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Clémentine Tholas

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FILM REVIEW: FEARING EMPOWERED WOMANHOOD DURING WORLD WAR ONE?

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Love and Duty (1916) and *A.W.O.L.* (1919)

CLEMENTINE THOLAS

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“Men are disarmed, women, indispensable.”^[1] This quote from Joanna Bourke’s article on gender roles in *The Cambridge History of the First World War* enlightens the confusing and challenging relationships established during wartime. The two American short films, *Love and Duty* (1916) and *A.W.O.L.* (1919), could offer a relevant illustration of the new social organization deriving from the conflict and heralding women’s agency. If none of these films has been directed by a woman and seem to deal with women during the Great War, they inadvertently do so despite their male-centered plot illustrating the misadventures of American soldiers when trained or demobilized. Spoofing inflated heroism in romantic melodramas, *Love and Duty* is a one-reel comedy from the Plump and Runt series produced Blackhawk Films in Jacksonville, Florida. As Plump (Oliver Hardy) and Runt (Billy Ruge) presumably serve as reservists, they are trained in a bucolic camp even if America has not entered the war yet. This slapstick piece may exemplify the pacifist stance adopted by Hollywood in the early years of the Great War, as Americans dreaded taking part in an international conflict which they considered alien to their interests. *A.W.O.L.* (*All Wrong Old Ladiebbuck*) is a one-reel propaganda cartoon commissioned by the U.S. Army Signal Corps at the very end of the war to encourage the soldiers to wait patiently for the general demobilization after the 1918 Armistice. It was designed by Charles Bowers, one of the pioneers of animation films, to warn the impatient soldiers too eager to get back home of the risks of going A.W.O.L., absent without official leave. Both films reveal the presence of women around servicemen and how the war paradoxically separated and brought together combatants and non-combatants. These films presents a non-scary and distant vision of the war – an anticipation of the conflict and an illustration of its aftermath, picturing not so much the ac-

tual military fighting but what Ford Maddox Ford called “life as a perpetual sex-battle” (*The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion*, 1915) in which women have the upper hand over men, thus turning males into the weaker sex.

Love and Duty (1916)



Love and Duty offers a grotesque gallery of unfit servicemen, as the regiment on screen seems to gather the rejects of the US army. Plump and Runt, the title characters, are too stout or too short to fit the standards of military manliness introduced by recruiters and military boards. Lieutenant Runt tries to ease his frustration by bullying Private Plump with nonsensical and useless exercises and maneuvers which cause the poor lad to gesticulate in an absurd manner and sweat like a pig as he juggles with his rifle. Runt spends his time yelling stupid orders at Plump who cannot do as told and almost faints with exhaustion. Along with this antithetical pair, other peculiar soldiers form the battalion: a group of idle simpletons and an over-aged bugler. Instead of getting ready for war, they just chat with the local women, relax in the countryside, and watch passively Plump being harassed by Runt. They look like a regiment of outcasts who may have been gathered because of the call for preparedness of some Americans who considered the US would fight the war sooner or later. Yet the war don't seem to be on the mind of these soldiers and they show no sense of professionalism or military duty. The officer in charge, Colonel Tracy (Burt Tracy), is busier trying to convince his daughter (Florence McLaughlin) not to fall for Plump than training properly his men, and the soldiers are mainly interested in wooing women, especially Plump who only cares about escaping to meet his sweetheart (Ray Godfrey). *A.W.O.L.* opens on the conversation of a group of soldiers who are desperate to leave Europe and want to return home. As the fighting is over, they are bored to death, complaining about the slowness of demobilization and waiting idle. One of them is more vocal about his discontent while the others are coping with the situation and he decides to escape the barracks. Even if they are still wearing their uniforms, they are not of any use to their country because of their apathy. Because of his impatience, the noncompliant private decides to run away with a lady of pleasure who shows up outside the camp to invite young men for a joy ride. The cartoon presents US soldiers as dispirited and even defiant to Uncle Sam's orders. The men are indeed disarmed, physically and morally, in

these films because they are not granted any strength or will power which could enable them to match the archetypal standards of the ideal warrior. Before and after the war their lack of motivation to serve their country or obey the rules prevents them from becoming heroes in these two short programs. As a result, we may wonder if women become heroines despite themselves in *Love and Duty* and *A.W.O.L.*?

"AWOL" (1919 silent film short)



Female agency is a common trait in both productions. In *Love and Duty*, women are granted the power to galvanize the regiment, give men orders and most importantly to decide for themselves. Plump's sweetheart keeps the morale of the troops high as she entertains the men with her cheeky behavior and she is not scared to defy Runt by throwing a stone at him to make him stop molesting Plump. When she meets with her beau, she is the one bringing flowers to him, thus reversing the codes of romance by leading the seduction instead of being courted. She is the one kissing Plump and, when Runt sends a soldier to interrupt their tender embrace, she knocks the soldier off with her bouquet in order to continue doing what seems more important to her. The regiment watches the scene and laughs out loud, enjoying this impudent display of defiance. The sweetheart has a rival in the camp: the Colonel's daughter. The latter is also in love with Plump, to her father's and Runt's dismay because the two men planned on marrying her to the tiny Lieutenant. Challenging the authority of her father, she refuses to change her mind and disparages Runt's exuberant courtship. Instead, she prefers chasing Plump around the camp, also transforming the traditional codes of seduction as she openly shows her desires and behaves like a suitor. When she discovers she is not the target of Plump's affection, her features are distorted with jealousy and fury. Her power over men is fueled by her rage against the couple and she starts ordering soldiers around in order to separate the love-birds. The Colonel's daughter uses Runt to have him send Plump to the guard house and she commands the soldiers to expel the sweetheart from the military camp: "Take her off". Despite her condition as a woman, she is given some official power over the servicemen and bosses them around as she pleases. At her command, the soldiers even point their rifles at Plump's lady friend when they oust her out of the camp. While her father is never shown leading his men, the daughter behaves as if

she was the real commanding officer of the camp and soldiers salute her with deference. Despite her misuse of the power transferred to her thanks to her father's rank, she is presented as the one ruling the regiment. Her ruthless decision is not challenged by men but by the sweetheart who works out a clever plan to get Plump out of his prison cell. Only another woman is capable of countering the supremacy of the Colonel's daughter and save her captive lover by pretending his baby needs to visit him and bringing tools in the cell. The comical exaggeration may show the ladies as a dictator in petticoats and a cunning intriguer, yet it cannot be denied that they are conferred a form of superiority – even open control in the case of the daughter – over men in a military environment.

In *A.W.O.L.*, the portrayal of women is far less flattering because the female character, “Miss AWOL” – as she introduces herself, is dangerous, a loose woman who lures the poor soldiers to their doom. However, she embodies the liberty and authority women gained during the war. With her short bobbed hair and her sophisticated outfit and make up, she may be a flapper challenging traditional gendered behavior. Seeking fun right after the war, she shows up at the window of the barracks and calls out soldiers to join her for a joy ride in her fancy car, a hardly covered allusion to sexual intercourses. The cartoon criticizes brazen women who chased young men in uniforms but it also reveals new trends giving women more opportunities to become autonomous. Miss AWOL initiates the encounter with the soldier who does not behave like an audacious man but rather like an embarrassed maiden when he is approached by the undaunted seducer. Uncomfortable and impressed, he makes funny faces and wipes his sweaty palms on his trousers while she seems perfectly at ease and tries to convince him by shouting: “Oh do, come on, we'll have a bully time”. He obeys her command to loosen up and have fun and jumps into the back seat of her car. His position at the rear of the car is significant of his subordinate role while the woman takes on the leading role and decides for what they should do and where they should go. He depends on her for getting away from his military barracks and he is submitted to her whims. The joy ride ends up being less joyful than expected because of her reckless driving and her desire to maintain him at her disposal: when he tries to move to the passenger seat in the front he is pushed to the back seat, reminded where he should stand. The car almost falls from a cliff and he is completely panicked. After they manage to escape the peril, the flapper orders him to repair a flat tire but he makes a fool of himself as he has no talent as a mechanic and makes the tire explode. He is knocked out by the explosion but she insists on continuing the crazy ride until they get arrested by a police officer and are taken to Judge Gloom. The soldier pays the fine but his lady companion refuses to stop and abducts him for a new ride before she finds another admirer she fancies more. Miss AWOL appears to be authoritative and quite manipulative and the soldiers, probably bewitched by her interest in them, are presented as submissive and quite impotent, disarmed because of the trauma of the war and overwhelmed by the social transformations generated by the conflict. The cartoon offers a negative portrayal of women after the war changed their looks and behaviors because they had been called to endorse more active roles in society as bread-winners, political protesters, helpers in the combat zones and even fighters sometimes. Despite the cynical denunciation of the wildness of Miss AWOL, the spectator is presented a shift of power and how women became indispensable because they were turned into decision-makers while men seemed overtaken by events. In the cartoon, the female character is obviously a temptress driving the soldier away from his military duty and causing his fellow soldiers to turn their backs on him, but the moral lesson of the

film incriminates the private who ends up locked in the guard house while his brothers in arms are sent back to the U.S. and Miss AWOL happily runs free with another boyfriend.

Love and Duty and *A.W.O.L* are rather unknown World War One films and have been often left aside by scholarly works analyzing anti-war films or propaganda productions. Both the comedy and the cautionary cartoon are worth of interest for their comparison of male distress and female empowerment in a context of exacerbated military masculinity. Even when the films disapprove of the attitudes and choices of women, they interpret a period of transition during which women took charge of their own destiny and of men's fate. *Love and Duty* announces already the challenges to male command witnessed in the post-war world presented in *A.W.O.L.*, in which new gender relationships are tensed and often contested. After the war, most men longed for a return to the normality they once knew – in which they held the upper hand. These films show that that mythical normality is a remain of the past and that women cannot resume a life guided by the by-gone principles motherhood and home-life after they have been given emotional, sexual, professional and political independence.

Films

A.W.O.L. Directed by Charles Bowers. United States, 1919. *Love and Duty.* Directed by Will Louis. United

[1] Joanna Bourke, "Gender roles in killing zones", in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War: Volume III, Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 153.

Clémentine Tholas is an associate professor of American Studies at Sorbonne Nouvelle University. She is a silent film scholar, with a special interest in World War One films. She co-edited the volumes *Humor, Entertainment and Popular Culture during WWI* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and *New Perspectives on the War Film* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). She also produced a pedagogical documentary on sexual violence and harassment in French higher education, entitled *Briser le silence des amphis* (2022).

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