THE SALIENT
A FILM TRIBUTE TO THE BATTLES AROUND
YPRES

THIS FILM HAS BEEN GENEROUSLY MADE AVAILABLE FOR FREE
TO UK SCHOOLS BY THE GALLIFREY FOUNDATION

SYNOPSIS

The Salient is a film about one of the most contested spots of the Great War: the half circle north and east of Ypres that protruded into enemy territory and became known as the Ypres Salient. Less than five miles wide, more than a million people were killed or wounded in this small area during four years of bitter fighting. In due time the Salient came to symbolize every description heard in conjunction with the Great War: sacrifice, courage, honor and duty just as much as chaos, slaughter, calamity and utter senselessness.

The film is presented in two parts. Part 1 (42 min.) covers the First Battle of Ypres and its aftermath through the end of 1914. Part 2 (43 min) continues the story of the Salient’s plight during the Second (Spring 1915) and Third (Fall 1917) Battle of Ypres.

STRUCTURE

MUSIC
The Salient is structured as a requiem, relying on music written for that purpose, mostly 19th century and by composers from both sides of the line. As in a proper requiem mass, its order of appearance in the film is dictated by the order of the service, starting with the Introit and concluding with the In Paradisum.

NARRATION & VO
To the extent possible the story of the Salient is told through the words of the people who witnessed its horrors firsthand. Honoring Harry Patch’s plea to “always remember both sides of the line”, the eyewitness sections include both British and German accounts along with a few Belgian observers. Linking their accounts is a narrator; a role splendidly performed by Sir Ranulph Fiennes.

VISUALS
The Salient features a powerful soundtrack, combining brutally honest eyewitness accounts with some of the most moving music ever written. That calls for strong visuals, which original WW1 footage cannot always meet. While some of the archive images survived in good condition, much of the material did not due to the quality of the film, deterioration of the negative or the conditions the camera operators faced while filming. Moreover, for the first months of the conflict there is very little material available, hardly any of which directly related to the Salient.
To cover the shortfall in visual material the film turned (partially) to feature film segments, reasoning that, after having selected music from the best 19th century composers, it made sense to turn to the best 20th and 21st century filmmakers to visualize (some of) the story. Naturally The Salient also relies on archive but especially in battle scenes the use of strong feature material helps convey the brutality and absurdity of war, and of the struggle for the Salient in particular.

Each historical (B&W) section is followed by a color actuality sequence, showing what the various locations mentioned by the soldiers look like today. Aside from satisfying the curiosity that compels many to visit the battlefields, these sequences also serve as ‘breathing space;’ giving the audience an opportunity to reflect and contemplate.

SYMBOLISM & MEANING

The first image of the film shows the Ypres belfry clock. A heavy bell strikes eight times. With each strike it becomes more clear this bell is not just marking time. It is a death knell, and invites us to a memorial service. A service that will be held in the temple-like setting of Ypres’ Menin Gate.

With the first notes of the Last Post pictures of a few soldiers appear. Their names are etched on panels nearby. The Salient gives their names a voice and a face. We hear and see what they faced. The images are graphic, brutal even. Making them even more uncomfortable is the divine music that accompanies them. Perfection and failure juxtaposed. A sample of Europe’s finest played over images of its absolute worst. But the The Salient goes beyond juxtaposing good and evil. The film also allows them to join forces, by echoing eyewitness accounts of war in the lyrics of the requiem mass. In the Dies Irae, for instance, the choir describes the end of the world. Cpl Arthur Cook records what it feels like in his diary:

Another day of Hell under the continual hail of shells and bullets. The ground is vibrating all day long with the concussion and the continual thud of shells. Men are being buried alive and blown to pieces all around me. Perhaps death is preferable to this infernal life.

A bit later in the film comes the Lacrimosa. The choir mourns and so do the survivors:

This time only forty men of my regiment were able to march away. Forty… forty left out of 250, and only about three weeks ago there were only forty-six left out of an entire battalion. I reckoned that in three months ninety-six out of a hundred had been killed or wounded.

This interplay between choir and eyewitnesses continues throughout the film, with the choir foreshadowing what the main protagonists are about to face, much the same way the chorus did in Greek tragedies. In doing so, it becomes clear that The Salient is a modern version of a Greek tragedy, following young men who are doomed, who are trapped by fate; much the same way Greek warriors sometimes were thousands of years ago. As in their stories there is a chorus to establish the setting. In The Salient it sings liturgical texts in a language few understand, but those lyrics become much more meaningful when seen in the context of conflict, and especially when echoed in simple words, hastily scribbled in a letter home.
The Salient is as much tragedy as it is memorial. A requiem for men born in the wrong place at the wrong time, and forced to fight one another for the wrong reasons. A requiem for the city they fought over, as well as the age they left behind. And quite possibly a requiem for common sense and sanity, which could have prevented so much suffering.

The film ends where it started. Now it is cold and dark. As the first notes of the Last Post fill the Menin gate, pictures of some soldiers appear. They look at us wearily, with eyes that have seen unspeakable horror. Eyes that beseech us not to forget, for those who do are doomed to repeat time and time again …

REFERENCES

MUSIC

Compositions in order of appearance include Fauré's Introit et Kyrie, Cherubini’s Graduale, a selection ((Dies Irae, Quid sum miser and Lacrimosa) from Verdi’s Sequence – all of which featured in the first section of the film (Autumn 1914) along with a fragment from Brahms’ Deutsches Requiem. Berlioz’ Offertorium and Hostias underscore Winter 1914, while Spring 1915 is covered by Bruckner’s Sanctus and Requiem followed by Gounod's Benedictus. The final section (Summer 1917) starts with Saint Saens’ Agnus Dei and continues with John Rutter’s Lux Aeterna. The film’s music ends with Fauré’s evocative Libera Me and Rutter's moving Pie Jesu. Credits and acknowledgments are underscored by Fauré's In Paradisum.

VO SEGMENT SOURCES

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Malcolm Brown, Tommy Goes to War, The History Press
Camille Delaere, Journal de Guerre
Erich Dohne, Als Christ im Weltkrieg, Spener-Verlag und Druckerei
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John F. Lucy, There’s a Devil in the Drum, The Naval & Military Press
Lyn Macdonald, 1914 - The Days of Hope, Penguin Books
Lyn Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, Penguin Books
David Nicholas, They Fought with Pride, Nicholas Publishing
Colin Rushton, Spirit of the Trenches, Best Books Online
Fritz Stetefeld, Kamerad Stetefeld, Karl Ulrich & Co.
Achiel van Walleghem, Oorlogsdagboek 1914-18.
Edwin Campion Vaughan, Some Desperate Glory, Pen & Sword Books Ltd.
Philipp Witkop. Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten, Georg Müller Verlag

To access The Salient follow these links and use the password WW1

https://vimeo.com/201461183 (part 1)
https://vimeo.com/201516822 (part 2)