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Maillard, Masks, and Machinations: Cinematic Tropes in *Au Revoir, Là-Haut!*

*Au Revoir, Là-Haut!* is a 2017 French historical comedy-drama film directed by Albert Dupontel.<sup>1</sup> The film, hereafter *ARLH*, follows the intertwined lives and schemes of the villainous Lieutenant Pradelle and two lowly soldiers formerly under his command, Edouard Péricourt and Albert Maillard, in the year after the 1918 Armistice. The film transcends genres and styles, engaging with a wide variety of tropes. There are detailed analyses of *ARLH* to be made through the lens of Psychoanalytic, Queer, Post-Colonial, or above all Auteur theory, but for the purposes of this brief paper we shall content ourselves with a Marxist analysis.

For the first scene of the film, and only the first scene, *ARLH* is a war movie. The film opens on 10 November 1918, the day before the First World War was to come to an end. Rumors of an armistice had been circulating, and it was clear that the victory of the Entente was imminent. However, not everyone was content to sit back and allow the war to come to a quiet close. Lieutenant Henri d'Aulnay-Pradelle insists on mounting one last assault on the German lines, with no clear objective in mind other than to fight for fighting's sake. Dupontel's camera work in the first scene is reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no humanistic officer like Colonel Dax to intercede on behalf of the common soldier in *ARLH*,

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<sup>1</sup> *Au Revoir, Là-Haut !* dir. Albert Dupontel (2017), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5258850/>

<sup>2</sup> *Paths of Glory*, dir. Stanley Kubrick (1957). Clip: "A Stroll Through the Trenches." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU4PQ3OJn58> The equivalent scene from *ARLH* is not available on YouTube.

leaving the men exposed to the caprice of the French officer corps and their ceaseless, unwavering *élan*.

Pradelle sends forth two scouts before the assault. Out past the wire, the both of them are shot and killed. After withstanding a withering artillery barrage brought on by Pradelle's prodding, the Frenchmen mount a large assault, suffering devastating casualties as they charge across a cratered, desolate landscape. Albert discovers that the two scouts had been shot in the back by Pradelle, who sought to use their deaths, ostensibly at the hands of the Germans, to inspire a desire for revenge and violence among his men. To protect his murderous secret, Pradelle then attempts to kill Albert as well. Before Pradelle can slay Albert, however, Albert is buried two meters underground by the explosion of a massive shell. Albert is only able to survive by breathing through the mouth of a horse carcass. After a harrowing subterranean spell of ceaseless seconds that stretched like years, Edouard reaches his hand through the soil and pulls a barely conscious, dirt-choked Albert to the surface. Albert is only able to express his gratitude momentarily, as the concussion of another artillery shell blasts Edouard's jaw clean off.

The first scene of *ARLH* both indulges and inverts the tropes of the war movie genre. In the same vein as *Paths of Glory*, *ARLH* depicts the cinematic trope of French officers being arrogant and bloodthirsty in the First World War. While unwavering adherence to military tradition was a major institutional problem for the French officer corps during the Great War, especially in the first few years, by 1918 this was less so the case, as older, traditionalist officers had largely been sidelined from major commands and replaced by younger, modern-minded officers. However, the trope of the French officer as dispassionate butcher serves the class conflicts that animate much of the narrative of *ARLH*, pitting the officer class against the common *poilus*.

*ARLH* also inverts several tropes of the war film genre. Our protagonists are not bullet-proof superhumans. Edouard and Albert duck when danger is near, they sweat and pant and get dirty, their eyes dance with fear when they hear the whistle of shellfire, and above all, they get hurt. Albert nearly drowns in dirt staring in the eyes of a horse, and Edouard is permanently disfigured by the force of a blast. This stands in stark contrast to the tropes of contemporary action and war movies, especially American productions, which are populated by young, muscle-bound Adonises who mow down hordes of faceless foes without so much as a papercut to mar their marquee-worthy visage. *ARLH* resists the tropey tendency of most war movies to focus on an elite group of commandoes, the best-of-the-best engaging in singular heroics and saving the day all by themselves. Edouard and Albert are not special forces soldiers; they are average draftees. Edouard is a skinny artist, and Albert is an accountant nearing forty years of age. Their normalcy, in appearance and in action, sets them quite apart from the mass of war movie heroes.

Class conflict is prevalent throughout *ARLH*. Edouard and Albert are pitted against Pradelle in the trenches; Edouard the bohemian artist is pitted against his stodgy bourgeois father in their home before the War; Edouard the upper-class avant-gardist is pitted against Albert the middle-class former accountant in cultural matters; Pradelle exploits the labor of Chinese immigrants for his own gain; and Edouard and Albert are pitted against the French state in their scheme to wrest more than honeyed words of gratitude for their sacrifice in the name of France.

Class conflict animates the two main narrative threads of the film. After the war, Pradelle goes into business exhuming mass graves of French soldiers and reburying them in cemeteries for the war dead. Pradelle, in his greed, seeks to inflate the number of bodies he is reburying,

assumedly because he is being paid by the government per grave.<sup>3</sup> Pradelle buries numerous empty coffins, or coffins filled with rocks and cash, then sends the enlarged bill to the French government. Pradelle's scheme puts him in conflict with numerous classes. Pradelle exploits the labor of Chinese workers, who were sent to the Western Front in great numbers during the Great War to engage in manual labor. These laborers are shown to not speak French and to not understand the nature of Pradelle's scheme, and they certainly do not share in the profits of Pradelle's duplicity. Pradelle is also at odds with the French bureaucracy over whose eyes he is attempting to pull wool. Pradelle covets the power and influence of Edouard's father, the mayor of the 8<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris, and seeks government contracts from him, including those for exhumation. Pradelle is also in conflict with the Ministry of the Interior. Pradelle attempts to bribe an inspector from the Ministry to overlook his wrongdoings but is flatly refused and his scheme is foiled by the might of a bureaucrat's stamp.

The postwar story of Edouard and Albert is also informed by class conflict. After his being wounded, Edouard is ashamed to return to his prosperous, image-obsessed family. He is particularly reluctant to face his severe, bourgeois father, the mayor, who disapproved of Edouard's refusal to purchase an exemption from the draft. Edouard convinces Albert to forge his records as having been killed in action so that he may disappear. Edouard is a brilliant artist and, after some time living in a squalid garret in Paris, hatches a scheme to strike it rich and flee to the Colonies with Albert.

The 8<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris, of which Edouard's father is the mayor, is holding a contest for the design of a monument to the war dead with a huge cash prize. Edouard creates a

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<sup>3</sup> My French is only rudimentary, so it is possible (likely) that I have glossed over some nuance of the narrative.

portfolio and false paper trail for a design firm, replete with dozens of imaginary designs of monuments in villages and towns across France. The pair felt that they had been scammed by France, seeing their friends ground into the soil for four years only to receive little more than a tin medal, a handshake, and a “thank-you.” It was time now for the common man to turn the tables and scam the French government that had taken so much from them and given them so little. Edouard’s designs eventually cross his father’s desk and, while the mayor’s histrionic aid crows that he has discovered the design firm to be a fabrication, the mayor selects the portfolio anyhow, as he recognizes his son, Edouard’s, distinctive artist’s signature in the designs. The mayor had thought Edouard dead, but his signature was a clear sign that he lived on.

Edouard and Albert receive a large sum from the government and prepare to flee to Africa with their cash, but on the night before their departure Edouard is visited in his swanky penthouse apartment by his father. Few words are exchanged – Edouard could not exchange more than a few words if he wanted to – before father and son embrace. All the tension, all the disappointment of previous years was washed away as father recognized the value and importance of his son’s contribution to France, and in his relief to find his son alive. However, just a moment after breaking their embrace Edouard, clad in an opulent blue bird mask, flings himself from the roof of his building, having been more fulfilled by his father’s embrace than all the *francs* stuffed in his suitcase ever could.

The framing device of this film is a police interrogation of Albert by the colonial police in Morocco. Later in the film, it is revealed that Albert accidentally caused the death of Pradelle by forcing him, at gunpoint, to retreat through an active construction site, with Pradelle falling into a hole that fills in like quicksand, groping and grasping only one of Edouard’s masks, in the shape of a horse, in a death bearing both irony and karmic justice. The gendarme conducting the

interview motions for his colleagues to leave the room, then slyly informs Albert of the best way to escape. As the gendarme leaves Albert alone in the room, Albert questions incredulously why he was being let go mere seconds after confessing to massive fraud and involuntary manslaughter. The gendarme simply shows Albert a photo of his son: one of the two scouts who had been murdered by Pradelle in the first scene. With little more than a final nod of acknowledgement, the gendarme departs and leaves Albert a free man. The spirit of solidarity animates the relations of the enlisted men – and their families – against the cruelty and violence of officers.