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“Lest we forget”: the Grand Illusion of the Great War on Celluloid in Britain and Italy

Abstract – The following essay takes its cue from Hayden White’s illuminating distinction between “historiography”, or “the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse”, and “historiophoty”, or the representation of history through “visual images and filmic discourse”. Such a distinction does not imply that cinematic representation is more effective in conveying the complexities of historical thinking than written discourse. Rather it suggests that history does not invariably need to be done on the written page since cinema’s capabilities of sight, sound, editing and location can also be profitably utilized in excavating the past and making its ghosts speak. The first part of the essay will concentrate on how the “real” was re-presented or mis-represented in the propaganda documentaries as well as in the footage and the newsreels that were actually shot during World War I; the second part will instead focus on some of the most unsettling “fictional” reconstructions on “celluloid” which preserve within them the spectral image of the fallen soldiers and expose as falsehoods the grand illusions of the Great War.

Keywords: Great War, celluloid, spectrality, trenches, offscreen, onscreen, sound