

Visualization of Violence

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Summary

This piece explores the visualisation of violence for home front audiences and shows that violence was often hinted at very strongly, but the actual act was avoided. All home front audiences were aware of the effects of violence through visual media, but were very rarely exposed to the actual details of combat due to the technical difficulties of recording the moment of engagement and sensitivity over exposing people to the deaths of potentially identifiable individuals. The piece also shows that the effect of violence was often sublimated through allegorical images which hinted at the Crucifixion.

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Introduction

The visualisation of violence for home front audiences is a remarkably complex and somewhat ironic phenomenon, for at one and the same time it was both vividly portrayed *and* avoided, often in the same product. Depictions often showed a combination of the preparation for violence and/or its aftermath, but almost never the act itself. The reasons for the portrayal of violence can be divided into two. The first was to act as a reminder of the brutality of the enemy, and the second was to depict the force and energy required to defeat him. Thus, all home fronts were aware of the effects of violence through visual media, but were very rarely exposed to the actual details of combat. There are two main reasons for this discrepancy. First was the technical difficulty of recording the actual experience of engagement on [film](#) and in [photography](#): the camera could not be used at such moments due to its bulky and obtrusive nature. Second, the armed forces of the Great War were mass ones – the possibility of actually showing a home front viewer the moment when a loved one met

his death and the precise circumstances surrounding it were deeply shocking and so had to be avoided. By late 1916 the realities of war were all too clear to most people, and they wanted little reminding of it in their precious leisure hours. Escapism was the key motif of popular culture by 1917, but this did not mean that the depiction of violence disappeared. Rather it was allowed to drift to the periphery of domestic culture but nonetheless remained a part of the home front world, where it served as a constant reminder of the need to maintain the war effort.

This article will show through use of drawn illustrations, photographs and films and high art how violence was depicted for wartime audiences on the home front. It will show that the actual act of violence was almost always avoided and where depicted was often through a proxy or allegory.

Establishing a visual genre

The German invasions of [Belgium](#), [Luxembourg](#) and [France](#) in 1914 provided the British and French with an immense [propaganda](#) opportunity, for not only could the invasions be depicted as unprovoked acts of aggression, but the military operations also quickly threw up strong rumours, and occasionally hard evidence, of German [atrocities](#) on the civilian population. As with so many of the attempts made to influence hearts and minds in the First World War, the early leaders were not state organisations but individuals and non-official bodies. Without any kind of prompting, the [newspapers](#) and journals of the combatant nations threw themselves into the war effort. Particularly powerful in terms of visual depictions of the war and violence were the illustrated journals. Numerous high quality, but relatively cheap, illustrated magazines existed in Europe. In [Britain](#) *Punch* was one of the leading examples and its celebrated cartoonist [Bernard Partridge \(1861-1945\)](#) was among the first to establish the convention of showing the effects of violence without the actual act in his cartoon, "The Triumph of Culture" (26 August 1914). This cartoon shows the smoking ruin of a Flemish village and in the foreground a dead family. The father is slightly apart from the woman and her child. The positions of the adults imply a last desperate act of familial defence of their child, for the man is slightly in front of them and the woman's arm is wrapped round the child. Standing over the corpses is a German officer in ceremonial uniform, thus hinting heavily at the Kaiser and the Crown Prince, holding a German flag in one hand and a pistol in the other. He looks down at the bodies without any sign of emotion: he is an unfeeling war machine.

A slightly different tack was taken by [Georges Scott \(1873-1942\)](#) in the French journal *L'illustration* (29 August 1914). Although he too shows the brutal consequences of violence rather than the act in the form of a blazing town, dead civilians and a German soldier, in this

version the soldier has his boot on a female corpse and smiles directly at the viewer. Arguably, this portrayal is even more shocking than Partridge's, for here the German has actively enjoyed his task rather than performed it automaton-like.

Allied recruiting and later war loan posters took a similar stance, for in most instances the depiction is either of the immediate threat or of the subsequent result of violence rather than the act itself. In February 1916 the *Ligue Souvenez-Vous* (Remember! League) was established in France in order to keep the memory of the atrocities alive. It pursued its objectives through posters and pamphlets, with a particularly vigorous and widespread campaign in late 1916. The posters contained visually arresting images portraying the results of German violence. One showed a ruined town engulfed in flames and in the foreground a German soldier, a mixture of beast and ghoul, carrying a flaming torch and a blood-soaked dagger. The American Fourth Liberty Bond poster showed the silhouettes of a *Pickelhaube*-wearing German soldier dragging a young female away. The image teeters between two stages of violence – past and future. The past is provided through the ruins seen in the bottom left corner of the poster, while the future is in the hint of ill-treatment, possibly including sexual assault, for the woman being led off against her will. The results of violence were obvious in [Louis Raemaeker's \(1869-1956\)](#) 1916 poster for the British [National Committee for Relief in Belgium](#). Although Dutch, Raemaeker was deeply disturbed by the German invasion of Belgium and moved to Britain in 1916 in order to provide the press with images more effectively. "In Belgium" shows a mother wrapped in a red shawl clutching a clearly traumatised child to her chest. By concentrating on a mother and child Raemaeker deliberately emphasised themes of innocence, frailty and victimhood. Once again, however, the viewer is not shown why they are in a distressed state, but is left to imagine the acts that have caused it.

The immediate wake of violence was shown extremely effectively in [Joseph Pennell's \(1857-1926\)](#) 1917 US Liberty Bonds poster in which apocalyptic flames are the leading motif. The violence here is palpable, for it shows bombing [aircraft](#) over New York and the city engulfed in flames. In the far right corner can be seen the ruins of the Brooklyn Bridge, and in the foreground the icon of American freedom, the Statue of Liberty, is about to be consumed by fire. Adding to the menace is what looks like a rising submarine, which perhaps implies that the raid is a prelude to invasion. The association with eschatological imagery seems deliberate, and there are heavy hints of the Book of Revelation. However, even here what we see are effects of the violent act – none of the aircraft is depicted in the act of dropping bombs, and they appear to be flying away, having completed their raid.

But the Allies did not dominate the genre of atrocity violence. [Mihály Biró \(1886-1948\)](#) produced a harrowing poster for the Hungarian war effort in 1917. It depicts a village in

flames in the background and a peasant woman in the foreground, her hands on her head in anguish at the scene. The image is given force by its red background, implying a mass of searing flames, and the orange smoke that streams across the image and sketches out a ghostly Russian soldier striding away from the ruins he has created. This poster thus concentrates on the consequences of violent action and is designed to evoke both pity for the victims and resolve to avenge them.

There is only one real exception to the rule of depicting the consequence of violence rather than the act itself, and that came in [Frank Brangwyn's \(1867-1956\)](#) War Loan poster from 1918. Brangwyn was born in Belgium, and the sufferings of the Belgian people caused by the German invasion moved him deeply. Within a few weeks of the war's opening, he produced a poster for the Underground Electric Railways Company of London showing shocked Belgian families stumbling away from bodies of their dead relatives and friends and the ruins of their homes. The hard-hitting image was regarded as too potent by the newly-established Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC), and it declined the Company's offer to use the image for free and requested that it be withdrawn before distribution. Angered by this decision, [Frank Pick \(1878-1941\)](#), director of publicity for the Company, banned the PRC's posters from the Electric Railways' underground stations, thus depriving the PRC of extremely valuable exhibition space. Furthermore, he ignored the PRC's squeamishness and exhibited the poster across the London Underground network, where it grabbed attention and was soon deemed responsible for a surge in recruitment. Unable to argue with the poster's effectiveness, a rather shamefaced PRC relented and accepted the work. Although a very effective visualisation of violence, it does not depict the actual act of violence itself, rather it is the aftermath and results that provide the focus.

Pick produced many more posters, and his efforts culminated in 1918 with the most explicit British depiction of the act of violence in the entire war. His poster, "Put Strength in the Final Blow. Buy War Bonds" was so shocking that the artist later alleged that the Kaiser had offered a reward for his assassination. The poster shows a British soldier in the act of bayoneting a German and is infused with a sense of dynamism. Reginald Praill of The Avenue Press, the firm responsible for printing the poster, stated "it gave the War Bond Committee somewhat of a shock", but the chairman concluded that "nothing could be too drastic to fight the Germans with". In his comprehensive study of war posters, Michael Rickards described it as "one of the most violent posters that the war produced" and judged it an incitement to "actual violence". His conclusion underlines the fact that the actual act of violence was almost invisible in wartime images: "Killing people, when you got down to pictures of it – even if it was the enemy, even if only on posters – was somehow wrong".¹

The German soldier is seen to have toppled backwards over the edge of rising ground thanks

to the thrust of the bayoneted-rifle into his chest. Additionally, the British soldier already appears to have bayoneted one man, for there is a dark shadow in the right foreground that looks like a corpse. There is evidence to suggest that once published the poster caused some disquiet, for it was almost immediately superseded by a second version that slightly toned-down the violence of the original. The text shifted from the more aggressive and dynamic, "Put Strength in the Final Blow", which implied a spiritual push adding weight to the British soldier's thrust, to the more passive, "Back Him Up. Buy War Bonds". The visual image was also altered; gone were the precipice and the corpse, and the German soldier is toppling backwards from a standing position rather than in the free-fall position of the original. This rapid replacement reveals two themes. First, it shows the desperation of the British government and people by the autumn of 1918 to see an end to the war, allowing them to overcome their earlier sensitivity to the depiction of the actual act of violence. Second, it emphasizes how quickly such a decision succumbed to second-thoughts and restored the taboo surrounding the moment of killing. Coming in late September 1918, the decision to tone-down the image may have reflected the emerging sensation that victory was imminent. It is interesting to speculate as to whether the restored sensitivity would have emerged had the military situation been less favourable.

The most common way of depicting the actual moment of death was usually in the form of engravings in the illustrated journals. Titles such as the *Illustrated London News* produced hundreds of images of the height of battle, but these very much followed the traditions established in the 19th century for the depiction of battle. With its emphasis on heroism, often in the form of desperate defences or valiant assaults, violent death was shown but stripped of its horror, particularly as small arms fire seems to cause most of the casualties in such illustrations. None depict a dismembered corpse or hideously injured soldier.

Occasionally, press photographers and soldiers using their own cameras, captured images of death and [mutilation](#). However, heavy [censorship](#) usually stopped such images ever gaining widespread circulation until after the war. Even when shocking images were shown, such as in *Le Miroir*, the vast majority were after the moment of death and the text often led the reader to interpret the image in a particular way usually emphasising the number of enemy dead. Post-war productions often drew upon this stock of images in attempts either to disturb or titillate their readership. In 1934 the London *Daily Express* produced *Covenants with Death*, a photographic history of the war. The final chapter is prefaced by a warning that no one of a sensitive nature should read further. What follows is a series of gruesome photographic images of the effects of battle which were never seen on a wide scale during the conflict itself. And, as any visitor to Sanctuary Wood, Ieper/Ypres, today can affirm, the post-war "What the Butler Saw" photo-scope machines were very much reliant upon the appeal of their shock effect.

Violence by proxy and allegory

In order to avoid the grim reality of the act of violence on the modern battlefield, propagandists often mediated it through the use of an alternative visual code. A poster for the German Seventh War Loan by [Leo Shnug \(1878-1933\)](#) consisted of a Teutonic knight determinedly striding forward, sword in hand, holding his shield, which soaks up storms of arrows. The poster thus contains allusions to the act of combat, but shifts it to the Middle Ages, although a concession is made to contemporary conditions by portraying the knight in the German “coal scuttle” helmet. Another poster for the Seventh War Loan shows a Siegfried-like figure clutching an enormous club he has just drawn back in order to beat the British lion. The imminent act of violence is obvious in the poster, but it is intriguing for what it avoids: it is not a depiction of the ferocious club coming down on the head of the lion. [Lucian Bernhard \(1883-1972\)](#) produced another image of “arrested aggression” for the German 1917 War Loans campaign in the form of a mailed fist clenched and ready to deliver a blow. The fact that the fist is expectant rather than caught in action serves to slightly distance the sense of actual violence. By contrast, the result of violence is seen in [Fritz Boehle's \(1873-1916\)](#) deliberate pastiche of [Albrecht Dürer's \(1471-1528\)](#) famous woodcut of Saint George on horseback. A knight looks solemnly down on a blazing village, and the implication is that he will go on to avenge justly for such an outrage. [Maximilian Lenz \(1860-1948\)](#) also used the vehicle of medieval iconography for the depiction of violence. His 1917 Sixth War Loan poster shows an image of a mounted Saint George in full armour driving his lance into the fire-breathing dragon. Lenz may well have plagiarised a similar British poster produced a year earlier, but his is more visually arresting than the British original.

Much of this iconographic and metaphoric visual language emphasised the use of bladed weapons or piercing, as can be seen in [Georges Dorival's \(1879-1968\)](#) and [Georges Capon's \(1890-1980\)](#) poster, which combined the struggle against the Germans and tuberculosis (thus, also associating the Germans with contagion) by depicting a German eagle driven through with a sword. By using a shock of red covering the blade of the sword and dripping from the wound caused by the blow on the jet black eagle set against a white background, the image is arresting and disturbing and is made more menacing by the absence of an obvious perpetrator: it is almost as if an assassin has completed his task and disappeared from the scene. Similar images can be found in two German war loan posters. In 1917 [Willy Menz \(1890-1969\)](#) produced an image of a four-headed snake, presumably representing Britain, France, Russia and the USA, which is penetrated by six swords. The swords are divided into two sets of three and both sets point diagonally inwards, creating a chevron effect as they exit from the far side of the snake's body. [Julius Klinger \(1876-1942\)](#) was very probably influenced by this symbolism in his 1918 Austrian Eighth War Loan poster which shows a serpent-like creature coiled through the hoops of a number eight, which is pierced

by eight arrows and also implies that the allies are the equivalent of the serpent that destroyed Paradise on earth. A large drop of blood emerges from the snake's mouth, implying a mortal wound. Each draws upon Christian imagery of the slaying of mythical beasts, and also has hints of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, but of course in this instance the object has neither the holiness nor purity of a Christian saint.

[Christopher Nevinson's \(1889-1946\)](#) poster advertising his 1918 exhibition of officially-commissioned war art was equally striking in its implications of incision and piercing. Simply titled "War" it shows a blood red thicket of [rifles](#) topped by bayonets against a white background. Bayonets had already been given prominence in the British propaganda film, [The Battle of the Somme](#), which depicted in detail the fixing of bayonets before action, as well as troops resting after the battle and waving bayonets in the air. These scenes emphasised that bayonets were very much part of the soldier's kit (even if their combat use was quite minimal). Such images reveal an obsession with the penetration of flesh with edged weapons or lances. Although a denial of the fact that the overwhelming majority of men were killed or wounded by projectiles driven by [chemical propellants](#), this form of imagery was perhaps more effective for civilians on a number of levels. First, the home front publics, regardless of age, were used to the depiction of soldiers and edged [weapons](#), and not only as implements of ages gone-by. Images of the Franco-Prussian, South African, Russo-Japanese and [Balkan wars](#) had all emphasised soldiers with swords and bayonets. Many would also have been familiar with them from the ceremonial roles of soldiers, such as providing Life Guards around palaces or other important public buildings. Secondly, the urban audiences that was most exposed to such posters and less familiar than rural communities with the workings of rifles and guns, but surrounded as they were by domestic implements like kitchen knives and scissors probably found it easier to "scale-up" such items and imagine being horrifically slashed, impaled or stabbed than the sensation of being hit by bullet or shell. Thirdly, there is the association with the Crucifixion. The combatant nations shared a Judeo-Christian cultural root in which the piercing of Christ's flesh was all-pervasive, and as many historians have noted, became even more prevalent after the outbreak of war. Edged weapons and implements of piercing also implied an awful, lingering, painful death and not the instantaneous oblivion of a shot clean through the heart, which was so often used by officers providing consolatory explanation to bereaved families, or the utter annihilation caused by a shell exploding close-by (a fate no-one wished to imagine and later had to be cauterised by the erection of massive memorials to the missing).

Cinematic interpretations of violence

The war gave cinema an immense boost in all of the major combatant nations, but it also revealed distinct alterations in public demands that were remarkably similar in Britain, France

and [Germany](#). In all three nations there was an initial reluctance to use cinema on the part of the authorities due to fears that it encouraged delinquent behaviour. By 1914 daily film attendance in [Germany](#) is estimated to have reached 1.5 million. It was cheap entertainment and so attracted the working class, and the standard diet was sensational stories often depicting violence. This attracted critical comments from middle class observers, particularly teachers, who were concerned that cinema was having a detrimental moral effect on the nation's young. Much the same public debates over the influence of cinema were held in [Britain](#) and [France](#). However, soon all combatant nations realised that cinema was a potent mass communicator and was actually drawing in a wider class range. Paris saw its cinema attendance boom: 800,000 cinema tickets were sold in December 1914; by 1916 it was about 2 million per month; and thereafter monthly sales floated between 1.6 and 2 million for the rest of the war.

At first there was a great desire for news from the front. French newsreel production, closely controlled by the military, expanded massively after 1915; by the end of the war over 600 separate newsreel films had been distributed. Supported by mobile cinema units, the medium of film ceased to be a largely urban phenomenon and reached deep into rural France. Prior to the establishment of Eiko-Woche in 1914, Germany had no domestic newsreel company and was reliant on French production companies. By September 1914 all of the French-owned newsreels had been shut down and seven other German newsreel companies entered the market. The German film producer, [Oskar Messter \(1866-1943\)](#), recognised the value of newsreels and was keen to see them exploited, but the army lacked the enthusiasm, equipment and personnel to assist in producing scenes from the front. Messter offered his services to the forces and began to organise a newsreel strategy. His earliest productions showed scenes from both the [Eastern](#) and [Western](#) Fronts, but in both cases the depictions only showed the aftermath of violence in the form of damaged buildings and the evacuation of the wounded. Despite Messter's official position he still found it difficult to arrange for his forward teams to gather suitable footage, hampered as they often were by the distrust of the commanders on the spot. The response was the faking of frontline scenes in which Messter's own product, Messter-Woche, led the way. By November 1914 he had perfected a standard format of twelve-minute fortnightly bulletins containing between ten and fifteen subjects. But once again, even with the addition of reconstructed scenes, the stories did not depict the acts of violence themselves. Instead, it was the already standard diet of items such as the Kaiser visiting wounded troops, troops behind the lines, and mine craters in no man's land that were shown. The closest the audience got to the sensation of actual combat was in the coverage of training exercises in which troops practised for the attack using their weapons.

Even at the end of 1915, when cameramen started to be allowed closer to the front line,

depiction of actual fighting was never included. [David Welch](#) has noted that it was felt that “while those at home could be shown pictures of their fathers and sons in the reserve lines, they should not be subjected to the true horror of the fighting which could prove disturbing and consequently undermine morale.”² As German newsreel production became more sophisticated in 1916 and 1917, it did not spread its remit closer to the actual fighting, but rather deeper into the home front in order to show the value and extent of women’s participation in war industry and the need for the home front to maintain its commitment to the cause. In August 1917 a meeting of the War Press Office in Munich considered newsreels and identified the scenes from the front as particularly disappointing and stale, consisting of often repeated motifs of soldiers behind the lines, prisoners being brought in, and scenes of desolation. In other words, the depiction was one of pre- and post-combat and never of combat itself. However, by this point the public appetite for newsreels across Europe was fading. Worn down by the burdens of war, few people desired to see scenes from the front, regardless of precise content.

By 1917 public acceptance of cinematic violence was achieved only by wrapping it in a thick layer of melodrama. Hollywood provided such a diet for the Allies. [Cecil B. De Mille’s \(1881-1959\)](#) *The Little American* starred [Mary Pickford \(1892-1979\)](#) as the heroine, Angela, and reinforced her screen persona as the epitome of American innocent womanhood. The film recounts her voyage to France to visit her aunt. A German [submarine](#) torpedoes the vessel and she is nearly drowned. Whilst at her aunt’s chateau the invading Germans arrive and Angela is on the verge of being raped before her assailant recognises her as his former lover. Brought back to his senses, he is ashamed of the Prussian influence on his character, for the audience is told that he is an Austrian diplomat who had served in the USA before the war; his character thus illustrated US sensitivity to the differences between German-speaking peoples. Despite the re-emergence of his moral code, he cannot stop the wholesale execution of the local peasantry. Thus, Prussianism is identified as the true evil force and is depicted as a barbaric and inherently violent culture. Violence was therefore hinted at heavily, but was not an end in itself; rather it served as the narrative device for a romantic denouement that attracted a broad audience, particularly young women, who were a key demographic for filmmakers and exhibitors.

The appeal of films like *The Little American* represents the eclipse of the newsreel-documentary genre, which is best encapsulated in the key cinematic document of the First World War, the British official film, *The Battle of the Somme*. The film, which had an immense effect around the world on its release in August 1916, contains the most complex and complete of what might be labelled the war’s “violence visual narratives”, for it is a record of:

- the preparations for violence

- the opening acts of indirect violent action in the form of actions surrounding the use of artillery pieces
- the victim-less effects of violence as it actually occurs through shots of exploding shells
- the launch of men towards the act of violence
- the result of violence

All of this helped to disguise the glaring omission of the clash of combatants in no man's land and in the trenches themselves. However, as will be argued, this gap in the narrative by no means undermined the impact of the film on contemporary viewers.

[*The Battle of the Somme*](#) was not a production consciously conceived as a giant leap forward in propaganda techniques and was almost an accidental by-product of a series of interlinked events. In 1916 the British War Office finally, and somewhat reluctantly, rescinded its ban on film and photography at the front and gave permission to a small number of cameramen to begin work near the frontline. Two cinematograph photographers, [Geoffrey H. Malins \(1886-1940\)](#) and [John B. McDowell \(1877-1954\)](#), travelled to the [Somme front](#) where there was much activity in preparation for the forthcoming Anglo-French offensive. Neither was working towards a grand, over-arching narrative, and they simply shot what they thought to be interesting and valuable. Given this rather random approach, it is remarkable just how much important footage they gathered. It was only after their jumble of material was viewed in London that the potential for a larger-scale production was realised. [Charles Urban \(1867-1942\)](#), a pioneer of cinema in Britain (although American by birth) and an official of the still secret [British propaganda](#) office based at Wellington House, took control and imposed a narrative structure on the footage. In doing so, Urban created the potential to engage the public imagination in a way that fragments of newsreel footage could not.

The film premiered before an invited audience on 10 August 1916 and went on general release on 21 August; it was a stunning success across Britain before making an equally deep impression across the British Empire, among Britain's allies (and indeed enemies), and the wider world. By the time of its opening, the public was aware that a great battle was raging along the Somme front and so, of course, brought this mental construction into the cinema with them. As such it would have come as no surprise that the first inter-title was one highlighting the vital preliminaries to violence: "Preparatory action June 25th to 30th showing the activities before Fricourt-Mametz. Similar action took place along the entire British front". Scenes of intense preparation then follow. Troops march up to the line and cheer as they pass the camera. There are also scenes of artillery horses on the move and troops marching up to the front line before moving on to a divisional gun park. Here there is much activity as lorries deliver shells, which are then unloaded into forward dumps. A few scenes later gunners are seen loading the shells into the caissons of their artillery limbers. Through such

depictions the audience was left in no doubt that violent action was imminent.

The action then commences with footage of the preliminary bombardment. Shots of howitzers and heavy artillery in use show the power of modern [weapons](#) and also the great deal of physical effort required from the gunners in order to make the weapons work. Among these sequences is footage of a trench mortar battery, which brings the narrative into the trenches. In all instances the culmination of the activity in the firing of the pieces was captured. There are hints at the effect of this activity in the inter-titles such as: "The vicious bark of the Canadian 60 pounders adds to the din of gun fire. Shrapnel bursting over their trenches keep [sic] the Germans astir", accompanied by images showing shells exploding over trenches. The sequences culminate in one of the film's many iconic scenes, which has been reproduced in countless books (as a still photograph) and documentaries across the world, in the footage of the mine explosion at the Hawthorn Redoubt, Beaumont Hamel. Malins captured the moment of detonation when the mine throws up a vast plume of earth that then falls back down in a pall of smoke and dust. In all of these instances violence is being delivered on an invisible enemy in largely invisible positions, meaning that the effect had to be imagined rather than visualised through the camera lens. This scene is rapidly followed by the most powerful moment in the entire film, which was announced as: "The Attack. At a signal, along the entire 16 mile front, the British troops leaped over the trench parapets and advanced towards the German trenches, under heavy fire of the enemy." It gives way to shots of a group of soldiers climbing out of a shallow trench, and two are seen to fall back instantly. The shot cuts to another one showing troops advancing through the wire where two more soldiers fall. It then cuts to another shot showing troops moving towards the horizon. Such images amazed viewers, for here was the moment of the assault. Men were launched into battle before their eyes and were seen to suffer the full consequences of war. The depiction of British soldiers caught at the moment of death shocked many: a woman in a London cinema was heard to cry, "Oh God, they're dead!". It now seems highly likely that these particular portions of the scene were in fact faked at a training school behind the lines, but that is largely immaterial. People thought they were witnessing the violent reality of battle and were stunned by it. The avoidance of the moment of combat was only partially due to morality and propaganda policy. Instead, its absence can largely be attributed to the state of media technology. Film cameras in 1916 were too bulky and unwieldy to be serviceable in the frontline. No cameraman could safely stand on the parapet maintaining a stable position whilst rhythmically cranking the machine to gain effective footage. These technological difficulties ensured an omission in the filmic record of violence. Yet this absence in the narrative did not lessen the effect. Viewers were convinced they had seen the heart of violence and it sobered them. The Dean of Durham Cathedral wrote of the awful impact on people who might witness a now deceased loved one on screen. He condemned the film as

“an entertainment which wounds the heart and violates the very sanctity of bereavement”.³
A London cinema manager took equal objection and refused to believe that such material equated to his role as provider of leisure and diversion; he told his customers: “We are not showing the Battle of the Somme. This is a place of amusement, not a chamber of horrors.”⁴

Violence had therefore been depicted, but once again it was violence without an obvious agent or form. In the attack sequence four British soldiers fall dead from largely incomprehensible and invisible means. The viewer is not shown bullets hitting the bodies or an explosion near them; they simply fall over dead. It was a scene of battle without an actual battle. From this pivotal moment the film moves on to the effects of violence. There are scenes of British and German dead and wounded, shots of no man’s land, the wrecked village of Mametz, troops making preparations for the next phase of battle, and [German prisoners](#) being marched off into captivity. The effect of British violence on the enemy is particularly emphasised in this instance through the intertitle: “...Nerve shattered German prisoners arriving”. Of course, such scenes emphasised the scale of the British victory, which was an important aim of the film.

A key element in *The Battle of the Somme*’s success was its sheer novelty, and it proved very hard to sustain the format over a long period. Its two immediate follow-up films, *The King Visits His Armies in the Great Advance* (released October 1916) and *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (released January 1917) also drew large numbers, but they also marked a subtle shift away from such documentaries. The awful reality of war was not entertainment, and home front audiences weighed down by anxieties could not cope with too much of it. There is a hint of this move in the title of *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* in the deliberate identification of a novelty – the tanks. Audiences who found the unrelenting diet of trench warfare either harrowing, or even a little dull after first exposure, were re-engaged by the opportunity to see the latest wonder weapon. Here the instrument of violence became an icon in its own right and attracted much public attention in Britain. However, as with the artillery scenes, the viewer was given a vision of the tank acting in a manner lacking the immediate context of battle. Thus, cheerful crews are shown preparing their machines for action, the tanks then rumble into action and come back, but there is no action itself: the violent potential of the tank is left to the imagination. *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* was the last full-scale battle documentary of the war, and the demise of this genre reflected the common home front desire to retreat from the realities of battle no matter how incompletely visualised.

Before condemning *The Battle of the Somme* as a sanitised version of war, a significant qualification about the nature of battle and combat in the First World War needs to be

considered. As many veterans' testimonies reveal, actual fighting in which both sides came within close proximity of each other was relatively rare. Much of the damage was done by the intense fire of the [artillery](#), which had done its work long before attacking infantry reached the enemy's positions. When attacking infantry did see their enemy they were, therefore, already often dead, wounded, in the throes of surrender or running away to safety. Undoubtedly, fighting of a horrific and bloody nature could and did take place in and around the trenches, carried out by men in actual physical contact or in very close physical proximity, but it tended to be extremely brief and chaotic. As noted above, capturing such a moment was impossible for the cinematographer and equally difficult for the artist working with pencil and paint to recapture in paper or on canvas.

A second issue that cinematographers and others producing war images were faced with was the understandable reluctance to circulate any image of mutilated bodies, especially given the fact that viewers were part of a culture that had inherited the nineteenth century's increasing reverence for post-mortem treatment of the dead and funerary rites. Undoubtedly, such images were recorded, particularly by photographers, but they only became public long after the war. As with war memorial statuary, the dead were usually depicted whole and in repose or in relatively dignified positions.

Despite its success, *The Battle of the Somme* was in many ways a unique and unrepeatable formula. The film met an intense, but fleeting, public desire to see the reality of war. Once that appetite was sated, it could not be rekindled.

Painting and drawing

Prior to the war's outbreak the *enfant terribles* of the European art world, most clearly expressed through the Futurist and Vorticist movements, had often idealised violence and the infliction of violent acts. [Ludwig Meidner's \(1884-1966\)](#) famous *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1913) portrayed a city (Saarbrücken) being pulverised from the sky, which seems to have been ripped open by the forces pouring down from above. Unlike [Gino Severini \(1883-1966\)](#) or [Percy Wyndham Lewis \(1882-1957\)](#), Meidner was not celebrating the supposedly cleansing effect of violence, but presenting an awful warning. For those who did see regeneration in violence, direct experience of war often served to tone down such passions or even imply a denial of the reality of violence. Severini's *Armoured Train in Action* (1915) provides a dynamic and urgent interpretation of a war machine in action. However, the train is pristine and perhaps therefore implies that such modern weapons of war were impervious and could unleash violence without fear of retribution. There is certainly nothing of what [Wilfred Owen \(1893-1918\)](#) referred to as the "cess of war" in his famous poem, *Strange Meeting*. There are no dead bodies, no shell holes or craters, merely smoke. It is an irony and paradox – it is

violence without violence.

Christopher Nevinson took a similar path in his *La Mitrailleuse* (1915), which has been celebrated as a depiction of the dehumanising effects of war. The painting shows two French machine-gunners in their horizon blue uniforms who almost seem to meld into the grey gun-metal of their weapon, creating an awful symbiosis. However, we do not see what the gun does. It is not a depiction of bullets tearing into flesh and ripping massive exit holes as they emerge on the other side. The viewer has to imagine the effect of the action visualised. Where soldiers are depicted in the heart of action, the effect can be equally distancing. [Georges Leroux's \(1877-1957\) Hell](#) shows a group of French soldiers in gas masks huddled against the side of a flooded crater. The scene is suffused with livid oranges and reds and thick smoke and there are corpses scattered around slipping into the swamps. This vision strips the infantry of agency. They are playthings of invisible dealers of violence. Only the viewer's wide knowledge of the war and its weapons – in this case heavy artillery – can bring the narrative together, for no actual instrument of violence is depicted. Like Severini, this is violence without violence. In contrast, this is violence with cess in abundance.

As with poster art and cinema, artists shied away from the actual moment of bodily violence. Things are destroyed, as in [Félix Vallotton's \(1865-1925\) 1914](#) (1915), which shows a building being smashed by artillery fire, but the point at which men clashed physically or projectiles entered human bodies is entirely missing from the painted vision of the war. Instead, the method of depicting effect was often used. Nevinson's *La Patrie* (1916) shows wounded French soldiers on stretchers waiting to be evacuated. They are clearly in pain and many have bandages, but the viewer has to imagine what has caused the wounds. Significantly, even though the sense of suffering is vivid in this painting, every soldier is whole and there are no dismembered or mutilated men. The British artist and surgeon [Henry Tonks \(1862-1937\)](#), who became involved in facial reconstruction for disfigured men, drew a series of sketches depicting the hideous effect of modern weapons on the human body, but none of these were exhibited. Such a depiction was in every way unacceptable to the wider public. Mutilation was often sublimated in art through the depiction of the landscape. [Paul Nash \(1889-1946\)](#) was particularly effective in showing the effect of violence through his landscape painting. Canvases such as *The Menin Road* (1918) and *Void* (1918) reveal a smashed and desolate world littered with the detritus of the battlefield. Fecundity, reproduction, regeneration, the key forces of the natural world, and the rural landscape are annihilated.

Occasionally the ultimate effect of violence – the dead – was depicted, even if the act itself was missing. Vallotton's *Military Cemetery at Châlons-sur-Marne* (1917) brings shock as well as order and decency: shock in the sense that the canvas is full of crosses; order and decency through the fact that the graves are neatly laid out and respectfully tended. War's

awful consequences are therefore at least partially mitigated. Far more shockingly, Nevinson included *The Paths of Glory* (1917) in his 1918 exhibition. The painting focussed on dead soldiers sprawled next to a [barbed wire](#) entanglement. Even more disturbingly, the dead soldiers are very clearly British. The War Office objected immediately, pointing out that photographs of dead soldiers were banned from the newspapers and the same regulation covered the exhibition of paintings. Nevinson refused to remove the item before the opening of the exhibition and claimed that he had circumvented regulations by placing a brown paper strip across the canvas inscribed with the term "Censored". The populist newspaper the *Daily Mail* promptly printed a photograph of the exhibit. According to Nevinson's memoirs he was then immediately summoned to the War Office and "severely reprimanded for using the word "Censored", which appeared to be a word forbidden by the [Defence of the Realm Act](#) (D.O.R.A.)".⁵ Sensitivities over the depiction of corpses was such that [William Orpen's \(1878-1931\) *Dead Germans in a Trench* \(1918\)](#) also troubled the military censor and it was initially banned from exhibition. The decision was subsequently lifted, probably because it portrayed dead enemy soldiers, but the initial caution reveals much about the issue of depicting the dead.

Conclusion

The intensity of the violence unleashed in 1914 rapidly created a conundrum. Militarily, both sides found that they had sufficient methods to check their foes, but not enough to defeat them decisively. This created the conditions for a state of near continual violence at the fighting fronts, albeit at massively varying intensities. This in turn required a massive effort from the home fronts. With the war rapidly taking on a protean, all-enveloping quality, it was unsurprising that people had an interest in the actions of their armed forces and the struggle to topple the enemy. In many instances this desire was sublimated through a form of visual titillation. Civilians were offered heavy hints at the nature of violence without ever being submersed in all its awful details. As noted, this was partly technical – the inability to record the act was an immense problem – but also largely moral and aesthetic, for even war artists, many of whom had witnessed actual combat, shrank from the subject. Even if there had been a strong desire to interpret the moment when soldiers engaged physically, there was also the difficulty of actual combat experience. As most soldiers, even infantrymen, only ever used their weapons at some distance from their enemy, the moment of closing was by no means all-pervasive in combat. The fulcrum of the war was 1916, for it was at this moment that the reality of a long-drawn out struggle became obvious. 1916 witnessed the closest sustained attempt to interpret the true nature of the conflict in *The Battle of the Somme* film that fascinated audiences across the globe. However, at just the moment when the war moved into top gear, the populations of the main combatant nations began to shrink away from the reality of the war, whether it be the terrible conditions of the fighting front or the seemingly

unremitting dourness of everyday life on the home fronts. It created a deeply ironic and schizophrenic wartime culture in which violence was implicit in home front life, yet the actual act of violence was on the whole carefully avoided.

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Notes

1. Rickards, Michael: Posters of the First World War, London 1968, p. 14. ↑
2. Welch, David: Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918, London 2000, p. 5. ↑
3. Badsey, Stephen D.: The Battle of the Somme. British War Propaganda, in: Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 3/2 (1983), p. 110. ↑
4. Hammond, Michael: The Big Show. British Cinema Culture in the Great War, 1914-1918, Exeter 2006, p. 121. ↑
5. Nevinson, Christopher: Paint and Prejudice, London 1937, p. 148. ↑

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Citation

Mark Connelly: Visualization of Violence, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10169](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10169)

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- [Bernhard, Lucian: Das ist der Weg zum Frieden, c. 1917, poster, lithograph \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Image\)](#)
- [DeMille, Cecil B.: The little American, 1917 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Deux Fléaux - Le Boche - La Tuberculose \(Two Plagues - The Boche - Tuberculosis\), Georges Capon and Georges Dorival \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Image\)](#)
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[an Actual Act of Violence \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Image\)](#)

- [Messter-Woche newsreels \(European Film Gateway\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Nevinson, Christopher: La Mitrailleuse, 1915 \(Tate\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Now - Back the Bayonets, Christopher Nevinson \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Severini, Gino: Armored Train in Action, 1915 \(The Museum of Modern Art\) \(Image\)](#)
- [The Menin Road, by Paul Nash, 1919 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Image\)](#)
- [War Office: The Battle of the Somme, November 1916 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Wilfred Owen, Strange Meeting \(Poetry Foundation\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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Author Keywords

Violence; Posters; Paintings; Atrocities; Cinema

GND Subject Headings

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Key Person(s)

[Pickford, Mary](#); [Brangwyn, Frank](#); [Lewis, Wyndham](#); [Scott, Georges](#); [Malins, Geoffrey](#); [Valloton, Felix](#); [Pennell, Joseph](#); [Bernhard, Lucian](#); [Biró, Mihály](#); [Partridge, Bernard](#); [Pick, Frank](#); [Shnug, Leo](#); [Boehle, Fritz](#); [Dürer, Albrecht](#); [Lenz, Maximilian](#); [Dorival, Georges](#); [Capon, Georges](#); [Menz, Willy](#); [Klinger, Julius](#); [Messter, Oskar](#); [Mille, Cecil B. De](#); [McDowell, John B.](#); [Urban, Charles](#); [Meidner, Ludwig](#); [Severini, Gino](#); [Leroux, Georges](#); [Tonks, Henry](#); [Nash, Paul](#); [Nevinson, C. R. W. \(Christopher Richard Wynne\)](#); [Owen, Wilfred](#); [Raemaekers, Louis](#); [Orpen, William](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

Visualization of Violence

Author(s)

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Article Type

Handbook Article

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