

The Imagined Histories and Futures of the Past: WWI and the Cultural Imagination

The historical films of Steven Spielberg offer us an interesting in-road into understanding history: they both attempt to capture the world and its events as they were and to offer a contemporary perspective on why those events matter. His film version of *War Horse* (2011), while an adaptation of the 2007 play by Nick Stafford, emphasizes realism, marking a departure from the use of puppetry in the staged version. I argue that this shift is because Spielberg recognized, as I do in this paper, that the representation of World War I must change depending on medium and cultural perspective.

In many attempts made to speak of the historical event through art, the artist chooses not just to speak of the event itself but rather to imagine its futures, as *War Horse* represents both the event itself and its outcome, an idyllic reunion between boy and horse. In this way, art about WWI not only historicizes that moment through representing history but also through how the artist imagined a better future.

In this paper, I look at various modes of imagining the futures incarnated by the First World War, beginning with artists and writers, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Maria Remarque, who experienced and depicted the war from a firsthand point of view. From here, I expand that framework to include J.R.R. Tolkien, whose masterpiece *Lord of the Rings* may owe no small debt to his wartime experiences. I consider the *Doctor Who* episodes, “Human Nature” and “Family of Blood,” as contemporary attempts to reinsert WWI into the cultural consciousness. Finally, I look at the two versions of *War Horse* and consider how their change in narrative style and structure impacts audiences’ understanding of the significance of the presented events.

I argue that WWI, while often overlooked in popular culture production, actually offers a fascinating lens to making sense of how we became modern and thus how we understand ourselves as human. Therefore, retelling stories of the Great War provides an opportunity to consider the reflexivity of that understanding of our humanity: how we capture and represent who we were can tell us a great deal about who we actually are.

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