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James Kent, dir., *Testament of Youth*. London: BBC Films, 2014. 129 minutes.

Review by Elizabeth Foster, The University of Chicago (elizabethfoster@uchicago.edu).

War stories are political, and Vera Brittain's autobiography *Testament of Youth*<sup>1</sup> explicitly positions the author's politics relative to her personal story as a nurse during the First World War: the book is an "attempt to write history in terms of personal life," ultimately constituting "the indictment of a civilization" (VB 11-12). In adapting the book to film, director James Kent revisits a medium where condemnation of the war is a theme familiar from film classics like *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, compared to Brittain's original readers of 1933, modern audiences interpret her story through a much denser screen of political hindsight and war-movie tropes.

In the 2014 movie,<sup>3</sup> Kent represents the politics of *Testament of Youth* to an audience conditioned by history. On the surface, the film focuses on the love story between Vera, played by Alicia Vikander, and her fiancé Roland Leighton, played by Kit Harrington, and elides the retrospective comments on international and social politics that frame the narrative in Brittain's book. But the abbreviation does not make *Testament of Youth* apolitical. Nor does it create the effect of a movie like *300*,<sup>4</sup> where the "apolitical" nature of the film is in practice part of its politics.<sup>5</sup> The latter is precluded in *Testament* by its unrelenting realism and refusal to show gratuitous blood and gore for the sake of drama. Fidelity to Vera's character as a real human protagonist, at times unpleasant and abrasive,<sup>6</sup> emotionally engages the audience with her war and allows for a subtly effective connection of personal life and politics.

The beginning of the movie finds Vera attempting to escape the prison of politely uneducated Edwardian femininity. But despite her frustration, this is still a golden age, marked by romantic passages in the book that Kent translates into scenery and camera work:

On summer evenings one of our favourite rambles took us across the sloping fields, sweet with clover and thyme and wild roses .... [A]s twilight descended we looked a little nervously at the darkening sky for indications of Halley's Comet, which was said to herald such prodigious disasters, or listened more serenely to the nightingales in a stillness broken only at long intervals by the lazy, infrequent little trains which ambled down the toy railway line in the valley. (VB 36-37)

Lingering detail shots early in the movie provide a visual rendition of these passages, transforming the last summer before the war into an almost impossible paradise—which it remains for those of us on the other side of the cataclysm. Kent does, however, evoke the foreboding hovering over "that unparalleled age of rich materialism and tranquil comfort, which we who grew up at its close will never see again" (VB 50). This sense of impending doom is skillfully woven into Brittain's description of the prewar idyllic age. But Kent wisely avoids freighting the film's first scenes with, say, a solemn voiceover lamenting the twilight of an age of innocence or any flash-forward to the image of her beloved brother Edward lying dead in the

1. Orig. 1933, rpt. NY: Penguin, 2005 (hereafter, VB) with preface by Shirley Williams, introduction by Mark Bostridge.

2. Dir. Lewis Milestone (Universal City: Universal Studios, 1930).

3. The film's theatrical release date in the United Kingdom was 16 Jan 2015, in the United States 5 June 2015. It will be released in DVD and Blu-ray formats by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment on 15 Oct 2015.

4. Dir. Zack Snyder (Burbank: Warner Bros. 2006). See the review at *MiWSR* 2007.05.04.

5. The heavily stylized visual effects and universalized language of "freedom" theoretically frame *300* as "just entertainment," but also effectively create the ideal form of a person in the Western model and thus subtly convey a political message. See Kirk Combe and Brenda Boyle, "Hooah! We ... Are ... Sparta!" in *Masculinity and Monstrosity in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 74-120.

6. She is angry and frustrated at the beginning of the film, unsympathetic to her exhausted mother in the middle, and, after returning to Oxford, brusquely dismissive of her future best friend Winifred Holtby.

trenches; these would have been both melodramatic and unnecessary. For today's post-World War II viewers are already inclined to see the First World War as a tragedy that set in train even more geopolitical trauma than Brittain's readers could foresee in 1933.

Kent instead reminds his audience of the approaching tragedy in the film's opening scene, showing the end of the war: Vera pushes her way through a jubilant crowd with an expression of blank shock. This provides all the prompting we need to "read" the opening of the movie with the appropriate political background and the war as anything but a triumph.

The tone changes with the outbreak of war in 1914, from admittedly frustrated innocence to relentless realism. After helping persuade her father, played by Dominic West, to allow her brother Edward, played by Taron Egerton, to join the army,<sup>7</sup> Vera briefly attends Somerville College, Oxford, before signing up as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse and serving first in Britain and then in Malta and France. Meanwhile, the three men in Vera's life (Roland, Edward, and their friend Victor, played by Colin Morgan) head off to the front.

Despite Vera's personal connection to the fighting, *Testament of Youth* rarely provides the kind of battle scene familiar from other World War I movies. To cite only one recent example, Stephen Spielberg's *War Horse*<sup>8</sup> features dramatic vistas of cratered mud, shattered trees, filthy trenches, and human misery on a scale almost too enormous to take in. By contrast, Kent eschews brutal panoramas of devastation in France and stays faithful to Vera's perspective, challenging the viewer with an indirect, nightmare-under-the-bed Front, where men are sent off and then return gassed, amputated, or, in Victor's case, blinded by the head wound that ultimately kills him. "My rule was: what does [Vera] see? She can imagine Roland in the trench and Edward in the trench, because they write to her. But they don't write to her about the woundings, they don't want her to know about them—they're very protective. What she sees are the mass maimings as soldiers are brought into the hospitals. That we do show. Just enough to let you know what her environment was like."<sup>9</sup>

This approach to death gives it emotional coherence, because we see it on a human scale, through Vera: the deaths of Roland, Edward, and Victor occur off screen, but have powerful effects. Vera and Roland, for example, get leave to marry over Christmas, in an atmosphere of jittery brightness amplified by the energy of the holiday. As she and her family wait for Roland to arrive, Vera, already dressed in white, happily takes a telephone call she assumes is from him. The camera lingers on her face against a backdrop of cheerfully twinkling lights, as she learns that Roland has died of wounds at a clearing station in France.

On the other hand, the film does not shy from images of blood and gore when Vera's perspective demands it, notably when she works as a nurse in France.<sup>10</sup> The award-winning 1979 television adaptation of Brittain's autobiography partially sanitized the hospital scenes. Thirty-five years later, scenes of explicit violence in war movies are unremarkable, even expected, and sugar-coating the bloody deaths in *Testament of Youth* would have weakened their impact. But Kent does not try to generate emotional responses from violence alone. He uses our investment in Vera as a real person to heighten the force of a particular scene that conveys a grim condemnation of the war by subverting the trope of understanding across the trench-lines.

Vera is assigned to care for wounded German soldiers fresh from the divisions currently arrayed against her brother's unit. Naturally, tensions in the field hospital's "Hun tent" are high, and the nurses are no angels. The supervising sister numbers the men—"Hun 1, Hun 2, Hun 3 ..."—with brittle cheerfulness before

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7. In contrast to her later pacifism, but in perfect keeping with her presence in the film as a real and realistically complex human being. Mark Bostridge, Brittain's biographer and a consultant to the film, notes that, as an author, Brittain downplayed her early enthusiasm for the war and investment in the rhetoric of heroism and glory, even though it was very present in the diaries she kept at the time—*Vera Brittain and the First World War: The Making of Testament of Youth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 144–49. In the film, Vera's defense of Edward's military aspirations may have been inspired more by her contemporary diaries than her autobiography. From a dramatic perspective, it certainly makes Edward's death even more wrenching.

8. Burbank: Touchstone Pictures, 2011.

9. James Kent in an interview with Samuel Wigley, in "Testament of Youth: 'there's a massive female audience who aren't being catered for,'" *BFI: Film Forever* (7 May 2015).

10. See Bostridge (note 7 above) 187.

she and Vera set about treating them. But despite their sometimes flip bedside manner, the film never suggests that the nurses do anything but their best for the wounded Germans.

Against this background, Vera has a moment of human recognition with a German patient—a nurse’s version of the familiar scene where soldiers on one side recognize their counterparts on the other. This trope has a basis in history (for example, the “Christmas Truce” of 1914), but in war movies, it typically ends in a heartwarming affirmation of humanity in the middle of violent chaos that calls into question the whole political justification of the war.<sup>11</sup> In *Testament of Youth*, the recognition occurs as the soldier bleeds out all over Vera’s hands, calling up the same questions of political motivation in an even bleaker setting.

Vera’s conversation in German with the dying soldier is even more jarring because it recalls her naïve scholastic energy earlier in the film, when she turns to German as an improvised substitute for Latin on her university entrance examination. The contrast between the two scenes grounds the broader political questions in personal history and so brings them down to an emotionally comprehensible level.

A great deal must be omitted in any adaptation of a book to film, but excising Vera’s adult reflections on the politics of the war occasionally harms the story the movie is trying to tell in its own right, especially where there is no space to develop a character or theme from Vera’s point of view. An example is the portrayal of Vera’s mother, played by Emily Watson, whose nervous breakdown ultimately pulls Vera back home from the front. While the book has space for Brittain to reflect on the slow, nerve-fraying grind of food rationing and material deprivation at home, the movie is limited to telling, rather than showing. This makes the mother’s breakdown much less sympathetic, especially to an audience with no personal experience of the hardships of wartime rationing.

On the other hand, the director resists the temptation to cram in everything from the book without developing anything: the occasional abbreviation of minor plotlines is a small flaw compared to the tight, focused narrative that drives the film. This focus carries all the way through to the end of the war, when the repeated image of Vera in the victory parade places her private loss in a public context. Harkening back to the opening scene that colored Vera’s prewar innocence with political foreboding, the “victory” parade connects her personal story and her turn to pacifist activism, even though most of her postwar activities are excluded from the film.

The final scene wraps up a movie that works politically because the narrative and the protagonist are so compelling in their own right. That central strength lets Kent present Vera’s politics as an implicit commentary, in dialogue with the audience’s own knowledge of history and cinematic conventions. This allows for political complexity despite the time constraints of the movie, and also makes the film engaging to viewers at every level of historical understanding. Viewers interested in the historical background don’t have to sit through irritatingly simplified political history, while those who aren’t interested in the history for its own sake can still enjoy the movie—and perhaps even discover a new historical interest. In that sense, the movie succeeds not only as an adaptation that captures something central about the original text, but also more fundamentally as a story.

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11. In *War Horse*, concern for the horse motivates British and German soldiers to cooperate temporarily. *Joyeux Noël*, dir. Christian Carion (NY: Sony Pictures Classics, 2005), builds its entire plot around such a moment of recognition.