

## They Shall Not Grow Old

New digital technology can do some wonderful things as well as nefarious ones, but in the case of the new World War I documentary “They Shall Not Grow Old,” an amazing manipulation of images creates a thrilling reimagining of the past. It is for now a unique work, one which might prove a model for future looks at history

New Zealand director Peter Jackson, he of “Lord of the Rings” fame, created this stunning enterprise. He was approached four years ago by the Imperial War Museum (IWM) of London to craft something out of a mass of WWI material they held. The Museum had more than 2,000 hours of film footage from the conflict along with 600 hours of interviews with more than 250 war veterans recorded by the BBC in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Jackson and his team spent a year and one-half listening to these eyewitness accounts then married them with his trove of images to fashion, as he says, “an average man’s experience of what it was like to be an infantry soldier in WWI.” His amalgamation of the material is singular.

As Jackson himself explains in a spoken introduction to the film, he made some important decisions up front. The story would be told only be from the viewpoint of the British Army (infantry and artillery) because that was where the bulk of the footage came from (no naval or air units or other Allied footage). His version would eschew the details of dates and campaign locations but rather tell one chronological account of the war experience of most British soldiers, from enlistment to Armistice, using those voices (not identified on screen) from the BBC tapes.

Jackson calls “They Shall Not Grow Old” his most personal film because his grandfather was in World War I, and the family library was full of books about it. In describing his project, he said he “was focused on the technical stuff for a long time...but when it all came together, what really hits you is the humanity of the people on the film. They just jump out at you, especially the faces. They’re no longer buried in a fog of film grain and scratches and shuttering and sped-up footage. You just understand that these were human beings.” Those smiling, innocent faces are never more poignant than when, in a long montage sequence, they are grimly juxtaposed with horrific scenes of battle.

The chronology begins in tight frame, with black-and-white footage of the war’s beginnings, followed by ample testimony from eager recruits (many of them underage) anxious to join the fray and fight “The Hun.” This is followed by a lengthy chronicle—shot in slightly larger framing—of the six weeks of training camp in all its detail and drudgery. The black-and-white footage continues as the troop boats cross the English Channel, and the young men land in besieged France, after which...

...the film **bursts** into wide-screen color (and 3-D), and we are thrown into the trenches with these men (and boys). It is a breakout as stunning as that 80 years ago when “The Wizard of Oz” exploded with color once Dorothy landed in that enchanted land. Yet this land is hardly enchanted but all too palpably dismal, full of mud and dirt and thudding shells and corpses on wires and, again, more mud. The dreariness and monotony of trench warfare is intimately described, down to the intricacies of impromptu tea-making, lice-picking, latrine business, and the hunting of the ubiquitous rats. Yet, surprisingly, Jackson also incorporates many positive remarks by soldiers about their

war experience, usually in terms of triumphing over adversity, finding unique camaraderie, or discovering their own manhood.

The narrative describes what appears to be one long campaign, ending with victory in hand-to-hand warfare in the trenches. The last attack sequences, lacking actual footage, are effectively portrayed in a dizzying display of WWI images taken from posters and magazines of the day. The finale also includes images of captured German soldiers, just as callow and bedraggled as their conquerors, and sympathetic for that.

The film is also enhanced by its astute use of sound effects, recalling the work of documentarian Ken Burns in his masterpiece, "The Civil War," with the steady rhythms of wind, horses' hooves, bombs, rifle fire, and trench sounds plus an imaginative inclusion of the snatches of the men's voices, sometimes matching the actual images in original accents. Perhaps most effective of all is the film's digital enhancement. Jackson and Co., through painstaking trial and error, smooth out the action by stretching out the frames-per-second from the original hand-cranked camera's imagery to a consistent 24 frames-per-second, thus converting jerky silent footage to an even flow on the screen. It's a technique that should be used on any future silent movie material.

In the introductory remarks mentioned above, Jackson noted: "It is a film for non-historians made by a non-historian." Indubitably, because it is made by an artist. *(The film opens at the Smithsonian's Warners Theatre on January 31 and then opens more widely; it runs 99 minutes and is rated "R" for graphic visions of a brutal war).*

(February 2019)