



# A very long engagement

**Director:** Jean-Pierre Jeunet

**Country:** France

**Date:** 2004

*A review by Philip French for The Observer:*

Unlike the Second World War, during which the British and American film industries created the war movie as an entertainment genre, the First World War, or as some of us persist in calling it, the Great War, has traditionally been a sombre affair in the cinema.

The few exceptions are pictures about aerial combat. The two most memorable recent films on the 1914-18 conflict are Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*, about the callous execution of French soldiers 'to encourage the others', and Bertrand Tavernier's *La Vie et rien d'autre*, in which a French widow confronts bureaucratic obfuscation and official hypocrisy as she searches for evidence of her husband's death on the Western Front.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet, a film-maker best known hitherto for whimsy and surreal tricksiness, has combined elements of both these films in his outstanding *A Very Long Engagement*. Audrey Tautou, star of Jeunet's *Amélie*, plays Matilde, a young Breton orphan determined to discover whether her lover and childhood sweetheart, 19-year-old infantryman, Manech (Gaspard Ulliel), actually died after being sentenced to death for self-mutilation in 1917.



The movie is based on a novel by Sébastien Japrisot, a writer best known for his thrillers (Costa-Gavras's *The Sleeping Car Murder* is based on a book of his) and, in fact, this is a detective story. This is not in itself entirely new. In the years after the Second World War, there were a number of thrillers that turned on mysterious wartime incidents being investigated in the postwar world - Fred Zinnemann's *Act of Violence*, for instance, and, in a more lighthearted vein, Stanley Donen's *Charade*. But *A Very Long Engagement* is altogether more complicated than these and its meaning goes to the heart of the conduct of the war.

Working from the small farmhouse of her kindly adoptive parents on the coast of Brittany, Mathilde, who walks with a limp due to childhood polio, sets about her task with great vigour, and Jeunet uses Tautou's winsome good looks as an innocent mask for her steely determination. She first establishes that Manech was one of five poilus sentenced to death for self-mutilation - the others were a socialist welder, a Corsican petty criminal, a carpenter and a farmer from the Dordogne - and in flashbacks we see the self-inflicted wounds, one of them an accidental bullet through the hand that occurs while beating off rats in the trenches with the butt of a pistol.

Advertising in the press, securing the services of a colourful Parisian private detective (lovely performance from Ticky Holgado), forcing a lawyer friend of her late father's to help by pretending to be confined to a wheelchair, Mathilde pursues lead after lead. A succession of witnesses provides background information as to what happened on the fatal day at Bingo Crépuscule, the section of trenches from which the condemned men were forced unarmed over the top to face enemy fire in no-man's-land. This cruel and unusual form of punishment was dreamt up, it is said, by Marshal Pétain himself.

Through this accumulation of evidence, Mathilde puts together a jigsaw that for her solves the problem of

what happened to her lover. In a larger way, for us, the audience, this carefully assembled puzzle recreates a world of military and political madness into which thousands of innocent people were drawn to be killed, maimed or mentally impaired.

Meanwhile, as she goes about her task, there is an angel of death conducting a parallel mission, exacting a deadly revenge on the officers she holds responsible for her lover's humiliating death. One of them she dispatches in a brothel, leaving him tied to the bed, his naked body pierced by shards of glass from the mirrored ceiling.



It's a remarkably rich movie, full of detail, and it grips and entertains like a detective story while never losing sight of the horrors of war. The sequences of artillery bombardment of the trenches and of soldiers being mown down by machine-gun fire are among the most terrifying and viscerally affecting ever filmed.

There is an astonishing visual set piece in a vast barrage balloon hangar being used as an emergency hospital. During a German aerial assault, a tethered balloon breaks loose and moves slowly upwards towards an unexploded bomb lodged in the roof.

Jeunet, his cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel and his production designer Aline Bonetto have created distinct visual styles for the various areas and time periods. Brittany and the French countryside are bathed in an idyllic golden glow, all primary colours have been virtually drained from the trenches and battlefields, while the bustling streets of Paris, most notably the re-creations of the vegetable market at Les Halles and the traffic in the Place de l'Opéra, are given the look of tinted postcards. Altogether a very satisfying movie, though some may find the end a trifle abrupt.

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