

Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old*: A devastating depiction of the horrors of war

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They Shall Not Grow Old ranks among the most poignant commemorations of the centenary of World War I.

New Zealand film director Peter Jackson's extraordinary 99-minute documentary film combines archive footage, colourised and edited to enable projection at modern speed, with the oral recollections of servicemen to produce a visceral, shocking and moving film depicting the horrors of war. It has resonated with millions, including those who fear we are heading for a third world war and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

It was commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the UK arts programme for the First World War centenary, and the Imperial War Museum, in association with the BBC. It was originally planned as a one-off screening in the UK on October 16 at 247 cinemas and was a sell-out success. It was also broadcast on BBC2 on Remembrance Sunday—November 11—to mark 100 years since the Armistice and was seen by over two million viewers. It is available on BBC i-player and will be distributed worldwide including in US theatres on December 17 and December 27 (tickets go on sale November 16), giving it a global audience of millions.

Typical of the reaction to the film were comments from BBC viewers. Sue Rhodes, for example, explained, "That moment when the programme went from silent to sound and colour—it literally took my breath away. So moving. When you see black and white, it is almost as if they are not real people but this really brought home the realities to you—the bodies, the death scenes, the injuries."

Chris Roe-Bullion added, "I had some idea about the conditions but I had no idea just how awful they were. The image that sticks in my mind is of a hand in the mud—it looks like someone reaching for help as they

were sucked down ... That thought of people falling to the ground and disappearing beneath the mud. You almost hope that someone took a rifle to spare them."

As one might expect from Jackson, best known for his *Lord of the Rings* films, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is an astonishing technical achievement. The film skilfully edits together footage from the archives of the Imperial War Museum with contemporary still images such as posters and cartoons. It uses no narrator, relying entirely on the words of servicemen recorded in the 1960s. Jackson chose to reflect only the experience of British soldiers on the Western Front. In so doing he shows how young men sign up in a spirit of a patriotic adventure, to "kill Germans," only to find themselves pitched against men no different to themselves in an orgy of bloody and brutish slaughter.

For the first 20 minutes the archive footage focuses on the preparations for war—soldiers talking about enlisting, training and being sent to the front. The images are the original ones, often jerky, black-and-white—with moments of comedy as the new recruits wrestle with ill-fitting uniforms, bullying sergeant-majors "knocking them into shape" and facing dispatch to the battle front after six weeks of perfunctory military training.

However, a darker side is ever present. One soldier speaks of being paraded through London's West End to entice bystanders into "falling for the con trick" of enlistment. There is the callous collusion of recruiting officers who persuade boys too young to join up—the age limit was 19, but we hear from some as young as 14 and 15. As one soldier says, "I was only a kid."

There are hints about underlying social conditions, too. One upper class voice complains about having to deal with the "refuse of our industrial system." A recruit talks of war as a "relief from boring jobs," while

another notes, “In those days men weren’t to think for themselves.” The fact that recruits on average grew an inch and put on 1 stone (6.35kg) in weight indicates the physical impact of the poverty suffered by the working class.

Around 25 minutes into the film, we see troops sent to the front. The myth of glorious war turns to bloody reality. It is here that Jackson employs his technical skills to the full. The footage slows from archive jerkiness to a smoother more natural tempo. The film is colourised as soon as the soldiers arrive at the front. We see a vision of hell.

Lip-reading experts interpreted the words being spoken on the silent footage, and the film suddenly develops a living soundtrack as we hear soldiers speaking onscreen in their own words, if not their own voices. Jackson has also built up a convincing soundtrack of the surrounding noises.

The effect is powerful. The viewer has a much sharper sense of immediacy and identification. Jackson overcomes the original static camera position by narrowing in on certain parts of frames, faces particularly. We get a sense of individual identities and characters. As the troops are being prepared for the big push across No Man’s Land, we hear soldiers talking about the “hysterical feeling” generated by the bombardment and the tension of waiting for battle.

The colourisation of the old archive film also brings out the horrific conditions of life in the trenches, plagued by lice, rats and trench foot. “The devastation was something I could never have imagined,” declared one recruit. Dismembered body parts of men and horses are everywhere, filling the air with “the musty, sickly smell of decaying corpses.” One man speaks of having had to put another’s remains into a sandbag after he had been blown to bits, while another cries out, “It hurt me,” as he recalls having to kill a horrifically wounded colleague. Soldiers speak of making a barricade of dead bodies. The sight of giant bombs exploding among the troops is terrifying.

By the time of the big push across No Man’s Land, says one soldier, “All my romantic ideals of war had vanished.” There is, throughout, little animosity expressed towards the Germans. And when they are captured, at the war’s conclusion, this turns to sympathy and identification.

Jackson has dedicated *They Shall Not Grow Old* to a

grandfather who survived the war, and two relatives who did not. His is a reaction against the war’s horrors rather than a broader political comprehension of the reasons for it. He admits that the film does not “talk about any historical aspects of the war ... we just talk about the social experience of being in this war, and the human experience.”

Nonetheless, he has produced a film that allows the viewer to see the Great War as what it was, a horrific crime. Under the present conditions of renewed militarism and the whipping up of nationalist jingoism, that is no small achievement. It will contribute to developing the determination of this generation to end the threat of war through the struggle for socialism.

The trailer for *They Shall Not Grow Old* can be viewed here.



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