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REMEDIATION, TRAUMA, AND "PREPOSTEROUS HISTORY" IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

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They Shall Not Grow Old has been lavishly praised for its spectacular remediation of archival footage from the First World War—its conversion of scratched, faded, and deteriorating celluloid into a digital pastiche of period-accurate colours, sounds, and life-like movement. It has also, however, been roundly criticized both for its exclusive focus on the Western Front, depicting a fighting force consisting solely of White male British soldiers, as well as for its frequent, imaginative interpolations of digital elements, including the substitution of background scenery and the painting in of colours, such as a red and gold sunset, that were not suggested in the original film footage. These two critical objections apparently follow from very different premises. On the one hand, the film has been faulted for not representing the larger, global story of the First World War—for being too narrow in its perspective. On the other hand, *They Shall Not Grow Old* has been criticized for being too imaginative, too free with its digital artistry. Both critical objections, however, stem from a similar orientation: both see the film as falling short of the goal of accurately re-presenting a past reality, a reality that is imagined to be preserved, in all its testamentary force, in the archives of the Imperial War Museum.

In this chapter, I will attempt to frame *They Shall Not Grow Old* in a different way. Francesco Casetti, in an online discussion of First World War film footage, offered a striking observation concerning early documentary film that I feel provides a good starting place for analysis. Once a camera is in an environment, he argued, the environment becomes cinematic. The presence of the camera on the battlefield changes the field itself. The First World War battlefield, he further maintained, ought to be thought of as a mediascape (Casetti 2020). Casetti's insight, in my view, provides a suggestive way of approaching the textual and historical questions raised by the complex reframing that *They Shall Not Grow Old* conducts.

I will begin by summarizing the two lines of critical response I have adumbrated in the previous paragraphs, arguing that they are both based on a particular concept of the archive and its ostensibly veridical relation to historical representation. Both lines of critique assume that archival images are foundational, and that they have primacy in terms of how we can accurately understand the past. The first objection, that the film is too narrow in its orientation, concerns the fact that *They Shall Not Grow Old* reinforces and preserves the dominant cultural memory of the First World War in its most sacrosanct form. With its limited focus on the fighting on the Western Front, and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003263234-8

its almost exclusive concentration on White British soldiers, Jackson's film, the argument goes, simply brackets out the experience of hundreds of thousands of colonial troops—Indian, African, and Chinese soldiers who contributed to the fighting on the Western Front, and who fought in other theatres of war around the world. Moreover, Jackson has all but eliminated the contribution of women to the war, whose role as nurses, munitions workers, cryptographers, truck drivers, and messengers has recently been the subject of extensive historical recovery. Jackson has said that he wished to paint a picture of war that would be universal, "generic," and where the contributions of different races, ethnicities, and genders in different battlefronts could be subsumed into the one story (Jackson 2018a). For Jackson, evidently, the universal representation of The Great War is crystallized in the image of the White male British soldier. In the words of historian Santanu Das, the filmmaker thus erases "the macabre cosmopolitanism of the trenches" (Das 2019, 1776). The technical wizardry of the film, Das writes, was used:

> to reinforce a narrative that had dominated and distorted our view of the war for decades… these [non-white] men and the extra-European theatres were gradually airbrushed out of history as war memory crystallized around the Western Front in a skewed Eurocentric narrative of global conflict.

Jackson's film is symptomatic of "the wider sea of amnesia that still surrounds these islands of Eurocentric memory in popular culture" (1773).

Das' critique, echoed by several others, faults Jackson for not looking harder into the archives of the Imperial War Museum, the source for all the film's images, where ample visual material detailing the contributions of a wide population of colonial subjects and where an abundant visual history of women's contributions to the war can be found. A much more representative history, which takes notice of the impressive new scholarship focusing on the global nature of The Great War and on the importance of highly skilled colonial troops and women to its success, could have been produced from the holdings of the Museum.

On the face of it, Das' argument is unassailable. If we accept his avowal that the Imperial War Museum has an extensive visual record of the efforts of colonial troops in the First World War, as well as the contributions of women on the various war fronts and on the home front, his objections hit home. I am sympathetic to this line of criticism. But what I would like to highlight here is something else: the phrase, "airbrushed out of history," a phrase that reveals more than might be initially apparent. For one, it communicates an undertone of anxiety concerning visual media in relation to the past, as if the referent—history itself—were vulnerable to erasure—not only by way of the dominant culture's mythmaking concerning the Western Front, but even more so, by the overwhelming visual authority, the technical wizardry of contemporary film. If we unpack the metaphor a bit, it suggests that the past now exists mainly in its visual representations, or at least, that visual representation now controls what we know of the past, a level of authority, control—and threat—that has been augmented and amplified by digital media. Where D.N. Rodowick once argued that "the primary sense of the [celluloid] photograph is not to represent objects, but rather to *transcribe* historical events," the role of transcription has given way, in Das' revealing metaphor, to digital manipulation (Rodowick 2007, 55). To "airbrush out of history" implies that the visual record and the historical past are not only deeply entwined, but that they are coterminous. Despite his evident intentions, Das' metaphor of airbrushing, almost like a slip of the tongue that reveals more than was intended, echoes the conjecture set forth by Casetti—that the presence of the camera changes the battlefield, that the battlefield may best be thought of as a mediascape.

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The second line of critical objection, that Peter Jackson, for all the research and care he gave the project, was too free and inventive with the digital transformation of the film, hinges on the question of what some feel are the proper limits of restoration. While the goals of restoration are generally understood as the attempt to bring the film to a condition that replicates the quality of the original release prints, with the rise of digital technology that goal has sometimes been exceeded. As one archivist states, with digital technology, it is now possible to restore a film to imitate not only what the first, contemporaneous spectators of the work saw, but what the cinematographer or camera operator saw as they were shooting the film (Bonnard 2016, 140). Jackson apparently endorses this view; *They Shall Not Grow Old*, he has frequently said in interviews, conveys trench warfare in the colours and three dimensions that the soldiers themselves would have seen it.

Some critics, however, feel differently. As Jan-Christopher Horak writes about the film—and about the argument of many restoration specialists who claim that they are only doing what the original filmmakers would have tried if they had the tools available—"such efforts take a work out of history, and into an a-historical no-man's-land" (Horak 2019). He continues:

> many of these changes – including 3-D, colorization, grain reduction, sharpening of the image, cropping the image, and conforming the film to sound speed – are a matter of public record and have been commented upon favourably… . More troubling, given that Jackson is insisting on calling his film a restored documentary, is the outright falsification of images… whole parts of images were removed and then repainted, e.g., in one scene houses were removed and replaced with green trees to make one composite more pleasing. According to David Walsh [head of restoration for the project] virtually every scene includes some redesigning of the actual image.

The colour compositing supervisor for the film, Russell McCoy confides that "There were giant holes where there would literally be frames missing, where we would have to rebuild them… by recreating anything we had to or basically painting" (quoted in O'Falt 2018). And as Tanine Allison points out, in a forceful critique,

> the vibrant red blood covering dead or injured bodies and the colorful red, yellow, and blue wildflowers visible in many shots were almost certainly painted-in additions that have little or no presence in the original footage… . Modern-day filmmakers become the ones in control of the archival image, rather than relying on it to speak the truth of the past on its own.
> (Allison 2021, 12)

While I am sympathetic to both these arguments, they each derive their authority from what I think is a limiting and somewhat questionable perspective, the notion of archival materials as a type of testamentary document, the baseline for representation, the foundational and unerring truth of the past that predicates all later symbolic expression. Archival images, in both critical arguments, are seen to possess both a temporal and an epistemological priority. Thus, Jackson's film deviates from the "truth" of the archive both in its selective focus on White British soldiers on the Western Front, as well as in its digital manipulation of what is seen as an originary visual transcription of historical events. As Allison writes, contemporary filmmakers choose to control the archival images, rather than relying on the archive "to speak the truth of the past on its own" (12). Although the archive, as she details elsewhere in her study, is already a highly selective assemblage of materials, shaped by specific historical narratives suffused with cultural hierarchies and bias, it is nevertheless still regarded, at some level, as holding the veridical records of the past.

The difficulty I have with these critiques of the film, notwithstanding the important historical and technical knowledge they provide, is that they ignore much of the film's semiotic richness. Tethered to an idea of the archive as the source of image-truth, both arguments—that the work is too constrained in its narrow rehearsal of the "primal scenes" of First World War memory, and that it is too inventive with its digital interpolations—set the film's textuality to the side, as if its use of close-up, repetition, slow-motion, and visual–sonic counterpoint were unimportant to its larger project of historical representation, its project of historical thinking. In hopes of expanding the discussion of the film, I would like to consider *They Shall Not Grow Old* in an entirely different light. What if we consider the film not as re-presenting, accurately or not, a past reality, nor as restoring and reanimating the images of the past, but as a form of *quotation*? What if we think of the film not primarily in terms of original sources, which it embellishes or deviates from, but in terms of *mimesis*? Not as offering an actual past reality to our eyes but as producing a *reality effect*, along the lines discussed by Roland Barthes? If we take Casetti's suggestion that the presence of the camera changes the battlefield, that the field itself becomes cinematic, it may be possible to set to one side the ideal of historical veridiction as a property of archival images and substitute instead the terms of textual analysis in reading the film, a move that opens a number of new perspectives.

The work of Mieke Bal on quotation in painting is instructive. One of her fundamental points in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* is that quoting the past changes the past—or at least changes how we know it. The first sentence of her book puts it plainly: "Quoting Caravaggio changes his work forever." She continues,

> Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking. It specifies what and how our gaze sees. Hence the work performed by later stages obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead.
>
> (Bal 1999, 1)

Bal's idea of quotation as an "active reworking," and as the obliteration of older images as they appeared in their earlier iterations, provides a powerful description of Jackson's project in *They Shall Not Grow Old*. His recasting of archival images—adding colour, three dimensions, smoothed movement, and more—changes our ways of viewing that past. Moreover, the archival images Jackson worked with can no longer be seen as they were before; we must take the new intervention into account. There is more, however. The act of quotation, of reframing, does not simply obliterate older ways of seeing, it also brings the past into a dynamic dialogue with the present. The act of reframing in the present multiplies the meanings and the contexts that are brought into view. As Bal further writes,

> Historians of art and literature have long been aware of the inevitable screen that later art puts between the historian's gaze and the older works. But instead of considering this a problem, a liability of history, I have decided to explore this inevitability as an enrichment of our cultural habitat as a whole.
>
> (7)

In her view, the customary idea that the earlier, more ancient works of the past are primary, and have a defining influence on the present, should be reversed: it is the temporally later quotations and appropriations of the works of the past that have primacy; what is chronologically "first" comes to us as an after-effect of more recent, later work. This reversal of the sense of the "pre" and the "post" is captured in the subtitle of her work, "preposterous history." Reorienting our approach to the past, and in particular to the archive, can have a salutary effect: as Bal writes, it "makes historical art more important because it keeps it alive and does not isolate it in a remote past, buried under concerns we do not share" (14).

Parts of this argument, of course, are already incorporated in certain genres of film and contemporary critical practice. As Ian Christie argues in his review of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, the pseudo-technical criticism of the film is misguided. Lamenting commentary on the film that concentrates on things like the "wrong colours" for blood, flesh, and grass, he writes: "Few filmmakers consider archival material a sacred text. Instead they treat it as a 'second nature', material traces of the past that are available for contemporary renegotiation" (Christie 2018). Christie cites various types of filmmaking as example—the compilation film, the found footage film, and the essay film. I would add the videographic essay to this list of moving-image works where archival footage is freely used as an artistic and critical resource. The film scholar Catherine Russell, similarly, emphasizes the major reconceptualization of the archive that has occurred with the advent of digital sampling, writing:

> The technologies of film stocks, video grain, and other signs of media history are often recorded within the imagery of archival film practices, inscribing a materiality into this practice; just as often, though, digital effects can alter the image and obfuscate both the original 'support' material as well as its indexical link to an original reality. Nevertheless, film and media artists are transforming cinema into an archival language, helping us to rethink film history as a source of rich insight into historical experience.
>
> (Russell 2018, 12)

And in the work of the art scholar Ernst Van Alphen, the increasing prevalence of archival extraction as a mode of practice for visual artists illustrates a larger cultural turn, as the archive has replaced narrative as a cultural dominant, as a mode for apprehending the world (Van Alphen 2014).

In the work of Bal, however, we find a theoretical argument that goes quite a bit further, asserting that the contemporary "renegotiation" of the traces of the past changes our understanding of the past, "obliterating" older images as they were beforehand. The more recent work becomes primary, she argues, and the older, "original," archival work becomes secondary in our approach to reading. Her points go well beyond the critical discourse that has emerged around the videographic essay, the compilation film, or the essay film, raising both the theoretical and historical stakes of these forms of practice.

I would now like to look more closely at *They Shall Not Grow Old* as an example of quotation, in which the act of reframing the past, creating new versions of old images, gives them a particular relevance for the present. As Van Alphen says, "It is because discursive frameworks belong to the present, and framing acts take place in the present, that memory of the past—knowledge of history—can have consequences for our contemporary and future world" (1997, 67). I will isolate two sequences from the film, which are repeated multiple times—sequences that immediately precede the harrowing full frontal assault that serves as the climax of the film. First, however, I would like to provide some context for my reading, and bring to the surface a theme that has not yet been discussed, to my knowledge, in the critical literature on the film.

In a major interview with the BBC on the occasion of the premiere of *They Shall Not Grow Old* (Jackson 2018b), Peter Jackson stated that the narrative of the First World War that has shaped cultural memory for over a century is misconceived, that it distorts the emotional colouration of the conflict and its aftermath, particularly in the case of British soldiers who fought on the Western Front. Far from embodying the stereotype of a "lost generation," stunned into silence by the extraordinary intensity and gruesomeness of prolonged trench combat, the soldiers whose voices we hear in *They Shall Not Grow Old* appear happy to recall their lives at war and in the trenches, which they narrate with a certain ebullience and zest. As Jackson says, there was a "surprising lack of self pity among the soldiers." Expanding on this point, he reflects: "We look on these soldiers with a sense of pity now," but among them, "there was no feeling sorry for themselves; most had a positive view of their experience…like one big extended boy scout camp." He then qualifies his own disorienting counter-narrative of the War, reminding us of the voices that we are not hearing—the voices of those who were killed, maimed, and horribly injured. "They probably wouldn't feel the same way. What we're getting are the voices of the survivors" (Jackson 2018b).

What is even more surprising and somewhat troubling, however, is an entire register of war experience seems to be missing from the film: psychological trauma appears to almost be eliminated from the pictorial, auditory, and narrative frame. The bracketing of psychological injury is puzzling. A prominent motif in literature, film, and drama set in the First World War, psychological trauma informs the cultural imaginary of the trenches in an explicit way. What Samuel Hynes calls the "battlefield gothic," the strange and uncanny appearance of the trenches and of No Man's Land, the constant din of bombardment, and the inescapable smell of death, has made the trenches a privileged setting for the depiction of psychic wounding in war. Hynes writes powerfully about the trenches and No Man's Land, emphasizing the psychological impact of fighting in a physical environment he describes as the "death of landscape," the "annihilation of nature," and the "monstrous appearance of anti-landscape" (Hynes 1991). Dramatic fiction films, of course, are replete with examples of psychic trauma as a figure and a consequence of trench warfare, going back at least to *J'accuse* (1919) and including such well-known works as *The Big Parade* (1925), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), and *Paths of Glory* (1957). And as psychological injury has increasingly come into relief as a defining feature of war, as cases of PTSD multiply in contemporary society, the visibility of psychic injury as a consequence of war's violence has also cast other representations of the past in a new light.

The spectre of psychological trauma during First World War trench warfare is well documented. According to the BBC, by 1916 "over 40% of the casualties in fighting zones were victims of the condition." During the Battle of the Somme, which forms a major part of the image track of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, 16,000 of the men serving were thought to be victims of shell shock. By the end of the war, some 80,000 men had been treated for shell shock or "war neurosis," as it was also called (BBC 2014).

The nearly complete absence of any explicit reference to shell shock or war neurosis in the words of the interviewed veterans is troubling, but perhaps understandable, given the stigma that was attached to it at the time, when soldiers were sometimes shot after being charged, in mock trials, with cowardice or desertion. Only a single shot in the film, a haunting shot of a man, his hands twitching, being escorted from the battlefront, serves to represent a condition that was prevalent—a shot that unfolds without comment. Jackson's silence on the subject in interviews is surprising, and raises several questions. Rather than exploring the filmmaker's intent, however, I would like to offer a different way of seeing this subject in the film. The nearly complete absence of explicit representation of shell shock, I argue, does not mean that it has been wholly erased from

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the work. In certain key scenes, psychic injury is evoked not through explicit imagery or commentary but rather *intertextually*, in the memory of other films and photographs that the film summons. In other words, the vast intertextual universe of images of psychic trauma in representations of the First World War and in depictions of other wars—images that were made long *after* the original archival images were filmed—now shape our reading of specific scenes in the film.

Mieke Bal's notion of preposterous history helps illuminate the particular historical and representational questions posed here. If we view *They Shall Not Grow Old* as a work of *quotation*, rather than of restoration, then our reading strategy changes as well—intertextuality and interdiscusivity become valid, even necessary frames for reading the film—interpretive frames that would not have been available if our focus had remained on the primacy of the archive. Moreover, as Bal insists, quotation *changes* the archival images upon which the film is based: the scratched, faded, black-and-white images in irregular speeds, when quoted and remediated in the present, emit different messages than they did before, messages that are shaped and reoriented by an entire history of war film imagery. These scenes begin to signify in ways that link directly to the present. And one of the central themes of our present day reading of war cinema, whose history extends over the course of more than one hundred years, is the tragic preponderance of psychological injury in war.

Certain formal emphases function as cues or signals in the film—the oddly obsessive repetition of certain shots and images, the radical slowing down of the film, the direct address to the camera. Almost as if the work were restaging a haunted return, certain scenes are repeated again and again, rehearsed with an insistence that seems to call out for recognition—scenes that speak to us not so much as illustrations of the memories of the interviewees, now settled into late middle age or older, but rather through a different mode of expression.

One shot of a group of men waiting to be ordered "over the top"—several looking directly into the camera, their faces filled with apprehension and dread—is returned to six times. Another shot depicting three soldiers turning to look over their shoulders toward the camera as they march through the trenches, appears twice. In both sets of shots, the image track of the film slows down, arresting itself, at times appearing almost to slow to freeze frame. For a film that had relentlessly striven to smooth out the speed of the archival footage, a technique that Jackson claimed "made the soldiers come alive again," the sudden appearance of images that are slowed, halting, barely animated, is striking.

The repeated shot of men waiting to be ordered over the top is, in my view, the unacknowledged centre of the film, the place where the trauma of war is fully concentrated, forcing the spectator to see, with all the indexical power that film can provide, with the eyes of the soldiers who exist, for this brief moment, on the crease between life and death. The shot is repeated six times in the space of four minutes, often showing the same soldiers, occasionally emphasizing different soldiers in the group. With each repetition, the film speed slows, finally arriving at a point where movement is almost stopped.

Similarly, the close-up shot of the soldiers turning around to look at the camera as they march through the trenches is repeated twice. The first iteration of the "looking back" scene, taken in medium shot at regular speed, occurs before the fighting has commenced. Its second iteration is given just before the gruesome assault sequences begin. Here, the camera holds on the gazes of the soldiers, in close-up, as the film slows to a crawl. The shot echoes a strikingly similar pair of shots in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where several soldiers turn, one at a time, to face the camera directly. In the first instance, they are about to embark on their first night patrol; in the second, at the very end of the film, they have each been killed. The background of the closing shot of *All Quiet* *on the Western Front* is a dark graveyard: the soldiers are marching to their graves, or perhaps marching from their graves to fight and die again. As Elisabeth Bronfen has it,

> the montage suspends the soldiers between life and death. They are neither fully gone nor fully returned…yet with their gaze, they take possession of us, calling upon us to acknowledge an experience of war we share only by proxy, in the darkness of the movie theater. Milestone's closure holds no redemption [for us] from their history.
>
> (Bronfen 2012, 2)

These charged moments of direct address in *They Shall Not Grow Old*, in which natural life-like movement is sacrificed for the symbolic power of extreme slow-motion, have a different sense and meaning than the many shots of soldiers mugging or staring into the camera. Here, at a point of mortal reckoning, the figures look into the camera and communicate a very different set of emotions than in earlier shots. The fraught nature of these looks recalls the long photographic tradition of images of soldiers stunned by fear and the sense of imminent death. They recall as well the many cinematic representations of psychic distress in films of war, where direct address to the camera has become almost a signature trope of the genre. Examples of prolonged direct address at moments of crisis can be found in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the reframing of the past that *They Shall Not Grow Old* conducts on multiple levels, including the interpolation of digital elements, the addition of colour, widescreen, and 3D, need not be seen as an ahistorical substitution of a modern way of seeing for an older mode of representation, but as something else entirely. If viewed as a work of quotation, rather than as a questionable restoration, the film can be understood through multiple frameworks that enrich perception rather than narrowing to the single lens of its fidelity, or not, to the past. By focusing on the film as a textual system, we can view its additions and enhancements in terms of mimesis, rather than recovery, in terms of the creation of a reality effect, rather than its adherence to the real.

Where the work was at first surprising and challenging for me, however, was in its apparent bracketing out of the experience of psychic injury, its seeming elision of shell shock from the narrative it presents. The experience and the reality of psychopathology, so prominent in the wider cultural narrative of the First World War, appeared to be elided from representation in the film. It was this surprising absence that spurred me to consider a different way of reading the work, neither as a bravura digital remediation nor as a brazen flouting of the codes and ethics of restoration, but rather through the relays its images establish with other films and photographs. Here, Bal's idea of "preposterous history" provided a way in. If the work that comes chronologically *after* reshapes the work that came *before*, if it "changes the work forever," as Bal writes, the film can be read not as a modern distortion, a bow to contemporary tastes, but rather as a rethinking, making visible theoretical and historical issues that can only be perceived through what she calls "the detour of the present" (Bal 1999, 7). It is this insight that I have tried to address in my reading of the film.

In the repeated scenes of direct address to the camera, in the slowing down of critical sequences just before the major battle scene, in the powerful, repeated close-ups that Jackson employs, almost as interpellations of the spectator, we come to see an entire history of war representation, a history that brings together documentary and dramatic fiction film, still photography and moving images to provide a sharpened image of soldiers at a psychological tipping point. The film, quite unexpectedly, moves us away from the idea of the archive as sacred repository. The newer work brings certain signals into relief that are comprehensible to us now, in a way that may not have been apparent in the original images.

Rather than a recovery of a buried past, the film makes visible, through the detour of the present, a sense of what images of the First World War can mean in today's war saturated image culture. The history of that past is here no longer isolated and buried "under concerns we do not share," but joined to a vital and developing lexicon of war representations, where psychic injury has assumed an increasingly prominent role. Finally, the film provides a kind of object lesson in the way we approach the historical past, reminding us that history, for all its significance in our culture, cannot speak for itself, that it "has no mouthpiece of its own" (Phillips, 2021). It can speak only through interpretation and symbolic expression.

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