

“They Shall Not Grow Old” – A Review

Exactly 100 years ago, those who had survived the Great War were returning to the places they loved in a daze. If they hadn't been scarred physically from combat, they most certainly were scarred mentally. The mostly docile home-front to which they were returning would not be able to understand them, nor all of the horrors they had endured. And yet, who would want to go back and describe the putridity of trench warfare to those who had no concept of it? No, they did what most anyone else who had been through those things would try to do...they would try to pick back up and move on. The ghosts would remain, though, and they would come back to life again in a few decades and culminate into the second World War.

World War I can be looked at from many different angles. There is the strategic angle, the geopolitical angle, the technological angle, and on and on it goes. But perhaps one of the most challenging angles of WWI to truly grasp is the particularly “human” angle of the war. How did this war affect the average person who lived through it? And how do you relate this experience to the current, very visual, generation?

Peter Jackson and his team of highly talented film restorers have done tremendous work in helping us to go back in time and hear the voices and see the faces of those who fought in the war. Rather than focus on different fronts and try to tell a “big picture” story, they decided to focus in on the experience of a typical British soldier from enlistment, through routine military life, through the Western front, all the way through the end of the war. The black and white film has been restored beautifully. Colors are matched as closely as possible to surrounding areas and uniforms, even down to the correct color of patches on the uniforms. The use of 3D technology brings added layers of depth to what was once a

still, jittery shot that once seemed alien.

Audio work on the film is impressive as well. When it came to scenes with people speaking on film, they hired professional lip readers to try and figure out what they said, then used voice actors to replicate it. The voices narrating the story of the film are all the voices of those who were actually in the war, which were taken from the countless hours of interviews conducted by the BBC in the 1960s. Foley work to restore the sound of war weaponry utilized actual live fire mortar and original WWI era machinery (from Jackson's private collection, no less). It's done to chilling effect.

Although film does not exist of the worst of the fighting on the Western front, they made great use of what film they did have. Close shots of human, smiling faces of soldiers are immediately juxtaposed with images of decaying corpses left out on the ground. Film of soldiers receiving medical treatment was also restored, bloody wounds and all. In one shot, a shell drops right next to a column of men on horseback, to horrifying effect. A far-away shot shows men jumping out of the trenches and running across No-Man's Land on a trench raid, dodging shells along the way.

One scene that will sit with me for a long time is that of some troops getting ready for a major offensive on the German defenses. They sit in a ditch, hunkered down together waiting for the signal to charge toward the barbed wire and mines and mustard gas and machine gun fire and heavy shelling. One man has a look on his face of sheer terror and shock. Jackson said that most of the men in the shot, if not all, were within the last 30 minutes of their lives.

If there are any flaws in the film, one is that you can't do justice to the depth and complications that this war brought with it. On his Hardcore History podcasts on the subject called Blueprint for Armageddon (which I highly recommend, and can be found, currently for free, [here](#)), Dan Carlin spends

close to 24 hours and still had to cut lots of material out. Jackson did his best with the hour and a half that he had, but that meant he had to aim for a “generalized” perspective of what fighting on the Western front was like. Don’t go into the film trying to figure out what particular battle theater is being discussed, as that isn’t the goal here. Western front fighting was pretty similar across the board, so it’s an understandable approach.

Thanks to the work of Jackson and his team, the voices and images of those who sacrificed their lives in this war will stick with me. They indeed shall not be forgotten in my mind, and hopefully not for generations to come.

The film is rated R for disturbing war images.