

'That Huge, Haunted Solitude': 1917–1927 A Spectral Decade

Paul Gough Arts University Bournemouth

Abstract

The scene that followed was the most remarkable that I have ever witnessed. At one moment there was an intense and nerve shattering struggle with death screaming through the air. Then, as if with the wave of a magic wand, all was changed; all over 'No Man's Land' troops came out of the trenches, or rose from the ground where they had been lying.¹

In 1917 the British government took the unprecedented decision to ban the depiction of the corpses of British and Allied troops in officially sponsored war art. A decade later, in 1927, Australian painter Will Longstaff exhibited *Menin Gate at Midnight* which shows a host of phantom soldiers emerging from the soil of the Flanders battlegrounds and marching towards Herbert Baker's immense memorial arch. Longstaff could have seen the work of British artist and war veteran Stanley Spencer. His vast panorama of post-battle exhumation, *The Resurrection of the Soldiers*, begun also in 1927, was painted as vast tracts of despoiled land in France and Belgium were being recovered, repaired, and planted with thousands of gravestones and military cemeteries. As salvage parties recovered thousands of corpses, concentrating them into designated burial places, Spencer painted his powerful image of recovery and reconciliation. This article will locate this period of 're-membering' in the context of such artists as Will Dyson, Otto Dix, French film-maker Abel Gance, and more recent depictions of conflict by the photographer Jeff Wall. However, unlike the ghastly 'undead' depicted in Gance's 1919 film or Wall's ambushed platoon in Afghanistan, Spencer's resurrected boys are pure, whole, and apparently unsullied by warfare.

Keywords

Abel Gance; commemoration; remembrance; resurrection; Stanley Spencer; war art; Will Dyson; Will Longstaff

In 1917 the British government banned the depiction of the corpses of British and Allied troops in officially sponsored war art. It was an important shift in the authority once owned by artists to represent the actualities of war. Gilbert Rogers' painting of the wounded being treated after the Battle of Messines Ridge in 1917, speaks of the impact of this restriction—the British wounded are whole in body and intact; they are being cared for tenderly and with respect, while the enemy dead are presented by the artist as bodily parts—legs, hands, and feet—mere fragments, disembodied and disaggregated, poking out

of the pulverised earth.² William Orpen RA, another government-sponsored war artist, faced little censorship for his depiction of dead and decayed German troops, while others such as C.R. W. Nevinson earned notoriety for flouting the ban and depicting dead British troops sprawled across barbed wire entanglements.³ Few records now exist, but the decree is thought to be linked to the government's fear of 'war weariness'. Authorities had grown anxious about the corrosive impact of three years of global conflict. It was feared that the population was becoming numbed and depressed; battle fatigue by proxy was setting in.

1 Alexander Stuart Dolden, *Cannon Fodder: An Infantryman's Life on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Blandford, UK: Blandford Press, 1980), 39.

2 Gilbert Rogers, *The RAMC at Messines During the 1917 Offensive, 1919*, Imperial War Museums London, Art. IWM ART 2757, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/23044>, accessed 2 December 2019.

3 C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paths of Glory*, Imperial War Museums London, Art. IWM ART 518. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20211>, accessed 2 December 2019.

It was also a brazen attempt to stage-manage the truth. Here, there are ethical alignments with the situation faced globally by writers, reporters, artists, and photographers intent on purveying the actualities of war. The concept of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ may seem entirely of our own making, but in 1917 the officially appointed painters and photographers who were tasked with recording the facts of war were sometimes forced to re-imagine it through what many deemed transgressive creative acts—collage, montage, the re-arrangement of incidents across different time zones, the use of re-ordered narratives. In short, they dealt with versions of truthful representation, at times they had to ‘fake truth’ to achieve a greater authenticity; the pursuit of exactitude had to be balanced with the broader sweep of emotional abstraction. Frank Hurley’s infamous collaged ‘combat’ photographs are perhaps the best known, along with those of Canadian Ivor Castle. His vast photo-montage of the taking of Vimy Ridge in 1917 is a fine example of a creative hand trying to overcome the diffuse nature of modern warfare, where incident was sporadic and the motifs almost impossible to condense into a single pictorial incident.⁴

Official Australian historian Charles Bean was deeply troubled by these composite images. He rejected them as deviant distortions of the truth. Forensic by instinct, he insisted on an indexical account of outward appearances. Nothing other would do. Documentary evidence was, for Bean, the only antidote to imaginative speculation.⁵ This tension between the indexical and interpretation persists. Despite 80 years of re-imagining the face of war, the issue of retinal authority refuses to go away. In 1994 the Scottish official war artist Peter Howson had a piece of his work refused by the Imperial War Museum in London who had sponsored his commission to the Balkans. Their objection was that the painting, which depicted the scene of a violent rape, had not been ‘witnessed’ by the artist. Not so much ‘fake news’ as phoney realism. Its ‘exclusion’ caused uproar in the press. It brought into sharp focus the rumbling debate about the very role and contribution of a war artist. Commentators probed their value as independent witnesses, questioning the validity of painting ‘imaginary’ events as opposed to ‘factual’ records. The debate focused not so much on the abomination itself, but on the right of an Official Artist to pass off such scenes as ‘authentic’. Its spectre hangs over the very nature of ‘war art’ and the pictorial management of truth today. The exclusion of this painting from the permanent collection further polarised two schools of thought: those that felt it necessary to

depict the awfulness of warfare using whatever means available to an artist, and those who argued that an artist (and by extension photographer, reporter, writer) must bear witness—ocular not just circumstantial—to a scene of horror before committing it to canvas.

Such a binary divide is important when considering the discourses of haunting that occupied, indeed gripped, many artists, photographers, and writers in the decade 1917–1927. To understand this period requires two complementary optics: the first borrows from Jay Winter’s three cultural codes—the visual, the verbal and the social—that encrypt the trauma of war and shape the language of mourning.⁶ The second lens proposes that if warfare is characterised by destruction, by dissolution, and by dismembering, then its commemorative aftermath might be understood as a reconstituting of once-broken parts, of putting back together, a visual ‘re-membering’ of shattered limbs, spirit, and members. In pictorial terms this process is best practised through montage, collage, editing, and re-arrangement of episodic incidents. Let us turn now to the language of loss that preceded the spectral decade.

LOSING

In November 1920 over a million people passed by the Cenotaph in Whitehall, central London, in the week between its official unveiling and the sealing of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. To lend a sense of proportion to the nation’s loss, it was estimated that if the empire’s dead could march four abreast down Whitehall it would take them over three days to pass the monument. The column would stretch from London to Newcastle. This incredible image became a form of truth as endless numbers of returned troops marched past recently erected memorials all over the empire. ‘The dead lived again’ intoned the *Times*.⁷ It was as though the soldiers were the dead themselves ‘marching back to receive the tribute of the living’. Think of Eliot’s lines in *The Waste Land*:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge. So many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.⁸

Across the British Empire it would have been impossible to avoid the intensity of remembrance. It was possibly the greatest period of monument-building since Pharaonic Egypt. Stanley Spencer’s painting (1921–22) of the unveiling of the Cookham War Memorial captures an event that was repeated countless times as nations sought

4 Martyn Jolly, ‘Composite propaganda photographs during the First World War’, *History of Photography*, 27, no. 2 (Summer, 2003): 154–165.

5 Charles E.W. Bean, ‘Wilkins and Hurley recommendations’, Australian War Memorial, AWM38, DRL6673, item 57 (24 October 1917).

6 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

7 Cited in Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995), 24.

8 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922.

to mourn the common man.⁹ The line of young men in haunted white who crowd the foreground of Spencer’s painting seem less concerned with paying homage to the dead as vicariously representing their missing villagers. They are a surrogate army of ghosts returned to their homeland. The poetry and prose, and other forms of cultural encoding, that underpinned these ceremonies evidenced the same tendency to see the dead among the living. ‘He is not missing’, ran the solemn script at the unveiling of so many war memorials, ‘he is here...’.¹⁰

In the decade after the war, the image of the dead rising from the tortured landscapes of the old battlefields became an integral part of the iconography of remembrance. During the war, artists had created the occasional image of a ghostly figure wandering wraith-like across no-man’s-land. There were, of course, the many legendary (and largely apocryphal) tales of ‘angels’ at Mons, of benevolent phantoms who return to help, warn or merely stand alongside comrades in the twilight hours of stand-to. Such artistic apparitions are an essential element in the spectral turn identified by W.G. Sebald.¹¹ Transposed to a battlefield setting it conjures immediately the ambience of the ghostly. The worlds Sebald describes are those occupied by the displaced, traumatised, and exiled. These are the very same worlds that confronted artists, poets, and writers during the conflict and in the years after the Great War. Haunted by harrowing experiences they moved through a dystopia cleared of occupants by expulsion and exclusion, saturated with traumatic memory, and rendered nondescript by the impact of sustained static warfare. Ironically, as the soldier-poet David Jones observed, for all its ‘sudden violences’ and ‘long stillnesses’ the battlescape remained for many a ‘place of enchantment’, or as soldier–artist Paul Nash described it, a ‘phantasmagoric’ domain, outwardly a ‘void of war’, which was actually not empty at all but crammed with its own emptiness.¹²

RECONNECTING

Many combatants, of the ground war and also the fighting in the sky and underwater, might have found this idea of a crowded emptiness entirely understandable. During artillery barrages soldiers had literally vanished into the air, dematerialised before their comrades’ eyes into little more than a small puff of putrid air. Battleships vanished without trace; aeroplanes would disappear into clouds,

never to emerge again. Sudden absences, emptiness, and invisibility became the recurring leitmotifs of the war. Despite the scale of post-war commemoration in stone and bronze, many of those who returned to the former battlefields craved some form of spiritual reconnection with their vanished loved ones. In part this explains the upsurge in séances and similar activities in the years after the war. It explains the fascination with battlefield pilgrimage and the need to gather ‘mementos’ or relics from the same landscapes that had apparently swallowed whole the sons, brothers, and fathers of the massed armies. Official decree had more or less granted permissions for such personal acts: in 1919 after selecting one exhumed body from four to become the ‘unknown’ representative of the empire’s dead, the re-burial party also gathered six barrels of front-line soil to pack out the body in its new grave in Westminster Abbey. From then on, a cross-Channel (and indeed trans-global) transaction of soil, stone, and seed became a mandatory part of post-war pilgrimage as organic reliquaries were gathered in lieu of the dissipated bodies of the dead. Jonathan Vance has covered this botanical transaction in detail in his cultural reading of the Canadian post-war experience, and Australian historian Bruce Scates has written in depth about the arboreal trophies of war that still surround The Shrine in Melbourne. Nature may have provided surrogacy; the bereaved wanted more.¹³

In film, in painting, and in photography the disappeared and the dead could be made to live again. Probably the most dramatic images of the dead rising from the ground are to be seen at the conclusion of Abel Gance’s 1919 film *J’Accuse*, when hordes of forlorn French soldiers appear to materialise out of the tortured earth.¹⁴ Such images were the more shocking because, for much of the war, battlefields were outwardly deserted yet densely occupied with a vast community of entrenched soldiers leading troglodyte lives. Many met dreadful underground deaths and huge numbers still remained interred in the boneyards of Flanders.

Just as Gance’s ragged army pointed accusatory fingers into the uncomfortable arena of post-war Europe, so images of the dead rising from the earth gained a wider global currency into the 1920s. In 1927 the *Melbourne Herald* published a drawing, *A voice from ANZAC* by Will Dyson, which depicted two spectral soldiers on the shores of Gallipoli, one of them asking, ‘Funny thing, Bill. I keep thinking I hear men marching’. That year another Australian artist Will Longstaff had attended the

9 Stanley Spencer, *Unveiling Cookham War Memorial*, 1922, private collection.

10 These were the form of words used by Field Marshal Herbert Plumer at the Menin Gate Inauguration ceremony in Ypres, 24 July 1927.

11 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Harvill, 1998).

12 Paul Gough, *‘A Terrible Beauty’: British Artists in the First World War* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2010), 154.

13 Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, eds., *Beyond Gallipoli: New Perspectives on ANZAC* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2016).

14 Abel Gance, *J’Accuse* [VHS], California, Connoisseur Video Collection, 1937. (125 mins); Van Kelly, ‘The Ambiguity of Individual Gestures’, *South Central Review*, 17, no. 3 (2000): 7–34.

unveiling of the Menin Gate at Ypres—with its rhetorical message ‘the dead are not missing, they are here’—and had painted *Menin Gate at Midnight* by way of reaction and response. It depicts a host of ghostly soldiers emerging from the Flanders battlegrounds and walking as one uncanny cohort towards the massive monument, wading through fields of red poppies. Longstaff wrote that soon after the ceremony at Ypres he saw a vision of ‘steel-helmeted spirits rising from the moonlit cornfields around him’. He returned to London and, it is said, painted the canvas in a single session while still under ‘psychic influence’.¹⁵

Its public reception tells us much about the memorialising mood of the time. Reproduced in tens of thousands of copies, the painting was first displayed in London, viewed by Royal Command, then toured to Manchester and Glasgow and finally taken to Australia where, after regional tours, it was exhibited in a darkened, chapel-like space at the National War Memorial in Canberra. For so many, the taut language of representation was comforting and factual; exactitude offered a desired blend of truth and reconciliation. Door-to-door salesmen toured Australia selling copies of the painting, raising money for the new war memorial in Canberra. They were required to memorise a script which contained the phrase, ‘He is not missing. He is here’.

RESURRECTING

In London, Longstaff may have been aware of Stanley Spencer’s *Resurrection, Cookham* (which was on show during early 1927 and bought soon after for the Tate Gallery). This was the first of Spencer’s resurrection paintings, created over many months in a tiny studio in Hampstead, London while he was gestating a major painting and architectural scheme to commemorate his time during the war.

As a medical orderly and later an infantry soldier, Spencer had witnessed death in the operating theatre and on the battlefield in Macedonia; in the field ambulances of the Salonika Campaign he had brought succour to suffering and pain, but he had also seen his share of burials. Spencer’s magnificent, post-war masterpiece for the walls of the Sandham Memorial Chapel was originated while the former battlefields in France, Belgium, Turkey, and Macedonia were being systematically combed for the dead, their bodies then concentrated into cemeteries.¹⁶ Indeed, Spencer started

sketching his ideas for the chapel while staying with a painter friend in Dorset, not far from where the massive limestone quarries in Portland were being gouged out to be chiselled into tens of thousands of headstones that would become the ‘silent cities’ of the dead. Spencer’s unrivalled *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* is a testament to those unknown soldiers whose parts were blown to pieces and who are remembered only in their names carved on panoramic slabs of stone. Through Spencer’s vision these unnamed and unnameable soldiers now festoon the extraordinary walls of the chapel in Burghclere, one of the greatest achievements of 20th century commemoration in northern Europe and comparable to Owen’s poetry, Sassoon’s verse or Britten’s *War Requiem*.¹⁷

In his expansive and fascinating diaries and notebooks about the war, Spencer wrote about achieving a harmonic balance between the ‘verbs’ and ‘nouns’ of his own front-line experience; the nouns being the immutable and tangible objects of the lived medical and combat experience—the puttees and helmets, the towels and the tea urns. The ‘verbs’ were the more elastic and fluid representations of the militarised body, where a skilful distortion of parts played a crucial role in releasing the imagination from the chains of fact.

Spencer’s figures emerge from the torn earth whole-in-body and becalmed; so very different from the venomous acrimony of Siegfried Sassoon’s post-war poetry populated with ‘scarred, eyeless figures deformed by the hell of battle ... supernatural figures of the macabre’ whom he pitied for the loss of their youth.¹⁸ And so very different again from the homunculi embedded in the Flanders mud as devised by German painter and war veteran Otto Dix. In his apocalyptic canvas, *Flanders*, the dawn may be epic, but the demise of the small troupe of soldiers is tawdry and banal, their bodies enmeshed in a thicket of webbing, wire and waste. Far from emerging intact from the glutinous mud, as Dyson or Longstaff had imagined, the soldiers are immersed in the land, becoming a part of its geology; they are encased in their *totendlandschaft*—a dead and deadening landscape. At least the skyscape holds an element of tentative promise, however ironic.¹⁹

RECOVERING

Representations of more recent conflicts maintain a link with the crisis of representation triggered in 1917. In Jeff Wall’s vast photographic panorama of an

15 Krissy Kraljevic, ‘Will Longstaff’, Australian War Memorial, accessed 9 May, 2019, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/90th-Anniversary-Menin-Gate-at-midnight>, accessed 2 December 2019.

16 Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil* (London: Leo Cooper, 1967), 103.

17 Paul Gough *et al.*, ‘The Holy Box’: *The Genesis of Stanley Spencer’s Sandham Memorial Chapel* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2017); Richard Carline, *Stanley Spencer at War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).

18 Mark Dollar, ‘Ghost imagery in the war poems of Siegfried Sassoon’, *War, Literature, and the Arts*, 16, no. 1-2 (2004): 235–245.

19 Matthias Eberle, *World War I and the Weimar Artists: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 1985), 78.

Afghanistan ambush, even the redemptive possibility of a horizon is stripped out.²⁰ Instead, in the place of Spencer’s serene figures, we gaze onto a platoon of traumatised soldiers, isolated and forsaken, tearing at each other, with bulging eyes and contorted faces. While some sit stunned and still, others horse around stuffing their spilled entrails back into their soiled uniforms. Wall’s dystopia shares much with Abel Gance’s film in which the dead are disgorged from the earth in rotting uniforms with mutilated bodies and torn faces. These abandoned infantrymen appear to bear nothing in common with Spencer’s elegiac armies. But in their similar scale, their subdued tonal range, and their powerful sense of camaraderie and *rapport*, there is some shared ground. *Dead soldiers don’t talk*. In Jeff Wall’s spectral visionary photo-piece they do. In fact it is hard to shut them up. His thirteen slaughtered soldiers cavort around, play with strips of flesh, smile knowingly at each other, or chat from casual slouching positions. What truths are they mouthing? ‘It interested me to wonder what citizens would say about the State that they lived in and served—if we could hear what they had to say under these circumstances.... What would people say? How would they feel if they could communicate from across this divide? They have sacrificed for the State, for the plans of their society and

now they are in a different relationship to all of that. That sense of the picture occurring on the other side of life was what intrigued me’.²¹

Wall draws his bleak lessons from Goya, whereas Spencer took inspiration from the Italian Primitives. Yet, like Spencer’s *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* there is no eye contact with us; no accusation outwards, no one turning blamefully into our world. As Susan Sontag says: ‘There’s no threat of protest. They are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war. They haven’t come back to life in order to stagger off to denounce the war-makers who sent them to kill and be killed.... Why should they seek our gaze?’²²

Would this have passed the censorship of 1917? After all there is suffering, but no apparent death. Wall seems to be suggesting, like Spencer and Dix before him, that as mere watchers we are never able to fully empathise, to understand the abject dreadfulness of war, its awful truths. We can only peer in and share something of these momentarily reprieved lives. Yet, where Wall re-creates the Day of Judgment as something horribly Sisyphean, Spencer, like Longstaff, preferred a vision of reconciliation and arbitration, even if the spectral figures in their haunted hillsides appear isolated, disengaged, and even sedated when compared with the livid ferocity of the permanently doomed Russian platoon.

A painter, broadcaster and writer, Paul Gough has exhibited internationally and is represented in the permanent collections of the Imperial War Museum, London and the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. In addition to roles in national and international higher education, his research into the imagery and aftermath of war and peace has been presented to audiences throughout the world.

His books about the arts of war and peace include *Journey to Burghclere* (2006), *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists and the First World War* (2010), and *Brothers in Arms, John and Paul Nash* (2014). He curated *Back from the Front: Art, Memory and the Aftermath of War* in 2015. His edited book on the genesis of Stanley Spencer’s memorial chapel at Burghclere, The Holy Box, was created with the support of the National Trust in 2017. *Dead Ground: War and Peace – Remembrance and Recovery*, a book of essays on ‘memoryscapes’ of the Great War was published in November 2018. paul.gough@rmit.edu.au

20 Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)*, 1992.

21 Jeff Wall, Jeff Wall discussing *Dead Troops Talk* at Tate Modern, London, 1992 . <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/jeff-wall/jeff-wall-room-guide/jeff-wall-room-guide-room-8>, accessed 2 December 2019.

22 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 128–129.

