

Pacifism and the Vilification of Women in Gance's *J'accuse*

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One of the earliest cinematic representations of “shell shock” (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919) served to powerfully illustrate an emotional human experience during the time of war. A tale of two soldiers caught in a love affair in a French village during the Great War, the film offered a deep look into the catastrophic effects of shell shock, a condition that was just beginning to be diagnosed at the time. Split into three parts (labeled “epochs”), the underlying meaning of the titular phrase *j'accuse* (“I accuse”)—that is, the object of accusation—shifts over the course of the film, determined by the thoughts and feelings of the main protagonist, Jean Diaz. Strangely, Diaz's shell shock in the film's third “epoch” results in him shifting the blame for war from the governmental authorities to home, his village in southern France. Home is represented primarily by women, meaning the film's pacifist message turns into a subtle attack on women. As Jean goes mad as an effect of the war, a true return home becomes inconceivable, and it can be reasoned that as home is lost, it is easier to blame.

We see the phrase *j'accuse* reappear several times throughout the film, emerging with different meanings as the narrative builds from start to finish. Interestingly, though the film is clearly pacifist, as the phrase shifts meaning, the emphasis on pacifism becomes less and less apparent. The momentous first scene of the movie, which also serves as the film's title sequence, displays hundreds of soldiers in an empty field. They come together to form the phrase “J'ACCUSE,” which can be seen from a bird's-eye view. Once configured, the men all fall to the ground. As Kevin Brownlow describes in his study of silent cinema *The Parade's Gone By...*, Gance reenlisted in the war serving as a filmographer. It resulted in him filming the battle of Saint Mihiel with the US Army in September of 1918. Many of the shots from the film are direct shots of war that came out of this battle (614). Overall filming lasted between August 1918 and March 1919 and across that time much of filming involved real soldiers of war, not just actors. For instance, the “return of the dead” sequence at the end of the film was shot in the south of France using 2,000 soldiers then on leave. In an interview, Gance said of this sequence, “The conditions in which we filmed were profoundly moving. ... These men had come straight from the Front—from Verdun—and they were due back eight days later. They played the dead knowing that in all probability they'd be dead themselves before long. Within a few weeks of their return, eighty per cent had been killed” (Brownlow 614). As Gance implies, when the soldiers collapse to the ground in the title sequence, it is to represent their fate. It is a foreshadowing of what comes later in the film and what eventually happened to many real soldiers during war. Throughout the film, the meaning of the titular accusation changes depending on the fate of the soldiers. In the beginning, *j'accuse* appears to place blame on the French government because Jean Diaz worries for the safety of the soldiers entering war. By the end, *j'accuse* places blame on the villagers and petty profiteers of war who have thrived while the soldiers have suffered. Jean at this point is angered on behalf of the soldiers. In the title sequence, the soldiers spelling out *j'accuse* with their bodies represent the progression they will make over the course of the war, encompassing all the shifts in the meaning of the phrase in one scene.



About thirty minutes into the film, the phrase appears once again, this time in the context of Jean's hatred towards war and the reasons he believes to be behind it. Not only the reasons behind it but also the grim consequences he envisions war to have. News has broken out across France, and the villagers are celebrating: "Enfin! Vive la France!" (Finally! Long live France!) they cheer in the crowded streets. There is joyful celebration, French flags fly on every storefront. During this scene we see an initial indication of the film's misogyny. Rather than showing *all* villagers, Gance decides to focus on displaying only women, therefore portraying them as the antagonists. The scene shows an elderly woman bob her head from side to side, grinning as she watches the festivities. A quick shot of a plaza shows women holding hands in a ring and twirling around in circles. Immediately following, a series of closeups of four different women flashes across the screen. Each one is beaming and laughing, and all four are quite young, between the ages of 15 and 30. The scene closes by displaying the celebratory villagers in the plaza, dancing. There are no shots of men alone, and if men are shown, they are in the context of a larger group. There is a clear singling out of women, as the camera pans from one to the next. This is particularly highlighted by the blunt contrast between Jean's sulking and the apparently joyful reaction of the women. It's a complicated accusation to make—being upset at the women for showing joy at the outbreak of war—because though they may seem happy, it may all be to mirror the reaction of the men. Men in the older generation such as Edith's father, Maria Lazare, are all supporters of war as well, as they are veterans of late 19th-century wars and are excited at the prospect of finally defeating Germany and winning back the Alsace-Lorraine region. The women are reflecting the overall feeling of nationalism in the country. They may not be pleased to see their husbands leave, but they may feel this is the reaction that everyone supports. Though all the villagers are to blame in Jean's mind for their apparent joyful reaction at the news of war, there appears to be an emphasis on the women, and Jean's anger towards them, even from the start.

As the festivities continue, the emphasis on Jean's pacifism becomes clearer. Jean is the village poet, a solemn but wise man who believes himself to be the only one with a clear mind regarding this new situation that has arisen. Jean is involved in an affair with the beautiful Edith, a married woman. Her husband Francois is abusive both mentally and physically, and in the beginning of the film Jean is seen as something of a sanctuary for Edith. Edith's narrative portrays her as a victim for the most part. In the beginning she is beaten and abused by Francois, who claims to love her. However, from his actions and the way he seems to "possess" her, it appears that Francois may not feel actual love but more a responsibility for her because he "owns" her. He does not see Edith as a human, he does not care for her emotional state, he just cares for himself and his reputation. This is made very clear when later in the film he is completely horrified that Edith has had a child as a consequence of being raped by German soldiers. He wants to kill the child that is the product of Edith's rape, and feels no love towards Angèle even though she is the child of the woman he claims to love. He is more angry and embarrassed that he should be associated with a child that is half German, and not pure French, than he is worried or concerned about what happened to Edith. Jean on the other hand protects her and loves her (and her child), and she loves him in a way that she doesn't love Francois. Jean is quite levelheaded and mature, but has many thoughts that may come to haunt him. He doesn't see war as a celebration, and it is possible that he sees the outbreak of war as foreshadowing his own death. In one particular scene, upon learning that he is to be dispatched to the front, Jean sulks alone in his room. He picks up his book of poetry titled "Les Pacifiques" or "The Peaceful." Superimposition is used and the bold lettering fades into the image of a

skeleton hand gripping a weapon, much like the grim reaper. This represents the fate of the people, who he knows will soon shift from peaceful to dying through the consequences of war. In a subsequent scene, Jean sits in his dark bedroom playing cello. Edith enters the room and crouches, resting her head on his shoulder. Upon her touch, Jean slowly looks out the window. A dancing skeleton appears in the frame, paired with eerie tones, and eventually fades into the landscape. These scenes are conversely broken up by the dancing of the celebratory villagers. The contrast between Jean and the villagers' perspectives on the war is made perfectly clear through the use of quick cuts, juxtaposing Jean huddled in his room with the festivities in the streets.

Shortly afterward, the film presents Jean's first official accusation with the phrase *j'accuse*. Jean spends his time trying to write. He is seen set up in a peaceful garden, surrounded by blossoming trees. He is clearly distracted, as every few moments he casts a glance upwards. Appearing to see troubles, as a disturbed expression crosses his face, he lowers his head. Images of destruction cross the screen. First comes a barren street, next a bombed church, lastly an aerial view of nearly an entire city in ruins. Jean grips his hands together, and seemingly a little wobbly, smells the flower above his head, possibly to bring him back to his senses. An image of two praying women in front of a destroyed city flashes across the screen, followed by depictions of dead men lying in the trenches. Suspenseful music builds in the background and culminates with Jean burying his head in his hands and staring piercingly into the camera. "J'ACCUSE...." unveils across his face. The phrase *j'accuse* comes from an open letter written by the writer Emile Zola in 1898. Zola accused the French government of antisemitism for convicting Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, for espionage. The letter gained widespread notoriety and would go on to become one of the most famous newspaper articles ever published. The phrase "j'accuse!" is now commonly used to express anger toward those in power, as Jean appears to use it in this scene. Since the news of war broke out at the start of the film, Jean has been wildly upset with the government and the French authorities. He is angry that they have entered war, not only because he understands the consequence of war for a country, and his people, but also possibly for himself, as he feels he may be able to sense his own demise. By seeing the skeletons appear, and having trouble bringing himself back to the present moment, Jean may anticipate his own death, or perhaps his later insanity. The frequent appearance of skeletons in the film's first "epoch" strongly emphasizes the pacifist view that there is a direct correlation between war and death. There is no joy or satisfaction when it comes to war, there is only death and destruction.

However, a huge shift in the meaning of the phrase *j'accuse* comes when the French are under attack and Jean descends into his eventual state of shell shock. It's here that his anger towards the French authorities, represented by the phrase *j'accuse*, shifts toward the villagers, and women in particular. Jean, Francois, and the troops are back on the front when there is an attack. A shell explodes directly beside Jean. Men all around him quickly perish. Jean regains consciousness but seems unaware of his surroundings, the only thing of importance to him are his love letters to Edith, which he had been holding before the explosion. He begins to flip through the letters. A slow dissolve occurs but reveals the same image again. Perhaps it represents just how long he is standing there aimlessly flipping through the letters, as we are not (and he is not) certain. In the midst of flipping, his expression changes. His expression of intense focus shifts to a chilling grin. He is not scared, but he is mildly smiling. This is the moment that he has become what Edith later diagnoses as a *fou*, or crazy person. Visions of war flash across the screen, representing the chaos that has overtaken the camp. Jean has no

perception or recollection of any of it at all, he is in his own world entirely. The fast-paced scene enlists a sense of panic as the rest of the camp is moving frantically and urgently. It then cuts back to Jean once again and he is seen laughing and sitting alone. Francois runs up to him to grab him and ask if he's alright. Francois is desperate to flee the scene with Jean but Jean grabs his collar and says "Mathieu! You must send these letters to Edith. But whatever you do, don't tell Francois." Mathieu is the soldier Jean was speaking to moments before the attack. Mathieu gets directly hit by a shell and disappears in a cloud of smoke. This technique was exciting at the time of the film's release as it was an example of the different types of effects that films can produce that make it different from theater. Jean has forgotten that Mathieu is dead. The music shifts to somewhat mournful tones. Jean whips his head around, eyes extremely wide, desperately seeking approval from the man he believes is Mathieu. Francois is puzzled but frightened. He shakily grips Jean's head as Jean repeats the same message over and over again. Francois barks at the men to bring the stretchers. Jean has gone mad. The anger and urgency in Francois' face as he calls for the stretcher is not of anger towards the men but impending sadness as he realizes what has happened. The stretchers arrive and Jean grips Francois hand tightly saying something before being whisked away. This scene shows the effects of shell shock, what we now call PTSD. At the release of this film, the concept of shell shock was very new and not yet well understood or taken as seriously. Tracey Loughran, in her recent study *Shell-Shock and Medical Culture in First World War Britain*, states that before 1916, shell shock was not accepted as a psychological disorder; "[i]n fact, there was no medical consensus on the physical or psychological origins of 'shell-shock': not at the outset of the war, not in 1918, and not for some decades afterwards" (79-80). As the film was made in 1918, and released in 1919, the reception and understanding of the concept of shell shock would've been fairly foreign. This scene could serve as an eye-opening moment for viewers who may not have understood the depth of the soldiers' trauma and its effects. This scene can also later be seen to be the moment when the major shift in Jean, and the film's accusation, occurs. He develops a more defensive and protective attitude toward his fellow soldiers, as well as toward the French government, as he apparently feels they are all in this tragedy together. His anger shifts from condemning the authorities to the villagers at home. Right before the explosion, Jean is flipping through his love letters to Edith, the only thing of importance to him. His demeanor quickly changes after the explosion, and especially following his return to the village, when he seems dismissive and inattentive toward Edith. His reaction towards the letters represents how the immediate effects of shell shock can completely alter one's state of mind and emotional condition. Jean's long-lasting love for Edith is dashed in the matter of seconds.

The final shift in the meaning of the titular *j'accuse* is displayed in the final scenes. In the most well-known moment of the movie, Jean has returned to the village in his state of insanity. He has called upon the villagers to gather around, to recite a vision he has recently been haunted with. Once all together, Jean begins his story. The room is dark, the figures barely illuminated by a dim fire flickering in the corner of the room. A medium closeup of Jean's face displays fright as he begins. Chimes overlay in the background, much like those played during a funeral. This is to introduce the haunting element of death that is to come in the next scenes. He tells them a tale of his deceased fellow soldiers arising from the dead in a barren field. They are full of spite and are unsure villagers have been worthy of their sacrifice as they've been away. Some women have been unfaithful, and others have profited from the war, thus making them unworthy of their sacrifice. The woman grip their hands together in desperation. The crowd leans back. In his recitation, Jean mentions how one soldier stands and calls upon all the dead

to return to the village in their zombie-like form and greet the villagers. By visiting the village, the soldier wants to ensure that the villagers are worthy of the sacrifices of war. The dead straggling soldiers parade down the road. The screen cuts in half and displays Paris on the bottom and the zombie parade on top. In actual newsreel footage of the recent victory parade in Paris in 1919, the remaining soldiers are honored as they march under the Arc de Triomphe. Celebratory music and festivities occur as the war heroes return home. The lower half of the screen shows the parade of the marching dead, staggering down the road. The contrast with the parade in Paris is meant to signify to viewers that these soldiers are forgotten. As the living soldiers are commemorated, the dead soldiers are entirely forgotten. The dead men are seen limping together in an ill-mannered fashion in comparison with the veteran parade that is very structured and pleasing. The image of the dead appears in black and darker colors in comparison with the victory parade which is shown in much lighter white tones. As darkness symbolizes mortality and the underground, it is fitting that the parade is shown in lighter tones to represent life and light. At this point, the meaning of the phrase *j'accuse* has shifted entirely to anger towards the villagers; not just any villagers, though, specifically women. Jean feels they are not worthy of the sacrifice the soldiers have made. He appears to no longer harbor resentment toward the French government or higher powers, possibly because he believes that they have not put these men in war by their choice. They have gone to war because it is what's best for the sake of France and it was the best they knew how to do. Instead, he easily turns his anger toward the villagers, who are portrayed as having sacrificed nothing and in fact gained something from war. Not only have women committed acts of infidelity while their husbands were away at the front, some people have additionally begun to profit from the war, which enrages Jean. The soldiers individually go up to their former homes and appear in the doorways and windows of the women who have been unfaithful. From there, a sequence of the phrase *j'accuse* appears on the screen following each visit to a new home, as Jean is accusing each woman of being unworthy. As previously discussed, earlier in the film there is a foreshadowing of this anger towards women when they are shown celebrating news of the outbreak of war. Even at that point Jean was distraught and severely disagreed with the people, but he did not appear to blame them. Now, in his state of insanity, he has gained a heightened sense of anger; one effect of PTSD is a higher level of emotional range. In one contemporary account cited by Loughran, symptoms of shell shock were said to include "insomnia, battle dreams, disturbances of the special senses, 'functional' palsies and anaesthesias, emotional overreaction, defects of mental synthesis, mental instability or disequilibrium, even paramnesia and hallucinations" (82). Jean embodies many of these symptoms, some more severe than others. Even toward Edith, Jean is dismissive and inattentive, very unlike his attitude towards her throughout the entire movie up to that point. His change in attitude towards Edith is symbolic of the change he feels towards all women. He feels no passion towards her anymore. In the scene when there are several specific accusations towards women in the village, the dead soldiers emerge in the windows of their wives' homes. Though the phrase *j'accuse* does not flash across the screen as with the others, Edith is pictured in her home when Francois and Edith's father Maria Lazare emerge in the window. It is not blatant, but there does seem to be an indirect accusation towards Edith as Francois has appeared. Edith did in fact commit an act of infidelity, but it was with Jean, and in Jean's view, it appears to only be Edith's fault. In his eyes, it appears, he sees men as doing nothing wrong, merely fighting the war for their country and hoping to be appreciated in exchange. He overlooks the abuse, rape, and acts of infidelity that men themselves commit throughout the narrative; it is notable that Jean and Francois become the best of friends while fighting together at the front.

Jean aims to frighten the villagers, or enlist in them some sense of fear, though he knows nothing will ever compare to what the men have experienced in battle. Once the soldiers feel satisfied that their punishment in greeting the villagers has sufficed, they return to the underground.

Later that night, upon his mother's death, Jean returns to his home. He stumbles upon his old book of poetry. He has enough consciousness to flip through the book. Upon seeing a few of his old works, he crazily rips the pages out. Many depict the daily life of the villagers, the peaceful and happy nature of everyday life pre-war. He can no longer imagine this, and the image of it angers him further. They have let him down, and the rest of the soldiers as well. Page after page, he furiously tears the poems from his book. Suddenly his eyes widen as he comes across his poem labeled "Ode au Soleil" (Ode to the Sun). He hobbles to the window where the sun is streaming through and begins a harsh monologue. He reaches his hands to the light, and in his desperate oration, he proclaims to the sun that he used to be Jean Diaz. He is no longer Jean Diaz, and his name has become "j'accuse." The soldier in him has killed the poet in him. He goes on to say that he accuses the sun. He accuses the sun for having witnessed the whole horrible epic of war. It's almost as if who he accuses is no longer only the villagers, it is everything that surrounds him, even poetry itself, because it serves as a beautiful way to illustrate the world, which he no longer can imagine. His heart has turned bitter. In a quick phrase that is hard to catch he says, "I come back to you, soldier." And with that final murmur, Jean collapses to the floor and dies.

His final words explain that the anger he has will not diminish, and he cannot continue on in the state that he remains in. Jean is not aware that he has gone mad, but he is aware that he feels his place of belonging is with the rest of the soldiers. By saying "I come back to you, soldier," he has returned to reunite with his fallen comrades: Francois, Mathieu, or any of the other men. It can also mean that he has returned to the man he was on the battlefield, maybe the man he was before he went insane, but he knows he will never reach that while he is living, and he is ready to ascend to the afterlife to become that man once again, hence, the poet being killed by the soldier. Or perhaps he feels he would've been satisfied to die on the battlefield with the rest of the soldiers. It is possible Jean feels bitterness towards Edith (in his altered state of mind he does not remember it is his fault that she was unfaithful), or he could be upset with himself (knowing that what he did was wrong). His death does not come as a surprise given his brash and dangerous actions and state of mind; however, it serves as a tragic ending to what was most likely a common narrative for soldiers returning from war. Scholars have often claimed that shell shock was difficult to diagnose in the early years of the Great War. For instance, Loughran mentions that different doctors diagnosed it in different ways, and certain physicians or doctors viewed similar conditions as separate things (13). It was too new of a phenomenon that different doctors contradicted each other. Further, there was no cure or sure way to help the patients, so it was very much a trial and error procedure every day with shell shock patients. With little understanding and acceptance, soldiers were often sent back to war when they were not ready because of the lack of information on the understanding of shell shock. Even if soldiers made it out of war alive, it is likely that they were never truly the same and were never able to return "home," a feminized domestic space represented by women.

Jean was in fact correct in the end about his initial view towards war, and he was correct about the final state the country would be left in, and the final state he would be left in. The meaning of the phrase *j'accuse* and how it shifts across the film is meant to accentuate the film's pacifist theme. As Gance said himself, "I *am* against war, because war is futile. Ten or twenty



years afterward, one reflects that millions have died and all for nothing. One has found friends among one's old enemies, and enemies among one's friends" (quoted in Brownlow 615). Throughout the film, particularly in the earlier epochs, the theme of pacifism is glaringly obvious, which is what makes it so odd when the film ends up placing blame for the war on women rather than the halls of power. It is during the moment of shell shock that it becomes clear that the shift in blame is towards vilifying women that represent home. Like Jean, the soldiers view home as a safe, feminized domestic sphere. In their new states of shell shock, they were no longer able to return "home." It seems that as home is lost, home is easier to blame. In the same way that it's easier to be mad at someone than sad, it is easier to blame home if home is lost.

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