

Passchendaele: Politics by other means

Lee Parsons
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Written and directed by Paul Gross

Produced, written, directed and starring Paul Gross, *Passchendaele*, named for the World War I battle, was released last month after opening the Toronto Film Festival in September. Boasting the biggest budget ever for a Canadian film at over \$20 million, and despite a generally unfavorable critical reception, the film has received broad support from the corporate media.

By any account, its large budget notwithstanding, this is not a film of substance and would not receive the attention it has but for the ideological and political service it renders to the proponents of a more belligerent Canadian national identity.

Mr. Gross apparently considers himself something of a 'maverick' for standing up to popular opposition to war and Canadian patriotism. A very contemporary 'maverick,' who opposes widespread popular sentiment and conforms thoroughly to the views and needs of the establishment! Whatever the filmmaker's own conceptions, his *Passchendaele* distilled to its essence is a glorification of military slaughter in the guise of honoring the fallen soldiers of the Canadian Corps in World War I.

Gross is best known for his role as the mountie (RCMP officer) in Paul Haggis's acclaimed television series *Due South*, on which Gross also cut his teeth as a screenwriter. He was born into a military family in Calgary, Alberta. His father served with Canadian forces in the Korean War as a tank commander, and it was his grandfather's experience at Passchendaele that provided the inspiration for the film.

In addition to his other credits, Gross also co-wrote music on this film and has demonstrated versatility in numerous other projects. Although he considers himself decidedly, conspicuously Canadian, he has lived in a number of countries including the US, England and Germany, as a result of his father's various military postings. He has won numerous awards in Canada for his acting roles and also wrote and directed the comedy *Men with Brooms* in 2002.

The opening scene of *Passchendaele* is drawn from an incident related by Michael Dunne, the director's grandfather, whose name is given to the lead character, which apparently haunted him the rest of his life. Following a battle with a German machinegun nest in which Dunne alone survives from his unit, he corners the sole survivor from the German side, a young German soldier who lies unarmed and wounded. Pleading "Kamerad," the youth appeals to him for his life, hand outstretched.

Gross's description of what then took place reveals some disturbing attitudes: "And it was coming, he couldn't control it, that furious contempt for life and self that fuels all wars and allows them to flourish. Dunne's hands trembled and his heart raced and he had never felt more alive or conquering when, in a single vicious movement, he lifted his bayonet and plunged in into the smiling boy's face."

This fascination with brutality and savagery becomes in itself the justification for reproducing it on film. "I can't really put my finger on what it did, but it did change me. And I became very interested in conflict." Gross's conception of why wars are fought is further developed in the words of his lead character, "We do it so much because we're good at it, and we're good at it because we do it so much." Humanity's supposed

inescapable 'contempt for life' is for the filmmaker ultimately manifest in an endless cycle of war and bloodshed.



Passchendaele

The bulk of the film is devoted to the love story between Dunne, played by Gross, and the nurse Sarah Mann (French-Canadian actress Caroline Dhavernas), who watches over his recovery in a Calgary military hospital when he returns wounded from battle early in the war. Dunne falls in love with her and reenlists to become protector to her younger brother, David. The latter, despite his asthma, has previously enlisted as part of a deal with the wealthy father of his betrothed who would like to see him dead.

The climactic scene has David crucified on a cross of battle debris, and being dragged back to the trenches by a wounded Dunne. This scene, in concentrated form, exhibits the sort of cloying sentimentality and emotional manipulation that, unfortunately, pervade the movie. As Dunne crawls across the battlefield with superhuman effort, the wounded young soldier on his back, all eyes are on our hero. The fighting stops, the rain stops, the heavens open up, the music swells and the heroic rescue is achieved against all odds.

Maudlin dialogue and a facile storyline are at odds with convincing depictions of the hellish conditions in which the battle was fought. Sadly, an understanding of the events themselves or the moral quandaries of the soldiers is similarly superficial. The lead actors deliver competent performances within the limits of their material, as does the supporting cast. As in much commercial cinema these days, the problems do not lie principally in the talent brought to the performances, but in the conceptions of the filmmakers themselves.

An uncritical hero-worship for his family's and his country's martial tradition leads the filmmaker to support the current agenda of the political elite. Referring to the Canadian soldiers of World War I, Gross elevates their efforts to mythic status: "I don't know what breed of man they were—I wouldn't last 10 seconds."

It is telling that nearly one third of the film's budget was pledged by the ultra right-wing Alberta government of Ralph Klein before he stepped down as premier; another \$3.5 million came from Telefilm Canada, the federal funding agency; and, according to Gross, the rest from wealthy "billionaire" donors. The production was also given the wholehearted support of the Canadian military establishment. Many of the background players are active Canadian servicemen, and the opening party at the Toronto Film Festival featured a military band complete with bagpipes.

To underscore the production's support for the Canadian combat mission

in Afghanistan, prior to its general release across the country October 17, the film's producers arranged for a preview screening to Canadian soldiers stationed in Kandahar. The occasion prompted Gross to comment, "We are finally able to present it to the Canadian public and in some small way pay homage to the sacrifice of our forefathers in the Great War of 1914-1918. It seems fitting that the troops who today so valiantly serve our country are among the first to see it."

With the shake-up of all the old alliances and the decline of America as the dominant global power, the world is being re-divided. A subordinate power such as Canada, which has historically relied on its special relationship with the US, is now compelled to carve out its own corner in the shifting sands of world politics. Canada's posturing as a 'peacekeeping' nation is now viewed by powerful sections of big business as an obstacle to the assertion of its interests on the international stage.

Paul Gross has been all too willing to allow his film to play a role in this effort. As he remarks, "When we view ourselves exclusively as peacekeepers, we ought to understand that ... that's relatively recent in our history. We also are warriors, and we were particularly good at it in the First World War and the Second World War" and "who we are was actually forged in those battlefields."

The director has been cautious about expressing his views on current engagements but is nevertheless quite vocal on promoting his country's military history. This evasiveness is apparent in a recent interview with CBC: "We did not want to consider ourselves militarists (in a previous period) ... but we can pay honor to the sacrifice and the conduct of the men who fought on behalf of our country without necessarily agreeing with the war that they fought in."

Gross is quick to point out that he had started work on this project long before 9/11 or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet it can hardly be a coincidence that a film named after one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War—and one which lies at the heart of Canada's national mythology—should appear at a time when the Canadian government is scrambling to win public support for its combat mission in Afghanistan.

A very partial history

Surely we have a right to expect that artists dealing with historical material will in some way offer insight into the experiences they treat. As part of its artistic shortcomings, *Passchendaele* disappoints on this score as well.

Generally referred to as the third battle of Ypres, after the town in western Belgium on the northern end of the Western Front during the war, the battle at the nearby town of Passchendaele in October 1917 has come to signify the most horrifying conditions of trench warfare and wars of attrition. Although the Canadian military and political establishment have attempted to endow the event with legendary status, at the time the conditions of the battle and the enormous losses suffered were largely kept secret from the Canadian public.

Following weeks of artillery barrage from both sides, the complex drainage system built for farming the lowlands of Flanders had been destroyed, leaving the terrain a virtual bog. The majority of deaths in the battle resulted from drowning in the water and mud and the conflict was known by the British as "The Slough of Despair." Passchendaele was also the battle where mustard gas was first introduced, leaving many disabled for life.

After three months of trench warfare in heavy rains between Allied and German forces, Canadian troops were tasked with finally taking the town, which they eventually did. It was a Pyrrhic victory at the cost of over half a million casualties on both sides, including the lives of over 15,000

Canadian soldiers in the final battle. Within a few months allied strategy shifted and the territory returned to German control.

One would be at pains to discover in this film, or in the book based on it, what justification the director sees for either the staggering loss of life in this battle or for the first imperialist war itself. Indeed, for a film purporting to deal with historical material, *Passchendaele* demonstrates a conspicuous indifference to the historical record, which shows the battle to have been a catastrophe both strategically and logistically.

Many dramatic possibilities remain undeveloped. The opening scene with the appeal of the young German to the Canadian soldier as an ally is striking as an opportunity for something deeper. This is lost on the director who sees no more in the incident than the meaningless brutality of war. A similar failure to illuminate broader questions is conspicuous in the central plot. The love story between a Canadian soldier and the daughter of a German soldier would indicate the common plight of adversaries. For Gross, however, it is used to merely enhance the tension of lovers caught up in the sweep of history.

According to official history, along with the slaughter at Vimy Ridge in the spring of 1917, the enormous loss of life at Passchendaele was a defining moment in Canada's fledgling national enterprise.

True, the First World War provided Canada's ruling elite the opportunity to wrench itself free from British domination and assert itself as an autonomous power. But this was also the period of enormous class upheaval in Canada, which saw the resistance of workers to war in the fight against conscription and in a major class confrontation, the Winnipeg general strike, in part a response to the Russian Revolution.

A warm reception

Even supporters admit that much of *Passchendaele* is embarrassing for its clichéd sentimentality and predictability. Nevertheless the corporate media have gone all-out to make the film a success, although there is a revealing tension between the editorial comment of the *Globe and Mail*, the country's largest daily paper, and its film critic's appraisal.

Following the film's release, a *Globe* editorial declared, "For once, Canadians have an opportunity to celebrate their own history and one of their own stories. We should flock to the theatres to see *Passchendaele*" and "Whether or not it earns a Genie Award or an Oscar, it should earn Mr. Gross the Order of Canada." The paper's film review by Liam Lacey, however, commented, "Even if it's not a particularly good movie, *Passchendaele* can't be dismissed as a cultural phenomenon."

The ultra-conservative *National Post* headlined an article promoting the film, "*Passchendaele* deserves our support," and went on to applaud the director/writer for funding the film exclusively from Canadian sources. Again, the *Post* took a different tone when reviewing the film: "The movie may not live up to the events it depicts, but ... this is the best we're likely to get."



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