



Death Drive and the Heroic Ego in *1917*

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This essay's main theoretical frameworks are the Freudian Death Drive and Kristeva's notion of the abject. I use these to show they function concerning identity, specifically a heroic ego in Sam Mendes film *1917* (2019). In an extension to Loewald (1980) and Laplanche's ideas (1999) that suggest the Death Drive is the death of the ego, I propose the Death Drive casts a metaphorical shadow on the ego in varying degrees. I suggest it is the writers/director's projection of their Death Drive, specifically Mendes as co-writer and director.¹ Consequently, the ego states of the hero explored are too a projection from the director to engage the spectator in dialogue on the status of heroism in the First World War for a contemporary audience.² I show that Schofield, one of the main character's, presents three states of a heroic ego identity that emerge fluidly, and these are aligned with pivotal narrative turns throughout the film.³

First the wounded ego state, characterised by repression and disavowal of previous trauma, that allows some reprieve of tension in service of the pleasure principle. In this stage, Schofield's identity does nothing to serve the heroic construct, quite the opposite. In the second narrative turn, Schofield presents a liminal ego state, manifested between resisting and living the construct of the hero, consequently a crisis of identity ensues which is discussed through Kristeva's concept of the abject (1982). Kristeva's notion of the abject and identity leads to a discussion of gender relations

¹ The ego states described in this essay have been inspired by Jane Loevinger (1976) who although a development psychologist, not a psychoanalyst, has based her idea of ego development from psychoanalysts: Erik Erikson's psychosocial model and the works of Harry Stack Sullivan. Loevinger suggests the development of the ego from infancy up to around the age of 25. It begins with impulsive, self-protective, conformist, onto self-aware and conscientious, individualistic, autonomous, and finally integrated. I also differentiate ego state from Eric Berne (2016) who identified the broad dynamics of parent, adult child ego states in the 1950s.

² When I use Schofield's Death Drive to exemplify the Death Drive, it is for clarity only, as opposed to writing Mendes' Death Drive projected through Schofield. Also, I suggest it is only Mendes, as although there is a co-writer for the screenplay, the ultimate effect and affect on the spectator and of course direction of the film was Mendes' responsibility, hence why I position the projection from him only.

³ This idea works on the premise of the four-act structure, as opposed to the traditional 3 act structure (Field; 1979). The four-act structure it is noted in an article, advocated by novelist and screenwriter Peter Craig who notes the feature length screenplay structure is best thought of as four acts dividing up the middle (the confrontation) into Act Two A and Act Two B.' (Myers: 2019). In the same article, it is noted by director Aline Brosh McKenna that film can have a four-act structure which allows for the psychological metamorphosis of character. Screenwriter and script consultant Rob Tobin (2016) also suggests the four acts and uses the film *Rocky* as an example.

more widely discussed in the third narrative turn in the film, which assesses Schofield's masculine hero construct concerning the only woman in the film. In the final narrative turn in the film, I show how Schofield's final acts are driven by a hero's performing ego state where he resorts to the desire of the other (society) conceptualised through Judith Butler's ideas on gender performance (1988, 1990).

There is a wealth of scholarly criticism on the dynamics of war and masculinity that is beyond the scope of this essay (Morgan 1994; Moss 1996; Frantzen 2004; Roper 2005, Meyer 2009; Burgoyne 2010). Critics have also assessed the notion of heroism and its relation to masculinity (Bourke 1996; Todman 2005; Wansink, Payne and Von Ittersum 2008; Schlenker, Weigold and Schlenker 2008; Harvey, Edros and Turnbull 2009). Notions of hyper and toxic masculinity have also been put forward by Mosher and Serkin 1984 and Flood 2018). Finally, film critics have addressed the genre of war with masculine heroism (Ehrenreich, 1983; Ritzenoff 2013; Sarris 2002). *1917* certainly appears to adhere to the ideas of heroism, and hypermasculinity, in its presentation of the warrior hero. However, the hero in *1917* is also presented in a complex dialectic. This article offers a complementary perspective of the war film, as I focus on the war within the self, conceptualised through the hero, in the psyche of Schofield.

The Style and Language of the Film

Robert Burgoyne comments on the style of the historical film, that the past reimagined is achieved through stylistic and narrative devices in film (Burgoyne 2010). For Mendes, it is the one-shot style and the four-act narrative structure that allows the spectator a close emotional investment in the character metamorphosis of Schofield.⁴ Mendes gives us his rationale for the one-shot method. 'Once I had the idea that it was two hours of real-time, it seemed like the natural thing to do, to lock the audience together with the central characters — in a way that they gradually began to realize, consciously or unconsciously, they couldn't get out of' (Mendes: 2019). The film's narrative follows the classical tripartite structure of unity of time, place and action. The passage of time is chronological. The place is France and remains so, distance travelled is done on foot by the main characters and later by Schofield on a short truck journey. The action is based on one single plot line, to get to the front line and save lives. The spectator follows the main characters in real time, the action focalised through them, the spectator is immersed in the action. As Schofield and Blake walk in real time, their steps lead them and the spectator into conflicting *mise en scenes* from the pastoral onto the ancient that merge seamlessly. The real time, action and place create a close realism, we are in effect caught up in their action, vicariously sharing their experience. 'Art, after all, should strive to connect us with another's experience or way of seeing the world. As a nation that sends soldiers into conflicts like these, shouldn't we care deeply about what that experience is like?' (Pebbles 2014:135). Mendes, it would seem

⁴ I have outlined the four-act structure in footnote three.

underscores the notion that the spectator should indeed care deeply, achieved through the thread of unity that is the action, time and place in *1917*.⁵

In *1917* the opening scene informs the spectator it is April 6, 1917. Lance Corporal Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) and Lance Corporal Schofield (George MacKay) are British soldiers stationed in France. They are given orders to deliver a message to troops at the front line, who are acting on information that the Germans have retreated. The intelligence, however, is believed to be wrong and it is in fact a Trojan horse. Schofield and Blake must reach the troops to tell them to abandon the mission. Blake is given an emotional impetus to carry out the task after being informed that his brother is amongst those on the front line. Schofield offers some initial protestations before relenting. And so begins Schofield and Blake's detours toward the end, in their hero's journey.⁶



Blake (Dean- Charles Chapman) and Schofield (George Mackay) in the opening scenes of *1917*. *Movie Stills* (2019)

When Schofield and Blake accept the challenge of reaching the front line, the first pivotal narrative point, they engage in a precarious stake in the balance of their life and

⁵ The Aristotelian unities are often associated with tragedy. The film certainly has tragedy with Blake's death, War itself is obviously tragic. However, there may be an underpinning tragedy that permeates this film: the performance of masculine heroism in War.

⁶ Joseph Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2012) first published in 1949 suggests that all narratives follow a mythological structure of the hero's journey that has been passed from classical times. The structure consists of twelve narrative steps in chronological order. Loosely headed by three different headings, the ordinary world, the extraordinary world and then a return to the normal world. It begins with a call to adventure and a quest, in-between various moments of tension which include tests, ordeals, and rewards. The narrative in *1917* follows Campbell's monomyth pattern. Of interest the ego states I go onto explore also fit in with the broad headlines of Campbell's monomyth.

potential death.⁷ On the one hand, a release of the tension and restraint between masculine heroism and the disciplinary acquiescence of the soldier. Alternatively, for Schofield and Blake, it provides a masochistic thrill of the potential to outmanoeuvre death, their disavowal of death through postponement.⁸

The Death Drive in 1917

According to Freud, organisms adapt and modify themselves to avoid unpleasure, however, this is not sustainable. We live within a society where our desires may not provide us or are prohibited in allowing for an immediate release and resolution of tension to achieve satisfaction. So, the pleasure principle must work with the reality principle. Freud writes: '[u]nder the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle' (Freud 1920: 4). Pleasure, while still motivating us, is postponed, or sublimated, channelled into a socially acceptable goal. Freud then goes on to posit a biological proposal concerning the Death Drive and explains how all organisms pass through various phases before death. Freud sets up the oppositional dualism of drives, the Life Drive that preserves an organism and the Death Drive that is, geared toward a reduction in tension in its aim toward dissolution.

Freud, after an exhaustive scientific summary of research on organisms, suggests that there is a desire to return to a state of inertia. 'It seems, then, [...] an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things' (Freud 1920: 30). Within the description of the Death Drive, tension is paramount.

The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the 'Nirvana principle', to borrow a term from Barbara Low [1920, 73] a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of that fact is one of our strongest reasons in drives for believing in the existence of death instincts (drive)⁹ (Freud 1920: 49-50).

In *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) Freud goes back to the Death Drive and asks: 'how can this conservative characteristic of instincts (drive) help us understand our self-destructiveness? What earlier state of things does an instinct

⁷ In acceptance of the task, Blake and Schofield present with Harvey, Erdos and Turnbull ideas of the hero with that 'acts [...] relating to courage, bravery and altruism' (2009: 313).

⁸ Peter Brooks provides an analogy for the death drive in a narrative in 'Freud's Master Plot' (1977). The reader or spectator innately anticipates resolution, unconsciously driven by instinct motivated by a desire toward an anticipatory conclusion. It is this desire that is the driving force of momentum 'the motor' (Brooks 1977: 281). Nestled in between the beginning and the end is the dynamics of narrative: 'a process we feel to be necessary' (Brooks 1977: 284).

⁹ This is a direct quote from the text and is a translation issue. It is important to note that instinct is actually drive. In the rest of this essay where it says instinct as opposed to drive, I will include drive in brackets.

such as this want to restore?' (Freud 1933:107). It is as we have seen in the *Pleasure Principle* (1920) a reduction in tension, but in his 1933 text, he refers to it as a return to an organic state. There is some contradiction here, if the return is to an organic state, then it cannot restore it literally because it would mean no life at all. Instead, it is a cessation of tension only, which does not necessarily mean literal death. So, although the meaning of the Death Drive can translate as a manifestation of literal death, other theorists reconfigure Freud's concept of the Death Drive in distinct ways and suggest it reflects the death of the ego.

Death is only one particular form of a state of peace and destruction, only one particular means of striving toward a state of peace. The central and predominant intention of Thanatos, its aim and purpose, is precisely peace in one form or another, attained in some way or other (Ikonen and Recharadt 2010: 29).

Further argued by Laplanche who states that: 'the words 'life' and 'death'...do not designate biological life or death but their 'analogues' in mental life and psychological conflict' (Laplanche 1999: 49). Hans Loewald's definition also supports these ideas when he describes the Death Drive as an 'urge toward the bliss and pain of consuming oneself in the intensity of being lived by the id' (Loewald 1980: 68). To live, as Loewald puts it by the id, suggests the desire to live without the ego. Put this way, the Death Drive's desire is the ultimate reduction of tension through the annihilation of the ego. As Blake dismisses Schofield, the ego is metaphorically killed off, to live as Loewald puts it 'living in the id's intensity' (Loewald 1980: 68). To live without the ego would mean to live in the governance of the pleasure principle. I argue that for Schofield, this translates as a release of tension, a reprieve from acting out the heroic masculinity that the army demands. By extension of Laplanche's and Loewald's ideas on the death of the ego, I suggest there are further stages of how the Death Drive numbs, as opposed to kills, the ego, I begin with the wounded ego state.

The First Narrative Turn: The Wounded Ego State.

The wounded ego state is characterised by repression and disavowal. It serves to repress and attempts to avoid the repetition of past traumatic events and behaviour in any current event. The wounded ego mediates with the superego, in its denial of the assimilation of the heroic construct, and its association with past trauma. The wounded ego further works with the id, to lessen tension through its repression and disavowal of the past, in service of the pleasure principle. At the start of Blake and Schofield's journey to reach the front line this allows for the presentation of the wounded ego state. It represents Schofield's rejection of heroism and how this function's regarding the wounded ego state is explored in two scenes featuring the discussion of his medal. In the opening scene of the film, it is described that Schofield's uniform is identical to Blake's, same rank, the only difference is the faded cloth left by the subtle absence of the brass stripe on Schofield's left sleeve. The (missing) medal substitutes for many motifs, a symbol of celebration of valour, courage, bravery, and heroism. It also functions here in war as a motif of survival and trauma. For Schofield, a remembering of something he would rather forget. It takes the spectator back to earlier words of Schofield in his protestation of taking on the task by his superiors, with Schofield's

passing comment to Blake. 'Look, the last time I was told the Germans were gone, it didn't end well ... You don't know, Blake, you weren't there' 'It didn't end well' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2019: 12-13). We never discover what happened to Schofield, it remains unspeakable.

The Death Drive works here through its repression of the ego as a protective, not a destructive drive. Schofield works in the pleasure principles premise as set out by Freud. 'There is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed' (Freud 1920: 14). Schofield's symbolic repression is visualised via the medal's literal absence. This is later followed up once again with verbal absence when Blake questions Schofield 'You don't remember the Somme?' Schofield responds with an anxious face, 'not really'. Blake goes onto say 'Well, you did alright out of it. At least wear your ribbon.' Schofield tells him, 'I don't have it anymore' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2019: 16). Schofield's tension is heightened with excitation and increased tension. The Death Drive curbed by the function of the Life Drive is metaphorically played out, as the dialogue abruptly ends there. There is a triumph for the spectator in the medal's symbolism, but here it is tainted with death. We can safely assume Schofield had a skirting with death, at the very least a witnessing of death. Even though the spectator only infers trauma from Schofield, the residue of mourning lingers with it without direct reference. So, it is not so much the death of the ego at work here, but a numbing involved in the repressive function of the ego. The medal at one level then translates at a very basic level as a motif of the Death Drive, however, it symbolically presents much more than that, it presents as a rejection, through its repression, as a disavowal of heroic identity. It is worth at this stage to look closer at what is heroism.

Heroism and Desire

Heroism is clearly defined by courage and bravery. The highest medal given to soldiers is the Victoria Cross the definition to receive this is given as: 'awarded for valour "in the face of the enemy"' (Forces War Record 2020) The second highest honour given to any British or commonwealth soldier serving in war is the Georges Cross awarded for 'acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger' (Royal Signal Museum 2020) It is interesting to compare the two with a contemporary perspective of heroism defined by a former veteran as the following.

People who are heroes go beyond what is expected of them, risking life and limb to benefit others. There is an altruistic aspect to heroism. All acts of heroism require bravery, but many acts of bravery are not acts of heroism because they are done for self-serving reasons. (Marlantes 2015)

It would seem the salient feature of heroism is more than bravery and courage, it necessitates altruism.

Schofield in a later scene elaborates on his missing medal and diffuses the notion of heroism as worthless, he explains his medal as just a bit of tin with ribbon on it. Schofield goes onto say how he swapped his medal for a bottle of wine. The substitution of wine for the medal is also significant: alcohol being a depressant, a

substance for impaired memory which can reduce anxiety and tension and offers a temporal cognitive impairment of memory, which is of course repression. There is also the sense of a chain of transactions: valour exchanged for a medal which then translates as a memory for trauma, the transaction and displacement of the symbolically rich object ends with a pithy bottle of alcohol. It conveys the pointlessness of the medal, and the repression for Schofield, and (the spectator too, because it is beyond the film's narrative) of why he received the medal. The medal, a metonym in condensation of valour courage and heroism, is now displaced literally through its exchange. Importantly what is also displaced psychoanalytically is heroism and its associative traits which are revealed as a veneer, much like the bit of tin the medal is made of. The protective veneer of the metal metaphorically stripped to reveal the truth. Alongside it, the ribbon and its culturally symbolic connotation of celebration is implicitly destroyed. It would seem Schofield is rejecting courage and altruism, however on closer analysis, this is not the case. He is rejecting the demand to perform; courage and altruism are simply by products of a performance.

The medal substitutes further in its decorative veneer because it translates as something as not authentic; it is symbolic of a guise which further translates psychically as a conflict in the ego. There is a conflict between the desire of the army and its celebration of hyper-toxic masculinity loosely translated as heroism, and reward of the medal. Psychically this can translate as the superego, the army, set against the id, the unbridled desires of the basic instinct of Schofield to act naturally. In between is the ego that struggles with the competing demands of the id and superego. In the medal's exchange, Schofield is rejecting the inauthentic 'I' of the ego that has been polluted by the demands of superego. The Death Drive functions here in the ego's repression, via the exchange of the medal, effectively-rejecting performance, disavowing it, in doing so, the Death Drive again serves a protective function in service of the pleasure principle to lessen the tension of a memory of the past and to deny a repetition of behaviour that would ultimately lead to a repeat of the trauma. Berlant, in reference to trauma, suggests it,

forces its subjects not into mere stuckness but into crisis mode, where they develop some broad, enduring intuitions about the way we live in a now that's emerging without unfolding, and imagining a historicism from within a discontinuous present and ways of being that were never sovereign (Berlant 2011: 93).

This is Schofield's ordinary in the context of war. There is, therefore, a psychical war at work within Schofield -between the desire to perform heroically in line with the superego, and the desire to survive at the most basic authentic level, which is mediated by the ego and supported by the Death Drive's repressive actions in containing desire.

Desire, characterised by the function of the superego, to uphold a heroic image emerges in an earlier scene. Blake tells Schofield the anecdote of one man who lost his ear, recounts how the man tells everyone they lost it because of shrapnel. The truth, Blake goes on to say, it was bitten off by a rat. The anecdote reveals the desire of performing heroism and sacrifice. In the film heroic sacrifice is revealed as the desire of the other, specifically women. Framed in one comment from a 'Lieutenant 'But, chin

up. There's a medal in it for sure. Nothing like a scrap of ribbon to cheer up a widow' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2019:20). The line is reminiscent of the opening lines of Siegfried Sassoon, 'Glory of Women' where the wounded hero is constructed through the lens of heroism in the desire of others.

You love us when we're heroes, home on
leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
(Sassoon 1961: 79).

It is a collective superego at work in society, glorifies the construct of the hero, that is introjected by the ego of the soldier.¹⁰

The desire of the other framed through heroism is continued in later scenes. When Schofield fulfils his heroic duty of finding Blake's brother and tells him that he was brave, and died a hero, we know Blake did not die a hero. He had a scuffle and was knifed to death. However, the desire to portray him as a hero is carried on by Schofield, echoing Sassoon's poem: 'That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace' (Sassoon 1961: 79). The chivalrous lie is one that Schofield dutifully colludes with, despite him knowing the insignificance of medals and heroism as noted earlier, but to reiterate, it is not his attachment to the desire, but to the cruel optimism of the desire of the other introjected, the military, families and civilians expectations. Lauren Berlant notes the cruel irony in optimism.

'Cruel optimism comes about when individuals remain attached to "conditions of possibility" or "clusters of promises" which are embedded in desired objects or ideas, even when those same objects or ideas inhibit people from acquiring or fulfilling such items or promises' (Berlant 2011: 23-24).

Embedded within the paradigm of the desire of the other is performance, the others desire that the soldiers perform heroic masculinity, one that has resulted in the wounded ego state of Schofield. Further in this paradigm, the desire of the subject is an illusory lie of inauthenticity. While the medal is a memory for Schofield's past performance of heroism; it is also a reward for performance.

Schofield sees through the illusory lie with the exchange of his medal, the corporal in his sarcastic wit also suggests they too are aware of the lie, the facade of the

¹⁰ The idea of the desire of the other regarding the hero relates to the idea that 'ideologies and heroes go hand in hand and probably reciprocally influence each other' (Schlenker 2008: 348). Lacan comments on desire in the following. 'Nowhere does it appear more clearly that man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other' (Lacan 1977: 58).

hero is, in fact, a performance. The wounded ego is a response to the truth behind the lies and the performance. In mediation, the ego comes to know the illusory lie of the superego. The Death Drive functions here in various ways. First, for Schofield it works as I have shown positively in its repression, it shields, and protects Schofield from living the recognised lie through its mediation and dis-allowance of the supremacy of the superego, but still allows the ego space for him to perform with an awareness of duplicity. Second, the Death Drive serves as a defence from civilians, against their fear and anxiety, naturally prevalent in war, which is disavowed as their own and projected onto soldiers. In the process of projection, there is a displacement of fear and anxiety of death from civilians, to the symbol of heroism. It is a cruel transaction that translates as dying a hero becomes martyrdom, which then becomes an acceptable sublimation of grief for civilians. It serves to lessen tension and dilute emotional pain for the civilians, in what could be described as a collective superego, working in service of the pleasure principle. The discussion of the medal reawakens the trauma for Schofield, it is the start of the fluid shift toward the liminal ego state which comes to the forefront in no man's land.¹¹

The Second Narrative Turn: The Liminal Ego State.

The liminal ego state is characterised by its presence on the border between disavowal and repression, (the wounded ego) and acceptance of the desires of the superego in fulfilling its expectations, here of heroism. Its key functions are like the superego in relation to the id and ego because it mediates between desires. In the process of this mediation, it brings the subject to the boundary of a crisis of identity. The scenery of no man's land adds further emphasis to this, it is a geographical liminal space that is in the subjective psyche too. Schofield is physically in a liminal state, as a soldier who up to now has resisted the performance of the hero, his status as a soldier further puts him in a liminal state, away from home, no longer a civilian, in an ambiguous state where previously recognised civilian social structures are no longer relevant.

If, as suggested, the Death Drive is read as a psychic death of the ego in degrees, this opens up the space to consider it alongside Kristeva's notion of the abject, which includes re-evaluations of (gender) identity as I will go onto show later. However, in the foreground of this reflection of identity with the abject lays a visceral feeling of horror and disgust that I will discuss first. According to Kristeva, abjection is the repressed horror within the psyche that, when faced, evokes a powerful psychical response: describing it as affect a 'revolt within being' (Kristeva 1982: 45). Kristeva adds that the abject is anything that threatens to contaminate cleanliness or anything that evokes a reaction of disgust or repulsion, particularly so regarding the body, bodily fluids or waste (Kristeva 1982: 2–4).

In the scenes of no man's land, Schofield and Blake and the spectator face constant repulsion. Through panoramic shots, the familiar scenic tropes of war films, guns, shrapnel, trenches, and heroes transform into visuals that are not amiss from a

¹¹ No man's land is the area of land between the two enemies that is not occupied and is a danger zone for both opposing sides.

sci-fi or horror film. The mise-en-scène of no man's land confronts the spectator with desolation. Nothing can live here, and death surrounds the characters. The circuitous paths of the Death Drive weave in and out of shot and provides the relentless unsettling notion of death which hovers on the screen's background and in the spectator's mind, an omniscient phantom of our most base instinct that haunts the spectator, the fear of death. Dead horses, swarms of flies and blackened trees. The ground is covered in shrapnel as if to remind us this is a man-made desolation and not nature's course. In the background, the relentless, repetitive, panoramic shots of death and abjection continue. There are multitudes of rats: parasites of destruction that swarm like vultures to feed on the waste of the dead, they evoke disgust. It is reminiscent of the Freudian notion of the Death Drive and the desire/drive to go back toward nature. 'An initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads' (Freud 1920: 32). The Death Drive is no longer just presented internally, but externally.

The Abject

The scenery of the abject in *1917*, with its visceral repulsion, is presented as Schofield's Death Drive, personified.¹² The spectator, along with the characters in the film, faces the revolt, disgust, and repulsion and disavowal of death as the main characters trudge on. The scenes of visual destruction in *1917* further serve as an extended metaphor of Schofield's psyche, his identity on the verge of collapse, it is a symbolic reflection of his liminal ego state. Identity is questioned through the presentation of the borders of life and death, the characters face death at every turn. Identity is further presented as fragments, and humans substituted with uncanny zoomorphism.

Schofield and Blake are reduced to an animal-like form as they trudge through the mud, hunched backs and startled eyes. Borders between animal and human fuse in depictions of abjection. As Kristeva notes the abject 'confronts us ...with those fragile states wherein man strays on the territories of animal' (Kristeva 1982: 12). Later, a clump of human hair drifts past. Identity is lost and reduced to a fragment. The characters face other soldiers in literal embodiments of death. Kristeva in describing abjection tells us how facing death affects the individual's sense of identity: 'corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [...]' (Kristeva 1982: 3-4). Schofield and Blake must thrust aside corpses in their quest. At one point they pass a dead German soldier bowed with a curved arm, as though welcoming them to some

¹² Walter Benjamin in reference German tragedy plays notes the importance of landscapes and shows how nature is linked to history and identity. 'Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with [...] history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in death's head [...] this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such but also of the biographical historicity of the individual' (Benjamin, 1998: 166).

circus of horror. They face another dead German soldier, rats eating him. Blake jumps into a crater in this otherworldly, alien-like land and faces a faceless German soldier, sitting up, his lips chewed off by vermin. Schofield falls on this macabre simulacrum figure, his hand falling into the decaying flesh, his action literally merges life with death. Kristeva further describes abjection in echoes of the film's scenes. 'Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. (Kristeva 1982: 3). Each image is a symbolic resonance of Schofield's liminal ego state: he is neither the hero, or the reluctant hero, but something in-between, stuck between the ego states of the traumatised wounded ego and a desire to perform heroically. What has previously been protected through repression, is now at risk of conscious awareness, provoked by the visuals of death, which threaten instability. Kristeva describes the affect of facing death.

'There I am at the border of my condition as a living being [...] the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything [...] in that thing that no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders' (Kristeva 1982: 3-4).

Blake and Schofield face their mortality by literally facing death and so face the prospect of the loss of authentic identity in place of heroic identity.

At the core of Kristeva's argument is the subject and thus the ego. 'The abject thus at once represents the threat that meaning is breaking down and constitutes our reaction to such a breakdown [...] what disturbs identity, system, order (Kristeva 1982: 4). Kristeva's concept of the abject is used to conceptualise disruption, when there is 'a loss of distinction between self and other, and places where meaning collapses, and the ego, the 'I', is challenged' (Kristeva 1982: 3). It is not the feeling of disgust that one faces in the abject, but a threat to the stability of oneself. Kristeva goes on to clarify the argument for the abject and identity. 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982: 4). The abject relates to problems of stabilising a delimited self, presented by Schofield in his liminal ego state. There is a catalyst for the fluid emergence of Schofield's final ego state, triggered by the death of Blake.



Schofield and Blake entering the farmyard. *Movie Stills* (2019)

Schofield and Blake arrive at a derelict farmyard. Moving to a barn, Schofield finds an urn of milk and pours some into his flask. What follows is the death of Blake. After a plane crashes into the barn, Schofield and Blake help the German pilot out of the plane. Blake instructs Schofield to fetch water for the injured pilot, with Schofield temporarily gone, the pilot stabs Blake. There is a sense of the horror committed by man in war in this scene, as well as the vulnerability of man. The relationship between Schofield and Blake, initially presented as a trope of the buddy movie, shifts across the spectrum of homosociality: from friendly banter that veers towards the homoerotic as Schofield cradles Blake. It is a transgression, a casting off of the performing heteronormative masculinity. There are none of the machismo traits that were presented at the beginning of the film, instead, we have two men in the grip of death and grief, in counteraction of hyper-toxic masculinity, in tenderness. The dramatic scene of Blake's death can be seen as presenting the anthropomorphism of Thanatos (Death Drive) of Blake, to Schofield's Eros (Life Drive). Remember, it was Blake that was adamant on setting out on this kamikaze task in the first place, to save his brother, despite Schofield's protestations and potential death. Now, in this paradigmatic shift, it is Blake's death that Schofield must contend with. What is significant in this scene is Blake's dying words, which shows complicity in retaining the desire of other where the superego reigns supreme: 'will you write to my mum for me [...] tell her I wasn't scared' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2019: 57).

Even in death, the desire for performing heroism is retained, even if it is a lie. Schofield too is complicit in the lie and performance, as at the end of the film he tells Blake's brother how he died a hero. Schofield adheres to the lie, not to fulfil his desire here, but to fulfil the other's desire. Blake presents as the uncanny double of his brother; the outmanoeuvring of death has worked regarding saving his brother but failed, as its transference is on Blake. It is the literal death of the ego with the death of the subject. Schofield's wounded ego state and its repressive function is now faced with death head-on; the Death Drive casts a metaphorical shadow upon Schofield, the

reduction of tension is now lessened in grief. Schofield mourns the loss of Blake, albeit momentarily expressed through his flash of emotion. Schofield presents the idea of repressed emotion there is no time, nor space in his soldierly masculine construct to allow for mourning, other than a beat of acknowledgement. In Blake's death scene Mendes achieves three things: he posits soldiers as divine-like Gods, in their depiction of Life and Death, a theatrical- like performance, but he simultaneously shows their fallible mortality and simple humanness. The Death Drive functions here literally in Blake's death, but equally powerfully as a killing of the construct of the heroic soldier.

It is difficult not to be moved by Blake's death scene, as it evokes mourning in the spectator. The motive of grief presents Blake as an obvious object of attachment for Schofield and the spectator. But the scene of mourning shifts from the individual actor, to the spectator into a cultural message, achieved through one gesture: Schofield wipes Blakes blood on the grass. This fleeting but dramatic gesture hints at a different, at least unconscious, motive for empathy beyond mourning. The blood-stained grass disrupts the idyllic image of England, now drenched in blame and shame, and lies and a further reflection on the innocent youthful lives lost. It stains our idyllist memory of the hero with blood. Blake's death also signifies the start of a shift in ego states for Schofield. It is a crisis of identity that problematises the construct of the hero and ultimately leads to an examination of gender in a cultural context. To explore gender Mendes goes beyond the year of 1917 and reaches further back into history, with a shift in mise-en-scene that reflects Kristeva's ideas of a social abject.

The Third Narrative Turn: Gender and Myth.

Kristeva's notion of a social abject is expressed in the mise-scene in *1917* that shortly follows Blake's death. Kristeva's notes how the social element of the abject has the potential to disrupt phallogocentric society in that it 'does not respect borders, positions, or rules' (Kristeva 1982: 4). Mendes through a dramatic shift in scenery rejects the landscapes of war and the pastoral scenes that have so far dominated this film in doing so he disrupts the borders of the genre as the visuals shifts into what visually looks strangely familiar, like a Greco- Romanesque amphitheatre. Mendes takes us back historically to explore what might be said to the roots of memory through ancestral masculinity and heroism. Schofield arrives at a main square the landscape changes, the screenplay describes it as 'framed by a colonnade' and 'large medieval colonnades flank the entrance' (Mendes and Wilson- Cairns 2018: 80). We are taken back in historical narrative time with a visual reference to Mesopotamian culture, 'being passed as a torch to the Greco-Roman world [...] the cradle of civilisation [...] an organic universal whole (that) represents human culture's infancy' (Matthews and Porr 2019: 128). It is difficult to ignore connotations of the Greco-Roman setting and the inevitable association of gladiatorial Spartans that fight to the death and the obvious connotations of hyper-masculinity and heroism. It can also be read considering the Freudian Death Drive, in its desire to return to an origin. But crucially when read in the mis-en-scene of a theatre-like structure, Mendes infers that masculinity has been passed down ancestrally in imitative form, from this cradle of civilisation. The links between performance and masculinity are subtly referenced, a point that is reiterated in the film.

The Greco- Roman context provides a third pivotal narrative turn in the film, that leads Schofield toward the ultimate resurrection of the performing ego state of the hyper-toxic masculine hero. To avoid gunfire from a German soldier, Schofield turns a corner, finds a window to an old cellar, and climbs through it. The symbolic, hidden subterranean gloomy space is a neat metaphor for Schofield's unconscious. Ahead lies a doorway, hidden behind a curtain with flickers of flames. He goes through the curtain as the metaphor extends, anything repressed will now be brought to consciousness. The scene so far sets up a symbolic foreshadowing of the resurrection of what we can assume Schofield worked in beyond the film's narrative, a performing ego state, one that led to him to receive the medal. However, Schofield's rejections of what the ego has previously repressed, the rejection of heroic performance, will soon relent, with the assimilation of the superego and its ultimate triumph of the ego over the id. Schofield will revert to the hyper-toxic masculine heroic hero. However, before this, there is one last significant stimulation that sets Schofield's performance in motion. The catalyst is Schofield's meeting with the only woman in the film. 'It brings into relief issues of power [...] exposing the "fissures and faultlines" between national myths and the historical experiences of people excluded from dominant accounts' (Burgoyne 2010: 6).

After climbing through the cellar window, a woman greets Schofield. She never gives her name, which is significant, she acts only as a stimulus to Schofield's shift in ego states. A further significance here is the silencing of women in WW1, and their role, then as now, to act as a bolster to reinforce masculinity. Nevertheless, in the screenplay script, she is called Lauri. It is a flashback to an earlier scene when Schofield and Blake are in German trenches and the name Lara the German equivalent of Lauri is written on the wall in the background. The name is significant, its origin in the Greco-Roman period meaning victory, honour, and strength. A further subtle message of heroic propaganda. The meeting with Lauri stirs Schofield physically. He is unsteady on his feet; he sits opposite Lauri, their eyes lock momentarily. Up to now, there has been no contrast to masculinity, but here there is a young woman, dressed in white, in contrast to the khaki machismo that has been so far, Schofield's only frame of reference to his identity.

The setting where Schofield meets Lauri is a cave-like dwelling, a dark, dismal cellar unfit for human habitation, another signifier for the abject, which instantly links Lauri in a relation to the abject. Schofield in this scene presents as the oedipal child, on the cusp of the rejection of (t)his mother, brought about the fear of the Father's retribution, here it is the superego informed by the military and the desire of the other (society) in the desire of masculine hyper-toxic heroism. Schofield recognises that it is he who has the penis and not the woman, who is now positioned in difference through lack.



Schofield's meeting with Lauri. *Movie Stills* (2019)

In complement of the Greek-Romanesque mise-en-scene, Lauri symbolically presents, as a Medusa figure, who despite popular imagery was once beautiful. Her phallic snaked head was a consequence of her rape at the hands of Poseidon, the trauma, according to the myth, transformed 'Medusa's beautiful hair to serpents and made her face so terrible to behold that the mere sight of it would turn onlookers to stone' (Freeman 2013: 30). Lauri is positioned as the pre-object Medusa. Freud (1940) suggests Medusa represents the threat of castration.

'The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother' (Freud 1940: 273).

Lauri further serves a dual purpose, like the Life and Death Drive. Positioned as a Medusa-like figure, she is an agent of death as she signifies to Schofield the death of his masculinity. However, she also presents, as a woman and the Life Drive, which serves for Schofield as an awakening for his masculinity. The scene takes a further twist that goes onto explore gender relations.

The cellar, as already noted, resembles a cave, in the context of the mise-en-scene it is yet another evocation of Greek philosophy, Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, from B.C.E. 517. (Plato: 2002). Plato's cave allegory is presented as a dialogue between Plato's brother and his mentor and narrator in the text Socrates. In a

very brief, simple summary, the text relays a story about a group living in a cave that watches shadows on the wall, projected from the fire in the cave. Plato describes the cave. 'Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets' (Plato 2002:373). To explain this a little more: the shadows are made by people with the puppets, the light and shade that casts the shadows, cast illusions thought to be real. The text goes on to explain how one day the prisoners are freed from the cave and come to understand the shadows on the wall are not reality, as previously thought, the illusion of a manufactured reality is brought to light by their freedom as they see the sun. Plato here alludes to the idea that what we perceive as reality is just a representation of our senses.

Plato's cave allegory is effectively played out in *1917* with Schofield and Lauri. There is the striking parallel of the setting, the dark cave/cellar lit with the fire. Lauri acts as the metaphorical puppet shadow, situated to analogously to represent Schofield's other, but he perceives the shadow as real. Lauri is Schofield's illusory representation of reality regarding gender relations. Metaphorically fashioned in shadow, as stated she has no name in the film, she is conceived as abject in her distorted shadow image by her other- Schofield. If as stated Lauri is a puppet shadow then the strings are metaphorically held by the patriarchal society, but importantly, as in Plato's allegory, this state of things is an illusion. Schofield refuses to see the illusion, as to see through the illusion would force him to retain his current liminal identity. Schofield needs to hold onto the illusion because it sets up and confirms his difference to women, it reaffirms his masculinity and subsequently, he reaffirms patriarchal power. Schofield is invested in upholding the illusion and is therefore implicit in the sustainment of hierarchical gender relations. Arguably he really has no choice, he is effectively trapped in the myth of the hero construct, one which he must pursue to avenge Blake's death. Implicit in this puppetry shadow reading is the subtle, yet powerful presence of the Death Drive and the death of the ego. There is no authentic I in either biological male or female identity, the ego is suppressed, all that remains is performance dictated by the big Other (society's' desire) in conformance of gender expectations.

In the meeting with Lauri, Schofield faces his other.¹³ It is a recognition of (his) masculinity, achieved through contrast. Mendes plays with this contrast and further problematises ideas of gender. Because next Schofield hears a baby cry, and by serendipity, he has the milk from the derelict farmhouse the baby needs. Here Schofield presents as a maternal motif, extended by the fact he goes onto comfort the child, as he sings 'The Jumblies' by Edward Lear.¹⁴ The scene is not unlike a Schofield

¹³ I use the term 'other' here to Simone De Beauvoir's seminal text; *The Second Sex* (1949) where she addresses how women are defined and are situated oppressively, as the 'other' in relegation to men.

¹⁴ The irony of the poem does not go amiss considering Schofield's cruel optimistic task, describing how the characters went out to sea in a sieve, nor does the genre of the poetry-nonsense. It serves a subtle critique of the futility of war. 'In a Sieve they went to sea: /In spite of all their friends could say. (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2019: 87).

acting as a substitute mother for a dying Blake from the farmyard scene. Then, in the farmyard scene, we saw a doll with burnt-out eyes, another symbol of death and castration, here we have its oppositional double, a baby. But what follows is a symbolic act of castration as the physical stir presented by Schofield early in this scene is psychically matched. Kristeva writes how the child abjects the mother, casts her off and simultaneously defines her as abject. 'It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling' (Kristeva 1982: 13). The bells toll, another symbol of mortality and death, and pertinently as a reminder of Schofield's cruel attachment to the task ahead. He leaves, in doing so he symbolically castrates, that part of himself that has presented as the maternal, the female and ultimately the feminine, in soothing the baby, and rejects through abjection the (m)other within himself.¹⁵ This rejection also involves the death of the liminal ego. Schofield recoils from the liminal state of identity and reclaims his masculine identity, defined further here by the military discourse, he will also reclaim the previously denied, disavowed, repressed heroic ego state.

The Final Narrative Turn: The Performing Ego State.

The performing ego state is the ultimate triumph of the assimilation of the superego's influences on the ego, in relent and acceptance to the military discourse, informed by public desire in confirmatory performance of heroic masculinity. In the acts that follow, Schofield (re)claims and (re)enacts his masculinity, he becomes the Plato inspired puppet, governed like Lauri by metaphorical patriarchal strings. However, his position as a man still affords him a privileged status, compared to Lauri as a shadow, in a hierarchical order. There is a further embedded consequence: the spectator also becomes a complicit puppet in perceived enjoyment and satisfaction of the scenes that follow where Schofield acts out the hyperbolic hero. While Schofield does not hold the metaphorical strings, he too is a puppet in the patriarchal system, albeit it, a complicit one. However, as stated his options are limited, he can reject the hero construct, and fail in his quest, or he can continue in the liminal ego state. Schofield goes onto act the puppet shadow, like Lauri, in doing so he too becomes a secondary, imitative presentation of the real figure, that is a denial of the true I of the ego.

The Death Drive has effectively worked here to kill off the ego, but in this process, it has outmanoeuvred one of its driving forces, that of a return to a state from which it began, here this signifies a state before gender demarcation. The Death Drive up to now has held Schofield in a liminal ego state. Faced with Lauri and the potential acknowledgement of the role of women that upholds his construction he also faced and veered toward, a symbolic death of masculinity. Again, Schofield outmanoeuvres this, with repression and denial, a brief interlude of the wounded ego that only serves to reinforce not only his liminal ego state but the fragile liminal state of masculinity. It is

¹⁵ Of interest, Michael Roper (2009) has shown the importance of the mother-son relationship for men in WW1 and gives examples of dying soldiers' last words were to their mother. (Roper 2009:2) Schofield seemingly goes onto buck this trend, but I stress his abjection that follows is psychical and representative of the beginnings of gender demarcation.

this that drives him, in absolute defiance of liminality and of course a firm rejection of the Death Drive, that propels him to carry on living, albeit performatively as I go onto show. What follows is heroic masculine performance and the last stage of ego development with the performing ego state, that the events in Greek- Romanesque setting has led up to.

Visual hyperbole follows Schofield's meeting with Lauri as he reinstates his masculine gender in violent overcompensation. In his reassertion of masculinity, Schofield strangles a German soldier to death. When Schofield (over)reacts with what can be interpreted as disgust, at his failure in sustaining heroism in substitute for the maternal and consequently the feminine, he is in effect in crisis mode living by his 'enduring intuitions', a way of being that is not sovereign to him, or his own agency (Berlant 2011: 93). Schofield (re)acts in a reversion to a learnt role. In war, this translates as hyper- toxic heroic masculinity. Schofield then runs with superhuman speed, spartan like through the Romanesque amphitheatre, visually it is stunning.¹⁶ Schofield's preternatural strength in the German's soldier strangulation, along with his athletic speed, running in the amphitheatre, all contribute to his heroism. It is poignant that Schofield's hypermasculine heroic performative acts are situated in the Greco-Roman setting, the cradle of drama.

It is pertinent, considering the arguments set out above and in a context of the performing ego state, to comment on Judith Butler's argument on gender performativity (1988, 1999). Butler highlights the theatrical quality of performance. The body she argues is a historical body that has been gendered through the repetition of gendered performances in culture (Butler: 1988). Essentially, we learn to act in imitation through the witnessing of others the same sex as us and how through this process this re-produces and legitimises gender binaries. In a later essay, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (1990) Butler suggests identities are sites of regulations. Identity follows the repetitive forms of behaviour in the sustainment and reinforcement of a cultural gendered norm, but they also conceal and exclude to maintain the cultural norm. The concealment and exclusion noted by Butler suggests behaviour, but there is a psychical element too. The performance of hyper-toxic masculinity the military demands noted earlier regarding Schofield and his medal, is an echo of Butler's idea of concealment, suppression of the ego and therefore oppression of identity, a disguise. Because performance is exactly that, an act, not an authentic (re)action in response to any given situation. Regarding exclusion noted by Butler, in psychical terms, the ego's mediatory function is destroyed, there is no individual agency now, as the Death Drive kills off the ego to support performance in the desire of the other.

Conclusion

There is a cycle regarding Schofield's ego states that present in the film. It begins with the wounded ego, in its denial, at service to the pleasure principle. This ego's state

¹⁶ Yvonne Tasker argues in her study of the genre of the superhero *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), the muscular action-film hero merely performs the masculine 'by acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expectations' (Tasker: 1993 78)

incurs inevitable failure, because of the reality principle and the acting out of the superego, which then leads to the liminal ego state, on the border between disavowal and repression and relenting to the superego. The liminal ego state will also fail, as the ego's mediation under the pressure of the superego to perform falters and leads to the performing ego. But, the performing ego is inauthentic, it performs in the desire of the other, not the self, because of this the ego will deny the act and do everything in its power to suppress the act and attempt to live within the id. But it cannot sustain this either, because of the reality principle, so the ego becomes wounded and in doing so, shifts to liminality. The cycle of ego states continues.

What Mendes achieves in *1917* is a complex portrayal of masculinity framed in heroism. On the one hand, the enduring myth of the hero acted out by Schofield is complicit in sustaining the patriarchal structure from which the hero is within. However, Schofield is nonetheless still a tragic figure. Mendes shows Schofield as effectively trapped by his masculinity, Schofield has limited choices, he could have abandoned the masculine heroism, but in doing so, he would not have been able to honour Blake's death. So, he must carry on with the myth of the hero and work within the patriarchal structure, which in war means to adopt the hyper-toxic masculinity that he presents through his performing ego state.

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