make "The Big Red One" not simply the finest film so far this year but one of the finest of its kind.