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BEARING WITNESS TO THE PAST

THERE ARE THE UNCHANGING FACTS OF EVENTS, which we call the past, and the ever-changing interpretations of those facts, which we call history. While a study of archival films may not always furnish definitive conclusions about the past, it may help to limit the misuses of history. Such study also points to the difference between the arrogance of opinion, which simply requires conviction and repetition, and the humility of truth-seeking. Technological advances have brought more old footage within our grasp than ever before, and our film repositories can serve a truth-telling function if they make history both accessible and reliable. However, those same advances can also manipulate historical films, which raises important questions about what can rightly be called “authentic.”

The ability to access cinematic history has improved greatly in recent years, as seen most spectacularly in the recent documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018). Conceived as a project to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, it was a labour of love for New Zealand director Peter Jackson, who is most famous for *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). Its title is a (perhaps deliberate) misquotation of English writer Laurence Binyon’s poem “For the Fallen” (1914), which was written in the first months of the war. The stanza that is familiar to Canadians attending Remembrance Day ceremonies reads:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

The film successfully deals with one of the key problems that confronts us when delving into the past—namely, its apparent inaccessibility. Indeed, the past often throws up barriers to our comprehension, such as unfamiliar lan-

guages, customs, and ways of thinking. It took years of effort and advanced technology to bridge the hundred-year gap between the events it depicts and the modern-day viewer, and the effect is to put the experience of the war back into the hands of the soldiers who lived it.

As with accessing the past, watching older films presents its own set of barriers for the modern viewer. Hard as it is for film lovers to admit, many people do not care to watch films without sound, colour, and natural movement, and this was precisely the challenge laid before Jackson. He was asked to look at roughly 100 hours of film shot between 1914 and 1918 and to listen to about 600 hours of interviews with veterans recorded in the 1960s and 1970s. He was then asked to find a “unique and original” way to present this material to a modern audience by matching portions of the interviews to appropriate segments of film—a process that took three years.

After paring the material down to a 99-minute film, Jackson’s next task was to rejuvenate the footage. This meant repairing the parts of the film that were scratched or otherwise damaged as well as those portions that were under- or overexposed. The biggest transformation, however, involved the insertion of additional frames using a computer in order to make movement appear more natural, as it allowed film exposed at 13 or 16 frames per second by hand cranking to be projected at the modern rate of 24 frames per second. Colour was then added, and a military historian was called upon to identify the colours of the uniforms, right down to the badges and buttons. Jackson also travelled through the territory of the Western Front, taking photographs of the various kinds of dirt so it would look authentic when coloured on film.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is the depth and richness of its sound, as Jackson created an entirely new soundscape for the film. There is the sound of gunfire, of course, as well as every other sound you would expect: horses’ hooves clopping, trains rattling, moving artillery pieces rumbling, etc. But the key sound is the human voice. In a sense, the stunning visuals are a vehicle for getting us to listen to what veterans wanted us to know about their experiences. Everyone we see on film is long dead, so the filmmakers had to find a way to bring them vocally as well as visually back to life. And unlike most documentaries, the speakers are not identified. This has the effect of making one man’s experience every man’s experience. There is also no omniscient narrator to place what we are watching into a larger perspective, like a historian informing us about the

grand strategy of the war. Instead, we see everything from the perspectives of the soldiers in the trenches, who only see what is directly in front of them. It is also important to remember that we are hearing the voices of those who survived the war by a half-century. This may account for some of the commentary that seems jarring to the modern ear. We have been conditioned by viewing dramatic fictions about World War I, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), to view the men who were in that struggle as humourless, doomed victims focused on death, but the voices in *They Shall Not Grow Old* give us a very different slant on the war. Despite the ghastly horrors they endured, for example, some veterans describe the fun and excitement they experienced. One fellow even refers to the war as “an adventure, like camping, but with a little danger to make it sporting,” and another emphasizes the “terrific lot of kindness” that the men at the front showed each other. This stands in stark contrast to the indifference and even hostility ex-servicemen often faced when they returned home. A more ingenious method of resurrecting the voices of the soldiers was accomplished using forensic lip readers, who are often employed by police services to discern what is being said in surveillance footage. The soldiers speaking toward the camera are thus able to be heard through the voices of actors, and appropriate accents were chosen based on the uniforms the speakers were wearing, which indicated the regions of the United Kingdom from which they hailed.

What criticism there is of *They Shall Not Grow Old* concerns the second aspect of delving into history, which is the need for it to be reliable or authentic. We can grant that this documentary is an amazing technical achievement that makes history accessible, but does it distort that history in the process? It is certainly true that the footage originally had only one purpose—namely, to foster patriotic fervour—and altering that goal can potentially mislead modern audiences. Perhaps it is best that we remain distanced from these soldiers by all the technical flaws, so we don’t pretend that they share our views about the futility of the conflict for which most of them volunteered. However, it is also helpful to compare *They Shall Not Grow Old* to two very different types of World War I films: documentaries released during the war, like *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), and fictional dramas released after the war, like *Journey’s End* (1930) and *The Dawn Patrol* (1930). The differences between these films clearly reflect the different needs of audiences during and after the war, as wartime audiences wanted their films to furnish a point to the suffering and a hope for the

future, and it wasn't until after the war that audiences became more open to interpretations of the carnage that went beyond jingoism and patriotism. The existence of these distinct varieties of film based on the same historical event also shows that what we are viewing is always curated, and it puts the onus on the viewer to consider what is presented with a critical eye.

That critical eye also needs to be cast on the label "documentary," which is applied to both *The Battle of the Somme* and *They Shall Not Grow Old*. While these two films focus on the same event, they have vastly different intents. Viewing *The Battle of the Somme*, one would never know that on the first day of the battle British forces suffered around 58,000 casualties. And it would not be clear that at Beaumont Hamel 68 men of the Newfoundland Regiment answered roll call on July 2, 1916 when almost 800 had answered the day before. The picture *The Battle of the Somme* presents is one of British successes and long lines of German prisoners, which is hardly surprising, since the unprecedented losses suffered by British soldiers and their families required some type of salve. In distorting the actual course of the battle, however, the contemporary documentary turns out to be more unreliable than the "reimagined" documentary a century later. While *The Battle of the Somme* includes footage of men "going over the top," for example, there was in fact no actual battle footage to be had, as it would have been far too impractical (and too dangerous) to film a real battle with the bulky cameras of the day. Instead, the 1916 documentary provides a fictional recreation of the battle as imagined by the filmmakers. *They Shall Not Grow Old* does not indulge in that kind of misrepresentation, and it thus stands as a bracing counterpoint to these fictions.

When we let the veterans speak for themselves rather than have their experiences interpreted for them, a different picture emerges. They do not see themselves as victims or spend time pondering the whys and wherefores of the larger conflict, as many of them volunteered to fight and often found it exciting and even fun. While their viewpoint may be considered a limited one, it is large enough to embrace a kind of kinship with the enemy. Towards the end of the film, when the Germans are surrendering, the British soldiers praise their skills and note that the prisoners no longer care who wins the war as long as it ends soon. And when the war is finally over, our expectations are once again confounded, as there is no joy or wild celebration but only exhaustion and uncertainty as to what comes next. One veteran even says that it was "one of the flattest moments of my life."



Image from *The Battle of the Somme* courtesy of the Imperial War Museums
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Unlike those who would promote “alternative facts,” *They Shall Not Grow Old* takes an existing historical record and uses technical advances to go beyond what the original filmmakers could capture. It would not be presumptuous to conclude that the people filming the war strove for as much realism as possible. After all, why take the risk of going to the front at all when the war could have been recreated on a set, like the battle sequences in *The Battle of the Somme*? That documentary would have surely been just as vibrantly colourful as *They Shall Not Grow Old* if it had been technically possible at the time. By removing the technical deficiencies of archival films, the more recent documentary thereby removes a barrier between contemporary viewers and the past, and it facilitates the same connection with modern audiences that the original filmmakers hoped to achieve more than a century ago.