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“They shall not grow old” and “Mimesis: African soldier”. Technology, ideology, and remembrance

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Abstract:

This paper will examine and compare two recent visual explorations of the experience of soldiers in World War I. Director Peter Jackson’s documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* has been called an immersive, haunting and often transcendent experience that’s unlike anything you’ve ever seen before. By using modern digital film technology, he has restored the visuals and added sounds and speech via Automatic Dialogue Replacement, colorized, changed the speed, and brought 3D depth to the old footage from the Imperial War Museum. Jackson has either, using the terminology of William Guynn (*Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe*),

employed this technology to trigger “moments of heightened awareness in which the reality of the past may be recovered in its material being”. Or, do these computer generated technological affects, “....stand in for the ‘truth’ and obscure just how constructed the ‘history’ Jackson is telling actually is?” John Akomfrah’s video/sound three screen performance/display installation *Mimesis: African Soldier* uses silent actors, archive film and photographs, ethnographic sound recordings, new filmed footage with and without actors, and a sound track by Trevor Mathison, to document the experience of those, among many, left out of Jackson’s film: colonial subjects as soldiers.

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Akomfrah “does not put colour back in the cheeks of the dead”, but rather warns the viewer that remembrance can come in many forms, some of them unreliable. All of this leads to a conclusion, as Avishai Margalit put it in *Ethics of Memory*, that “memory...is knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past.”

Key words:

World War I, technology, ideology, remembrance, colonial soldiers, Britain.

Resum:

Aquest article examina i compara dues produccions audiovisuals recents sobre l'experiència dels soldats a la Primera Guerra Mundial. El documental *They Shall Not Grow Old*, dirigit per Peter Jackson, ha estat considerat una experiència immersiva, captivadora i fins i tot transcendental. Mitjançant l'ús de tecnologia digital moderna ha restaurat les imatges i afegit so i diàlegs mitjançant *Automatic Dialogue Replacement*. Ha colorejat, canviat la velocitat i aportat profunditat 3D a les antigues imatges de l'Imperial War Museum. Jackson, amb la terminologia de William Guynn (*Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe*),

ha utilitzat aquesta tecnologia per desencadenar “moments of heightened awareness in which the reality of the past may be recovered in its material being”. O bé, aquests efectes tecnològics generats per ordinador: “....stand in for the ‘truth’ and obscure just how constructed the ‘history’ Jackson is telling actually is?”. La instal·lació de representació/visualització en tres pantalles de vídeo/so del documental *Mimesis: African Soldier* de John Akomfrah utilitza actors muts, pel·lícules i fotografies d'arxiu, enregistraments sonors etnogràfics, noves imatges filmades amb i sense actors i una banda sonora de Trevor Mathison per documentar les experiències d'aquells absents a la pel·lícula de Jackson: els soldats colonials. Akomfrah “does not put colour back in the cheeks of the dead” sino que avisa l'espectador que la memòria pot prendre diverses formes, algunes d'elles poc fiables. Tot plegat porta a la conclusió, com va dir Avishai Margalit a *Ethics of Memory*, que: “memory...is knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past.”

Paraules clau: Primera Guerra Mundial, tecnologia, ideologia, commemoració, soldats colonials, Regne Unit

Based at the Imperial War Museum in London the *14-18 Now* project was Britain's official arts program for the First World War centenary. Funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, & Sports, Arts Council England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Art Fund, *14-18 Now* commissioned new works from 420 contemporary artists, musicians, filmmakers, designers, and performers from across Britain, "achieving reach and resonance at local, national and international levels".ⁱ Creative commissions from the *14-18 NOW* project included The Poppies "Wave" and "Weeping Window" touring sculptures by designer Tom Piper and artist Paul Cummins, along with Danny Boyle's portraits of soldiers created on the beaches and Rachael Whitehead's Nissen Hut at Dalby Forest in North Yorkshire. Visual texts and shows across the United Kingdom ranged from frontline images of nurses and women ambulance drivers to contemporary artists' responses to war and the machinery that surrounds it.ⁱⁱ This essay will examine and compare two of the more striking visual explorations of the experience of soldiers in World War I to come out of the *14-18 NOW* program of creative commemoration and remembrance: Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), certainly the most discussed project in the popular press and among academics, and John Akomfrah's installation art work *Mimesis: African Soldier* (2018), focusing on the technology and the ideological function of both texts.ⁱⁱⁱ From all the visual texts in the *14-18 Now* project these two examples invite such a comparison because both are film texts of some sort that use similar archival footage from the IWM that both artists creatively manipulated. Also both works deal with memory and remembrance of the First World War strongly colored by Jackson's and Akomfrah's own personal memories of their ancestor's participation in that war.

Director Peter Jackson's highly lauded documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) has been called "...a piercing *tour de force*. We experience the effects of incredible restoration of old grainy footage that pulls those soldiers into our hearts and minds. Jackson makes the footage personal."^{iv} By using modern digital film technology he has restored the visuals, added sounds and even speech via Automatic Dialogue Replacement, colorized, altered frames, and brought 3D depth to the old footage from the Imperial War Museum. Jackson has either employed this technology to trigger in the viewers a sense of presence for long dead soldiers, making history come alive as they gaze on his reanimated subjects.^v Or, do Jackson's computer generated technological achievements merely create a false truth that obscures the obvious artificiality of the history that Jackson has created?^{vi} John Akomfrah's video/sound/ three screen performance/display installation *Mimesis: African Soldier* uses silent actors, archive film and

photographs, ethnographic sound recordings, new filmed footage with and without actors, and a music sound track by Trevor Mathison, to document the experience of some of those, among many, left out of Jackson's film: colonial subjects as soldiers. Akomfrah "does not put colour back in the cheeks of the dead"^{vii}, but rather warns the viewer that remembrance can come in many forms, some of them quite deceiving. In considering the role of technology, ideology, and remembrance in these two different World War I commemorative visual projects, one must always keep in mind what Avishai Margalit wrote in the *Ethics of Memory*, "memory is knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past."^{viii}

The title of Jackson's film comes from Laurence Binyon's poem "The Fallen" with some modification to the archaic phrasing: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old".^{ix} Most viewers and critics do not realize that Binyon wrote the poem in 1914 after the Battle of Mons, so the entire poem expresses an innocent sense of patriotism and noble sacrifice that belies the later slaughter of the war. The British Expeditionary Force that fought in the battle suffered heavy casualties in this early stage of the war. By choosing this poem for his title Jackson sentimentalizes the war. His grandfather fought in World War I so the project to restore old Imperial War Museum footage became a personal quest for him. At the end of the film Jackson expresses hope that people will be inspired to explore any personal connection that they may have with the war, because the history of it "involves us all."^x The result has been termed a "relentless technical wonder."^{xi} The History Channel or the Smithsonian Channel has used sound effects, colorization, and newly recorded voices, to give voice to silent films and color to black and white footage for some time. Netflix has a new test feature that allows viewers to watch content at different speeds on a smartphone.^{xii} Brazilian artist Marina Amaral has made a controversial career out of creative colorization of famous historical photographs.^{xiii} Denis Shiryayev's equally controversial YouTube channel showcases his company Neural Love's videos which uses a combination of neural networks and algorithms to overhaul historic images. Some of the very earliest surviving film has been cleaned, unscuffed, repaired, colorized, stabilized, corrected 60 frames per second and upscaled to vivid 4K resolution. Viewers can walk through New York as it was in 1911 so "...it almost feels like time travel".^{xiv} But Jackson's Wing Nut Films offers up what most critics and reviewers rave as a new level of historical reimagining. Without going into all the technical details, Jackson has processed the old archive footage of World War I from the Imperial War Museum, which is so familiar to historians of the war, using hand colorization, digitization, 3D

conversion (in theatre presentations), the addition of voices to the soldiers, and the enhancement of sound effects, going so far as to record the actual sound of military cannons being fired. Although as John Napper points out Jackson did not as claimed modify the film speed to a modern 24 fps, that had already been done by the IWM many years before.^{xv} As Jonathan Romney writes, “The effect is to make it seem as if events that took place a hundred years ago, and previously captured on black and white, are actually taking place in front of us in a vivid timeless now.”^{xvi} The project seems hard to question, and in keeping with that primordial aspect of image making famously described by Andre Bazin as originating from “a mummy complex”: “The image helps us remember the subject and save him from a second spiritual death.”^{xvii} Indeed the overwhelming praise for the uniqueness of Jackson and his crew making these soldiers live again in the present, actually goes back to the very beginning of cinema. A reviewer of an early Lumiere performance recognized cinema’s potential as momento:

What deeply poignant emotions we shall experience on seeing before us those we have loved speaking and moving. Departed parents or loved ones, suddenly brought back to life, reappearing with their familiar gestures, their soft voices, all those memories that alas, without this new invention fade further and further into misty corners of our minds.^{xviii}

Jackson clearly thought that the aesthetics of silent black and white film make it impossible for modern audiences to relate to subjects that seemed so distant and remote. As Jackson put it, “I wanted to reach through the fog of time and pull these men into the modern world, so they can regain their humanity once more, rather than be seen only as Charlie Chaplain-type figures in the vintage archive film.”^{xix} Yet on an intellectual and experiential level, viewers seeing his new creation felt nothing different than did the first audiences viewing a Lumiere show. So it is on an aesthetic and technical level that the film truly stakes a claim to being original and praiseworthy. While being a sincere memorial in images and sound, it remains like all his work, first and foremost a special effects production. Along with *Avatar*(2009) director James Cameron, New Zealand film-maker Jackson has been at the forefront of the digital revolution, with his twin Tolkien trilogies (*Lord of the Rings*(2001-2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012-2014) pushing the boundaries of computer-generated entertainment.

As transforming as the special effects are one cannot help but notice the limits of technology. Even colorization, arguably the least controversial part of Jackson's enhancement, came in for scathing attack from Luke McKernan, lead curator of news and moving image at the British Library. "It is nonsense", he wrote, "Colourisation does not bring us closer to the past; it increases the gap between now and then. It does not enable immediacy; it creates difference."^{xx} Faces appear blurry, almost cartoonish, at times, the computer-generated restoration of the ancient film unable to seamlessly generate motion. The 3D effect, where available, is occasionally too obvious, the film screen feeling like a medieval die cut wood carving. One reviewer is left wondering "if the chit chat captured on film—not the soldier voiceovers--, but the actual interactions between people filmed 100 years ago---was dubbed by modern voice actors, given the state of technology when the footage was shot."^{xxi} That this question would be posed in this fashion points to the naivety of some reviewers as regards film. Forensic lip readers, who usually work with police to determine what people say on silent security-camera footage, have been able to decipher the words spoken long ago. Actors of course give the soldiers on screen a voice. And Jackson makes sure that the appropriate regional dialect is heard based upon where the regiment hailed from in Britain. "Hello Mum!" chirrups one soldier as he marches past. Later we see and hear an officer issuing instructions for a forthcoming attack. But watching the soldiers newly imbued with colorized artificial life, Jonathan Romney remarks "...it's as if we're seeing not so much ghosts as the reanimated dead, restored to lifelike motion by the infusion of virtual blood in their skins and veins: the digital image technology as a kind of ghoulish taxidermy."^{xxii} Quite often the colorized faces seem to drift clear of the footage they're being superimposed upon. Skin looks porcelain smooth with cheeks eerily stubble free. Sprints across No Man's Land are disembodied, surreal with movement that is not remotely human. Explosions look like early TV efforts to videotape fire, fireworks, and bomb blasts—diffuse, with an effect smothering what the camera actually captured.

Lawrence Napper of Kings College London after one screening of the film quickly picked up on the above shortcomings of Jackson's alterations which he detailed in an October 23, 2018 Blog. The intense strain of the magnification of faces makes them "...buckle and distort in the most extraordinary way." Napper continues his assault: "...each man's face looks like it's rendered in an oil slick or perhaps out of a colony of ever shifting termites....The magnification doesn't make you feel the humanity of these men more than the original footage . It makes

you marvel at how thoroughly the images have been processed to shit.”^{xxiii} Napper, based upon his own university experience of teaching films like the *The Battle of the Somme*(1916), disputes Jackson’s claim that young people don’t get black and white film footage. Jackson makes the most of intense close-ups of the soldier’s faces, but Napper contends that the faces of the men in *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) are “...always remarked upon by the students.”^{xxiv} My own experience in using the pre-altered scenes from the that film in a capstone history Senior Seminar course consisting of not the most sophisticated university students confirms Napper’s experience on both counts. Napper concludes:

Such is the publicity hype around the film, and so sacred is the cow of the Great War in its centenary moment that nobody seems to have noticed how horribly distorted and ludicrous Jackson’s tarted-up images look. The reviews almost unanimously praised the images as extraordinary, so much so that I started to wonder if I’d hallucinated the melting faces and the disappearing limbs. But I’m pleased to note that others, including Pamela Hutchinson and Jonathan Romney have also drawn attention to the elephant in the room.^{xxv}

But more significantly in a later article Napper accuses Jackson of not acknowledging that the prints he used had already been restored by the IWM archive, drawing a sharp distinction “...between archival *restoration* work and the sort of digital *enhancement* techniques that *They Shall Not Grow Old*, in fact, showcases.” He goes on to state that “Jackson’s processes don’t so much strip the detritus of age back from the material as add the paraphernalia of modernity onto it. He’s not interested in what audiences saw in 1916.”^{xxvi} But so taken was the marketing department of the IWM Archive with the resounding popular success of Jackson’s effort that there was little complaint about his setting up a straw man of having to deal with badly flawed original prints, thus “...completely erasing their expertise and implicating them in an accusation of institutional incompetence.”^{xxvii} Napper views the whole affair as a warning to archivists that in the future any :

...invitations to film-makers and visual artists to offer creative responses to collections should be backed-up with a route back to the source materialand that attention should always be paid to the necessity to explain archival footage to a general audience in the many instances where such footage doesn’t speak for itself.”^{xxviii}

This will indeed be a tall order in the face of the public's natural predilection for fake alternatives that render the war more realistic and accessible.

Jackson is perhaps more successful with his use of the ambient sound of war. Most impressive is the rumbling and blasts of artillery reminiscent of the interactive tours at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana. In fact Jessica Meyer considers the reconstruction of the historical sound of the war in *They Shall Not Grow Old* to be its greatest innovation.^{xxix} Soldier voiceovers come courtesy of selections from 114 IWM recordings of veterans made in the 1960s and 1970s, which have been readily available to researchers and teachers for years, and which I have personally used in the history classroom. But such recordings consist of frequently unreliable retrospective memories after a lifetime of experience. Catherine Robson argues that the recordings done by the Germans of captured British soldiers during the war represents a far more accurate oral narrative of the experience of war because on an auditory level at least, they are truly "...captured forever in a moment of youth."^{xxx}

Unlike the way Christopher Nolan conjures up a visceral, intentionally disorienting facsimile of combat in *Dunkirk* (2017), Jackson is resurrecting the dead in more ordinary ways, revealing their lopsided smiles, their prematurely aged faces with bad, missing teeth, pipes and cigarettes dangling from their mouths, emitting clouds of smoke, and their exhausted body language. Sometimes the colorizing looks like rotoscoping—the transfer of an image from live action film into another film sequence using a rotoscope. The Fleischer Studios Superman cartoons employed this technique as early as the 1940s. Ralph Bakshi used this way of filming in the *Lord of the Rings* (1978) with Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) being a more recent example. Allison Strauss acerbically remarks that, "The soldiers of WWI are here little more than motion-capture figures for Jackson's team to drape with colour and sound and stereoscopy. An Army of Gollums: not wearied by age perhaps, but certainly condemned by technology."^{xxxi} *They Shall Not Grow Old* has an impressionistic feel to it, as Jackson mixes still drawings, recruiting posters, black and white footage, with his extraordinary restored color and sound segments.

Since film crews didn't accompany the military charges, Jackson makes up collages from the illustrated newspapers of the day, as the voice over tells of what soldiers saw as they charged the German trenches. He also uses the cartoons by Bruce Bairnsfather, the shell-shocked

machine gunner turned cartoonist who was extremely popular with the average British soldier, yet supplies no historical background or context to indicate that this is a heavily mediated representation of combat. One critic even complained that, "...there's something slightly ghoulish about meticulously colorizing the wounds on a dead soldier so that the blood is just the right color of darkening red."^{xxxii} Whether the technology works perfectly or not, there can be little doubt that Jackson's creative interventions profoundly altered these visual documents to construct a particular vision of history. Should *They Shall Not Grow Old* be considered a documentary or a work of art? Arguments about authenticity versus invention date back to the beginnings of cinema, and certainly involve the 1916 production of the *Battle of the Somme*, from which Jackson took many images that anyone familiar with the film would recognize.^{xxxiii} Despite the countless alterations, viewers of Jackson's film saw it as delivering reality, as one wrote, "... watching a technologically enhanced sequence in which a first world war soldier playfully juggles a beer bottle, then strums it like a guitar all I could think was how real, how immediate, how profoundly truthful it all felt."^{xxxiv}

Peter Jackson's dazzling transformation of the monochrome archive that produced such touching moments as the above where a soldier is clearly playing to the camera and, now to the modern viewer, could not be more removed from John Akomfrah's multi-screen installation *Mimesis: African Soldier*. Historian Santana Das, whose great uncle left India to serve as a doctor in France, observes that, "In their different ways, both Jackson and Akomfrah battle against memories—one against surfeit, the other its contradictions and silences---and stretch the boundaries of documentary making."^{xxxv} Akomfrah's art installation remembers the millions of colonial men and women who participated in the First World War, either as soldiers or carriers. Akomfrah, born in Ghana in 1957, is known for his prior multi-screen installations, such as *Purple* (2017), *Precarity* (2017), and *Vertigo Sea* (2015). But he is better remembered for his "poetic" documentary films on aspects of the Black British experience such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013). Since founding the influential Black Audio Film Collective in 1982, his installation work has taken on a multi-layered visual style that fuses archival material and newly shot footage. Continuing this practice, *Mimesis: African Soldier* employs historic film, and similar to Jackson, footage from the Imperial War Museum's massive holdings, to tell lesser known stories of the First World War. Akomfrah, like Jackson, wants his work to be a remembrance: "We have obligations to the dead, historian Carlo Ginzberg once said. Honouring the untold sacrifices made by the many thousands of

soldiers, labourers and carriers from a colonized Africa is an obligation. And I am proud to honour it.”^{xxxvi}

Akomfrah initially had reservations about doing the project because, “I’m not a huge fan of wars”. But he then became intrigued: “The more we looked into it, the more we saw there was something there. It was like a tiny bit of tapestry, blowing it up (in close up) and seeing a whole universe emerge.” Similar to Jackson the project became personal. “In a wider way, the war is why I’m here....My grandfather was called to northern Nigeria in the 1920s as a colonial officer to fill in for the absence of European officers (who had been called to the front). That’s where he met my grandmother, so in a way that’s how I came into the world.” His grandfather’s migration is a microcosm of a much vaster movement of peoples. “If you’re losing tens of thousands of men a day at Ypres and Passchendaele, you run out of those men very soon and that explains why so many Africans were brought in.” Again similar to Jackson’s view of the British “Tommy” selflessly doing his duty without complaint (“stiff upper lip for the aristocracy” not “making a fuss for the working class”), Akomfrah ironically perceived a “heroic and Arthurian” quality to his subjects’ experience. “I was struck by their altruism. Most came from the colonies, and those systems weren’t going to change one iota no matter what they did.” At first, he assumed they had signed up for economic reasons. “But now I would say the vast majority ended up fighting for very noble reasons. They realized they weren’t going to be treated as equal, or respected. Oh no! But in spite of that, nobody downed tools and said, ‘Take me back to Senegal.’”^{xxxvii}

The grandfather of Mwamkono Mwavaka was one of the estimated 100,000 African Carrier Corps recruited by the British to transport supplies to the western front trenches. When he died only the hair shaved from his head was brought home to then British East Africa.^{xxxviii} Today in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and other parts of the country thousands of Africans who died in the war still remain in mass, unmarked graves despite the pledge from the Imperial War Graves Commission that everyone should be equal in death---“What was done for one should be done for all”. But of course exceptions were made. Major George Evans in a 1920s IWGC document revealed that “everyone” meant white Europeans fighting on the western front. Evans observed that, “Most of the natives who have died are of a semi-savage nature and do not attach any sentiment to marking the graves of heir dead. I consider the erection of individual headstones would constitute a waste of public money.” Winston Churchill, then

chairman of the Imperial War Graves Commission, authored a letter signing off on the plan. The contemporary minutes of the successor to the Imperial War Graves Commission, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, recommends that a large mass grave off Pugu Road in Dar es Salaam containing the remains of thousands of African carriers “should be allowed to revert to nature as soon as speedily possible”, as they do not have any records of their names.^{xxxix} Over a hundred years after the war ended equality in death between white European and black African remains unachieved, making Akomfrah’s installation that much more poignant and relevant in a stubbornly racist society.

In order to engage the audience response to this installation I offer up a random description by one anonymous, average observer, not necessarily an art critic, who visited the Imperial War Museum display:

There are three big screens----the screens intercut creaky old archive footage with slow-moving, almost static ‘modern’ sequences shot in super-bright digital clarity at a number of locations—both of which are fascinating and/or entrancing in their different ways. The vintage black and white footage shows black African and Indian soldiers, labourers and carriers at work during the First World War. There’s a lot of footage at docks where all manner of goods are being unloaded by black labourers and heaped up into enormous piles of munitions and rations. Other footage shows Indian troops on parade, marching—and then footage of what appear to be black soldiers going into battle. The modern sequences are completely different in every way. For a start they are in colour. They are shot with stunning digital clarity. But most of all they are very, very, slow....the visual contrast is not just between the black and white and modern colour footage—there’s a rhythm thing going on, too, in that the old footage has that speeded up, frenetic quality (due to the discrepancy between the speed of the cameras it was shot on and the different speed of the projectors we now play it on) which brings out even more the hauntingly slow, almost static nature of the modern sequences. In the colour sequences which I saw, a black soldier is walking through a jungle, very, very, very, slowly, until he comes upon a skeleton hanging from a tree, and stops dead. Different screens show the static scene from different angles. Pregnant with ominousness and meaning. In another ‘modern’ sequence a handful of black men in uniform are on a wet muddy beach. The beach is dotted with flags of many nations, and also random crates. The men stare out to sea. They turn. One picks up a crate. Another takes off his helmet and wipes his forehead. All very slow. In

another sequence an Asian man in army uniform and wearing a turban is standing in a landscape of dead and fallen trees, and slowly chopping a piece of wood with an axe. Very slowly. The 'bock' sound of each blow is amplified in the soundtrack which, from amid a collage of sounds, sounds of docks, works, men, soldiers, guns going off. By and large the loudness and business of the audio track contrasts eerily with the Zen slow motion of the black and Asian actors.^{xi}

The final, ironic footage is of colonial commanders embracing troops and pinning medals in a hollow masquerade of recognition. The film's epigraph from Rosa Luxemburg, "Those who do not move do not notice their chains," fits "the mass mobilization of both the colonized and the carriers." All of which brings to mind what Gunter Grass said, "Perhaps...England will think about its colonial crimes...Everybody has to empty their own latrine."^{xli}

Other viewers of *Mimesis: African Soldier* expressed some chagrin at the complexity of this particular exhibit. Anne Samson after admitting that "I'm not a great one on works of art" in her history blog writes about her experience with Akomfrah's work: "How much of the 75 minutes is about the colonial contribution I cannot say, I was lost with a person sitting on a chair under a solitary tree in a desert with the tree wrapped in red, who then fell over as though shot."^{xlii} Another disappointed observer of the installation concluded, "I have to say, this film wasn't for me at all. In total it is 75 minutes long, so there may have been better parts, yet the portion I saw did not seem very engaging. In terms of representing African soldiers, I think there are much better ways this could have been done....Modern art about the war really isn't for me."^{xliii} *Mimesis: African Soldier* is certainly trying to dispel some of the post-imperial nostalgia and the process of strategic forgetting in contemporary post-Brexit Britain.^{xliv} Akomfrah's projects are so demanding because he refuses to recognize any arbitrary demarcations in his work:

... 'I will not accept the categories that you're throwing at me as permanent ones. 'This is a fiction film', 'This is a good documentary', or 'This is a bad one'—all of these demarcations have to be under scrutiny, under question, or have to be approached from a place of profound agnosticism before anything happens, really.'^{xlv}

Jackson makes it clear that *They Shall Not Grow Old* was designed to be accessible to the movie masses: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars", or sometimes quoted as

“This is a film by a non-historian, for non-historians”.^{xlvi} Now that does not mean it’s any less of an engaging, informative, and thoughtful experience for many generations of, not just younger, film goers, despite an academic blogosphere that was highly critical of the film from the beginning.^{xlvii} In fact Susan R. Grayzel, an historian of gender and World War I, finds that while the film never moves beyond the most familiar stereotypes about the war, it “...is so well crafted, impeccably credentialed, and powerfully marketed that it has the capacity to shape popular understandings of the First World War for the next hundred years.”^{xlviii} When *They Shall Not Grow Old* gets referred to as TSNGO even in academic journals it has clearly entered popular culture. In October 2018 the film was simultaneously screened in 2D and 3D at cinemas, schools, and special venues across the UK. It had a very successful run in the United States. On an anecdotal level Rob Bokkon who attended one of these screenings in the United States noticed that once the color portion of the film started even “the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed. Because the movie is *stunning*.”^{xlix} The film was broadcast on BBC Two in November 11, 2018, the 100th anniversary of the Armistice of November 11, 1918.¹

Given this popularity and the attention it gave to perhaps the most significant event in the 20th century, one can easily forgive the romanticism, sentimentality, selectiveness of content, and sometimes dubious special effects that Jackson laid on in his restoration of the old IWM archive footage that created *They Shall Not Grow Old*. It may not offer any new historical interpretations, but it succeeds at creating a new look at the horrors of WWI. Rather the very “Britishness” of the narrative presents the biggest non-technical problem: “To the casual viewer, seeing *They Shall Not Grow Old* leaves one with the clear impression that the entire Great War was fought by the British infantry and artillery, more or less single-handed....the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots, and Irish troops, every face a white face.”^{li} There is no consideration of the contributions and experiences of the colonial troops from India, Africa, and the Caribbean, not to mention the American forces, including African American soldiers. Also it concerns the already familiar Western Front, a theater of operations well mined by the British war poets such as Rupert Brooke or Siegfried Sassoon, literature, popular culture, film, and scholarly research, neglecting the Eastern Front, as well as the theaters of the Near East and Africa. Also missing is any material relating to the air force, navy, and women on the home front and war front. Jackson counters such omissions by stating that, “To be quite honest the 100 hours of footage could make up seven or eight different

films”.^{lii} Jackson tried to keep the film specific: “I didn’t want to do a little bit of everything. I just wanted to focus on one topic and do it properly: the experience of an average soldier infantryman on the Western Front.”^{liii} Here Jackson can be forgiven for his omissions, but *They Shall Not Grow Old* fits into a larger mythical popular historical narrative of Britain in the two world wars of the 20th century. The men who died in the trenches were the best and brightest that Britain had to offer. They became the “Lost” or “Missing” Generation. Without their leadership Britain sank into despair, weakness, and appeasement in the face of the Depression and the rise of Fascism in the 1930s. Even the British Empire started to decline. Furthermore whether those who died were actually the best and brightest becomes problematical as artillery shells and shrapnel do not make calculations based upon intelligence and virtue. Only with the rise of the “spirit of Dunkirk” and the “Blitz spirit” at the beginning of World War II when Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany did true greatness arise again in the British people.^{liv}

Rob Bokkon makes the not unexpected leap of comparing Jackson’s World War I film with his earlier *Lord of the Rings*:

The narrative structure of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is, almost exactly, that of *Lord of the Rings*. A group of brave, innocent Englishmen/hobbits inadvertently forced away from the comforts of hearth and home, reluctantly but bravely sally forth to do their duty in the face of certain destruction. Along the way, their innocence is lost. They confront unimaginable evil and emerge scarred, only to return home to a land unwelcoming, hostile, entirely changed from the one they left.^{lv}

As if to reinforce this connection, the 2019 Biopic *Tolkien* stars Nicholas Hoult as Tolkien himself, experiencing his service in World War I, with premonitions of Tolkien’s future created world at the Somme, where he has a batman called Sam and visions of dragons in the midst of the battle.^{lvi} While Akomfrah’s *Mimesis: African Soldier* wants to dispel any new post-imperial nostalgia in Britain, Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* enhances feelings for empire and race. The country’s bravest men shall live again. All of these features point to “...the constructed nature of the film, and its inherent bias towards a white, imperial, and, above all, male narrative, one that historians have been working to overcome for a generation.”^{lvii} An obvious example of this would be Jackson’s choice to close the film, not with somber music,

but the bawdy, jovial troop song *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*, which celebrated a woman who worked in a brothel “who hadn’t been kissed in forty years” and who “sure was fun/Moving her ass like a Maxim Gun.” Defending this choice as being consistent with contemporary culture during the war Jackson said, “Their spirit was not self-pity, they didn’t want that. So a mournful song shouldn’t be in the end credits. We recorded that song, and out of the versions I’ve heard, that was pretty cool.”^{lviii} These women became as Bridget Keown puts it, “...simply the butt of men’s jokes, rather than flesh and blood actors in their own right.”^{lix} Jackson’s treatment of women in the film is matched by his refusal to deal with men’s bodies, particularly the wounded or disabled male body, which for some time has been an important area of World War I studies.^{lx} The soldiers describe being wounded in a plucky and brave manner, but Jackson never does really probe these quotes for underlying physical and psychological trauma, what today would be called PTSD. By ignoring women, disabled or psychologically damaged soldiers, and non-white troops, Jackson presents a conservative, traditional, historically dated narrative of life in the trenches on the Western Front.

However, film historian Robert Burgoyne ameliorates some of the above critique by arguing that “*They Shall Not Grow Old* offers a parallel track of memory references within the film itself, a shadow narrative that emerges for the viewer who is familiar with heightened moments of psychic extremity depicted in the history of the war film”. For Burgoyne, “...The experience of psychological trauma is registered...as a formal disturbance in the film, in the nearly obsessive repetition of certain shots and images.”^{lxi} Jackson employs the close up, repeated shots of direct address by the soldiers to the camera. Using these recurrent shots Jackson “...evokes the figurative memory of other films, other visual representations, embedded in the genre language of war cinema and photography, forming a secondary memory space....”. The close-up of soldier’s faces to demonstrate psychic distress has been a long standing trope in war films going back to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), as Burgoyne so aptly demonstrates in the video presentation. Thus Jackson’s compulsive use of magnified close-ups is not really anything new, but in fact he is cloning or quoting, even enhancing, a trope used in war films for a very long time.^{lxii} Thus a modern viewer would recognize and find familiar these visual cues in *They Shall Not Grow Old* based upon their repeated use in prior war films.

A line at the conclusion of *They Shall Not Grow Old* just might be one of the most revealing closing credits in the history of the movies: “Filmed on location on the Western Front, 1914-1918.” Remarkably, the film’s credits do not include the cameramen who shot the original footage, led by Lt. J.B. “Mac” McDowell, who was decorated for bravery. Structurally and stylistically, Jackson’s film is heavily indebted to these men, notably their 1916 film *Battle of the Somme* which broke box office records.^{lxiii} And this comparison brings us to a fundamental reality about film as articulated by Adam Gopnik, “We adjust to the technology of our time as much as it adjusts to us.” He continues his argument:

Jackson asserts...that if the cameramen of the Great War could have shot in color with sound, they would have. But such choices are trickier historically than they seem. Most people looking back at black-and-white footage of the war while it was going on never thought, Oh, if only this were in color, with sound! Any more than looking at it with color and sound now, we say, ‘Oh, but if only you could smell it!’ The medium shapes our response to it. Those first viewers were overwhelmed by the fidelity and truth to nature of early film, shocked by the intensity of its realism—which indeed it fully possessed, compared to the woodcuts and stills of the American Civil War period, which were, in turn, shocking by their verisimilitude to the first observers.^{lxiv}

The visceral impact of an audience viewing *The Battle of the Somme* in 1916 and a modern audience viewing *They Shall Not Grow Old* in 2018 remains the same given the different technologies that shaped the times. But Jackson’s new aesthetic created by technology and special effects undoubtedly creates for 2018 audiences a seemingly more “truthful”, “real” and “relatable” experience of life on the western front, that never feels like a dry history lesson. But the “Wow” factor of special effects should never mean that this particular rendition of history is any more real, truthful, or better than any precursor. Film critic Mark Kermode remarked that watching the film “is almost like we are experiencing a memory.”^{lxv} But history does not consist of memories, nor even a sort of reverse *momento mori*, where the dead live again, becoming immortal.

In Mimesis: African Soldier the very “truth” of the war seems to mutate under the gaze of colonial subjects in their dress uniforms. Remembrances comes in many forms, some reinforcing, others unstable. *Mimesis: African Soldier* marks the African soldier’s experience

of the war and indeed of history itself. While also highly personal, Akomfrah's work speaks to the present, reminding us that no interpretation of the past will ever be absolutely accurate. It counters an older, popular, conservative, more traditional ethnocentric view of World War I as presented by Jackson. But like all great works of art, it is intellectually demanding, unfortunately unlikely to develop a large following on the scale of *They Shall Not Grow Old*. Santanu Das while highly critical of Jackson for the non-presence of colonial troops in *They Shall Not Grow Old*, sees such absence as "...rather than a failure on Jackson's part alone, it is diagnostic of the wider sea of amnesia that still surrounds these islands of Eurocentric memory in popular culture."^{lxvi} (Sam Mendes in his own personal homage to World War I *1917* (2019) included scenes with an Indian soldier.) But it must also be recognized that the same absence is also very evident in the original films on which Jackson's film was based. The vast majority of the film used in *They Shall Not Grow Old* came from the aforementioned *Battle of the Somme* (1916) and *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (1917). Neither of these films include any images of colonial troops. The film's color blindness might be as much a product of the wartime context as the present day. Das remains conflicted about Jackson's project: "While it is frustrating to have another Eurocentric blockbuster when so many of us are trying to decolonize war memory, Jackson's film, is, for me, more instructive than many other colonial battlefield reenactments that, in the name of cultural difference, end up glorifying war and empire."^{lxvii} *They Shall Not Grow Old* remains an outstanding act of popular history with immense implications for the future of historical documentaries. It shows what can be done with today's technology in depicting visceral images of war. As 3D, automatic voice replacement, digital colorization and enhancement, film speeds, CGI, Deep Nostalgia, a new app from *My Heritage* that animates images^{lxviii}, and Deep Fake AI technologies improve, the average television documentary will be transformed as a treasure trove of early silent films and photographs potentially could be retrieved and altered for modern audiences, for better or worse. According to a report from the American Historical Association such rapid advances are "...transforming how historians engage with photographs, videos, and other visual media, including everything from Civil War photos to classic sitcoms" in the hope that "... their work can help all of us learn to use computational tools to examine visual media from humanistic perspectives."^{lxix}

Robert Burgoyne in recently available research has posited a provocative new evaluation of *They Shall Not Grow Old*. Unlike Napper, Burgoyne feels that past critiques of the film are

based upon a very narrow interpretation, "...deriving their authority from the notion of the archive as the prime ground and baseline for representation, the foundational and unerring reality that predicates all later symbolic expression."^{lxx} Burgoyne posits whether "...the film may better be seen not as the restoration of the historical real. But rather as a work of *quotation*; not in terms of its fidelity to original sources but rather as a form of mimesis; not as portraying a past reality but as producing a *reality* effect...."^{lxxi} Much of the theoretical foundation derives from Mieke Bal's rigorous and demanding concept of "preposterous history" as articulated in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*.^{lxxii} Bal sees this notion as one where visual images created first actually operate as an aftereffect initiated by the works of art of subsequent artists. In such an analysis *They Shall Not Grow Old* should not be judged based upon any adherence or deviation from the archival sources. Rather it becomes "...an enriched, intertextual project that brings several discursive frameworks into view, an act of re-framing that links the memory of the past with perspectives that have consequence in the present."^{lxxiii} Burgoyne sees value in examining the productive relationship between *They Shall Not Grow Old* with any number of 20th Century war films from which it quotes. Such quotation is vital to the new art but also to the source from which it derives. The prime example that he uses is the aforementioned intense facial close ups of soldiers' faces as a visual trope for the psychic damage and terror of war. Such an exegesis holds promise for further research, but what Burgoyne advocates really amounts to a strange circling back to the way that scholars and artists would interpret Akomfrah's *Mimesis: African Soldier*. If one jettisons fidelity to the archive and "historical reality" they become the same artistic, visual and literary projects. But of course they are different and were perceived that way especially by the general public who actually experienced both visual efforts. Burgoyne's interpretation attempts to give *They Shall Not Grow Old* a contemporary relevance that had generally been lacking in some prior critical reviews of Jackson's film.

While on the surface technologically dazzling, and even if one acknowledges partially Burgoyne's unique interpretation of "quotation" of other examples of war cinema, Jackson's film still presents at its ideological heart a hubristic, conservative, reactionary, vision of a static, timeless, taciturn, Tolkien-like, stoic, white male British Western Front, that is changeless, very generic and unsophisticated in nature, that appeals to many patriotic, nationalistic, ethnocentric, and sexist stereotypes in contemporary Britain, some of which have been around for a very long time, like the "Missing" of "Lost" generation.^{lxxiv} It does not

question outdated and problematic narratives of World War I, even in its narrow focus on the western front. But in the balance between technology, ideology, and remembrance, Akomfrah's *Mimesis: African Soldier* skillfully exposes post-imperial nostalgia, racism, and strategic forgetting about colonial crimes. The superiority of Akomfrah's installation becomes apparent as a vehicle for cultural subversion of such conservative and even racist narratives of World War I by actively re-centering on the still neglected experience of colonial peoples. The installation does so through its characters mixture of *ennui* and insubordination with the beginnings of anti-colonial passions in the guise of respect. Yet it still retains reverence and remembrance for those colonial peoples who gave their lives fighting for, or serving, their imperial masters. Akomfrah's installation emerges as a superior historical text because no matter how potent the imagined restoration of the past may be, some putative future Britain will not see any mythical flame of past glory burn again in a society that calls out for long overdue reparations from a past that has been conveniently forgotten.

This *14-18 Now* film installation *Mimesis: African Soldier* along with the Channel 4 UK program *Unremembered: Britain's Forgotten War Heroes* (2019)^{lxxv} no doubt contributed to a raising of public awareness about the contributions of African and Asian soldiers during World War I. The documentary follows British Labour MP David Lammy as he discovers why African soldiers who served and died during the First World War had not received their own graves. This would lead to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission establishing an inquiry in 2019 into the writing out of African and Asian soldiers from World War I memorials and grave sites. In April 2021 the CWGC issued a report based upon the conclusions reached by this inquiry.^{lxxvi} The graves of 45,000 to 54,000 largely East Africans, West Africans, Egyptians and Indians who died during the war did not get appropriate memorials. At least 116,000 other casualties were not mentioned on any memorials. The number could go as high as 350,000. The official response said the failure to commemorate non-European war dead was based upon "entrenched prejudices, preconceptions and pervasive racism of contemporary imperial attitudes." The CWGC apologized for "historic failings". "The events of a century ago were wrong then and are wrong now," Claire Horton, the Commission's director general, said in a statement. "We are sorry for what happened and will act to right the wrongs of the past." The British defence secretary, Ben Wallace, apologized on behalf of the government: "There can be no doubt that prejudice played a part in some of the commissioners' decisions....Whilst we can't change the past, we can make amends and take action". But

Kehinde Andrews, professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University, remains unconvinced of the sincerity of these statements of contrition: “It’s really farcical that in the 21st century, now, they want to apologize....This was 100 years ago...too little, too late.”^{lxxvii} Long overdue for sure, but such an official popular acknowledgement of an aspect of the First World War long ignored, reveals that the best historical art is that which speaks to the changing cultural and societal needs and demands of the present.

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