

# Mr. Mendes' War: Film Review, '1917'

*"You have to construct a journey for the camera that's every bit as interesting as the journey of the actor. What I wanted was one ribbon, like a snake, moving forward, in which the information that you needed happened to fall in front of where the camera was pointing."*

*-Sam Mendes*



It is a glorious thing to live in an age that is learning to remember the Great War.

Once the Centennial passed, I started to worry that WWI would fade back into obscurity.

There would be nothing more to it than the occasional badly-produced documentary, rehashing all the basic facts. Or the once-a-decade feature film composed primarily of maudlin melodrama and scenery-chewing. Great War geeks would be reduced, finally, to re-reading what little their local library has on the subject (invariably, a shelf or two perched on the edge of the vast glacier of paper that is EVERY BOOK ABOUT WWII EVER PUBLISHED, which even the most modest county library is guaranteed to have).

We'd keep on of course, as we have for decades, finding solitary joy in studying the minutiae of this defining moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only telegraphing our interests by posting Siegfried Sassoon's "Survivors" on social media every Armistice Day. We know how to live like this.

And it may yet come to that again, in ten years or so. But for now, the Great War retains a prominent place in scholarship and the public eye. Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (see my [review](#) for WBT last year) was the first great post-Centennial media event, generating accolades, controversy and awards, and proving so popular it was re-released in theaters twice in one year.

Sam Mendes' masterful *1917* carries on this legacy, and in my honest and no doubt potentially unpopular opinion, surpasses Jackson's film in almost every way. I know, we're talking about two fairly dissimilar things here. The statement stands. *1917* evokes the character of the Great War, it contains the soul of the War, and it conveys these ideas to the audience in a way that documentary cannot do. In short, were you forced to show someone who had never heard of the Great War only one film that evoked the nature of the War, you would choose *1917* over *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

For one thing, it is shorter; for another, it is much more compelling; finally, it is free from the glaring flaws of Jackson's film. *They Shall Not Grow Old* suffers from low-key

jingoism and Jackson's bizarre visual insistence on depicting only white British infantrymen (it turns out there were other people there).

*1917* is the WWI movie I've been waiting for my whole life.

Yet after I saw it, and then read more than a few reviews of *1917*, I was left with one major question:

What movie did y'all see?

Because the *1917* I've encountered in the criticism is not in any sense the film that I watched.

For example, Manohla Dargis writing for the [NYT](#) describes a film containing "next to no history" and refers to the entire piece as "a carefully organized and sanitized war picture from Sam Mendes that turns one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern times into an exercise in preening showmanship."

Justin Chang on *Fresh Air* was generally more positive, but like many other reviewers spent ages decrying the film's technical skill. (If you're somehow unaware, the major conceit of Mendes' film is its use of a simulated single tracking shot, actually achieved through a variety of cinematic tricks—if you're interested you can see exactly how it was done on YouTube.) In fact, the most persistent line of bitching about this movie has been that it's "too perfect", with the NYT reviewer even throwing out an offhand line about the movie spending too much time on getting the buttons on the uniforms right.

To which I have to respond: have you ever MET a Great War geek? Get the buttons wrong on the uniforms and you will quite literally never hear the end of it on the Internet. And anyway, maybe I'm missing something here with this whole "sure, it's technically magnificent, BUT" angle. People WANT it to be sloppy?

This film is the opposite of sloppy. This is theater, ready for any contingency. This is opera, or better yet a musical, with sets and costumes meticulously and obsessively constructed. This is in every sense a careful production. I'm really missing why this is a problem. With that said:

Sam Mendes gets this a lot.

Fifteen years ago, people said the same shit about *Jarhead*.

Fie on the critics (for now, anyway). If you haven't seen this movie, you need to understand what it was really like to dive into it on the big screen. Because this film is beyond epic. It's beyond "a good film", beyond even the proverbial "good war film"—it is an *experience*.

It is immediate.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

The success of this film lies in the concept of cinema-as-immersion. Toss the viewer straight into the milieu and drag them along, whether they will or no, through all the horror and the madness and the despair that was the soldier's lot in 1917. Of course it doesn't dwell on politics or slap you in the face with the grade-school primer on the whys and wherefores of alliances and Archdukes. There is, quite simply, no time for that.

The plot of the film centers on two Lance Corporals of the East Surrey Regiment, Blake and Schofield, played by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay. Fans of *Game of Thrones* will recognize Chapman as an all-grown-up version of King Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name\*.

\*The fact of his starring role in this film prompted the following exchange. While we were on the way to the cinema, my wife said to me "Who's directing this?"

ME: Sam Mendes.

MARY: What else has he done besides James Bond?

ME: *American Beauty. Revolutionary Road. Jarhead.*

MARY: Oh. Oh God.

ME: What?

MARY: I just got this incredibly clear picture of Tommen dancing around with a Santa hat on his junk, to a tinny clarinet-and-piano '20s jazz version of "O.P.P."

ME: <inarticulate with laughter>

MARY (*imitating Cab Calloway*): Ya down with O.P.P? Yeah, you know me!

At that point I nearly wrecked the car.

I digress (but you laughed). Blake and Schofield are first seen on their backs in an unspoiled field, trying to get in one of the naps that soldiers everywhere can manage at the drop of any hat, when they're interrupted and summoned back to HQ in the trenches. Along their way, they pass by any number of black British soldiers from the West Indies Regiment.

Jackson's film made no acknowledgement whatsoever of the service these people made during the war. Mendes, whose Trinidadian grandfather was a messenger serving in much the same capacity as Blake or Schofield, is careful to honor the sacrifices of these brave people who served despite the racist and classist treatment they suffered while doing their duty. All of this is accomplished in the first five minutes.

Awaiting them is General Erinmore, portrayed by an extra-gruff-and-crusty Colin Firth. Our Heroes are informed that there is a mission of extreme importance that must be undertaken immediately; the German "retreat" to the Hindenburg

Line has been revealed through aerial reconnaissance to be anything but, and their comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> under Colonel Mackenzie are walking into a deathtrap. Their orders to attack will ensure the deaths of 1600 men. As Blake's brother is a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Blake is chosen for this mission and entrusted with orders from General Erinmore to call off the attack, and as he is allowed to choose one man to go with him, of course he chooses his best mate Schofield.

These are literally the only moments of peace the film has until its end. From this moment forward, everything is propulsive, violent, and fast. Even the scenes of relative inaction are fraught, with the promise of calamity never further away than the next street or the next trench.

From here, the camera follows Blake and Schofield with all the obsession of a stalker. Through the use of wildly varying color palettes, Mendes carefully establishes "chapters" in the film. The British trenches they leave are orderly, earth-colored, dusty but tidy. Their entry into No Man's Land, with its foul slurry of churned mud, discarded boots, and body parts, is clearly Chapter Two: a sudden break with the imagery seen before reveals a landscape riddled with the grey of rotting flesh, the brown of human shit, the occasional burst of gold or green to remind one that this was once a place where people lived with their families, farmed, tended their business.

The initial shots of No Man's Land are strikingly reminiscent of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II*:



Max Ernst. Europe After Rain II: 1940-42.

There is a moment of dark Great War humor when the two encounter Lieutenant Leslie (Andrew Scott, familiar to viewers of *Sherlock* as Moriarty) who lends them flare guns (“Throw them back when you’re done, we’re forever out of these”) and reminds them that on the way to their destination, they should “mind the bowing chap”. The Bowing Chap is revealed to be a decaying corpse suspended from barbed wire, a shoutout to the works of the inimitable Otto Dix, whose “Corpse on Barbed Wire” is one of the most memorable pieces of art from the War.

Further, a lingering shot on the corpses of two horses evokes the work of Dix, whose art provided an inspiration for Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* as well. “Horse Cadaver” is apparently every WWI movie director’s favorite; in both movies, the shots of dead and decaying horses are arranged precisely in the same aspect and POV as Dix’s picture.

Stomach-turning images of this kind can and should be employed by those who would make movies about war; *1917* pulls no punches here. During their dangerous sojourn in No Man’s Land and the German trenches, rats swarm everywhere and flies infest all surfaces, including *inside* a gaping wound on a corpse. Lance Corporal Schofield cuts his hand on barbed wire and then trips, firmly inserting his wounded fist into the bacteria-laden hole where rats were feasting not moments before. It is both disgusting and entirely realistic; the

chief cause of death in every war before the First World War was from infectious disease, not combat. If one were feeling particularly apocalyptic, one could definitely argue that the number of people felled by the Spanish flu during and after the conflict showcases the continuing role of Pestilence following along in the wake of War.



Otto Dix. Horse Cadaver, Plate 5 from 'Der Krieg' (The War), 1924.

From the German trench (where Schofield is nearly killed, only saved by the valiant efforts of Blake) they proceed to a bombed-out French farmstead. Here the plot takes an unexpected turn, as the corporals observe a dogfight between the Boche and two English pilots, which ends with the German plane crashing mere yards from the broken-down barn where Blake and Schofield have taken shelter.

And it is now where things begin to go horribly awry.

The German fighter plane crashes and catches fire. The pilot screams for help. Blake and Schofield don't wait for moral considerations or strategic concerns: they pull him from the wreckage as though he were their own comrade. He is burned and wounded, and Schofield suggest they employ the *coup de grace*, but Blake demurs.

Moments later, Blake is stabbed in the gut by the ungrateful recipient of his kindness.

Schofield shoots the German pilot over and over again, enraged at his perfidy, but Blake is mortally wounded. Schofield holds him as he dies, promising to write to his family back in Britain. "Don't tell them I was scared," Blake says, as he dies in agony.

From now on the story is Schofield's. In service both to his comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and his fallen companion, he will not be denied in his obsessive focus on the completion of The Quest.

The frenetic pace increases. Schofield manages to catch a ride further into German territory from a group of British soldiers on their way into the battle zone. Among them is a Sikh, a figure common in the British soldiery, but one whose presence in this film inspired ridiculous accusations of "forced diversity" by racist English actor [Laurence Fox](#). To briefly address Fox's "concerns": one in every six British soldiers who served in WWI originated from the Indian subcontinent. Sikhs, Malays, Sepoys and others served proudly in many capacities during the War. In fact, there is a famous photograph of Indian lancers proceeding into the now-abandoned No Man's Land during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:



Later, Schofield is shot at by a German sniper while making a perilous crossing over the blasted-out girders of a destroyed bridge. He survives and kills his opponent, only to be knocked out by a ricocheting bullet. When he awakens, he is forced to flee through a bombed-out cityscape of arches and dark passageways lit only by flares and the roaring fires from bombing, which scene makes clear reference to the disturbing cityscapes of De Chirico.



“Melancholy and the mystery of the street” – Painting by George de Chirico, 1914.

The existential horror of solitude. The dread and horror of war, The War, any war. All are displayed here, experienced by the viewer in real time as the protagonist experiences them. As Schofield continues on his journey, the color palette changes again and again and again, from yellow to orange to blue.

At one point, Schofield falls into a river, ending up floating in a pool laden with cherry blossoms, creating a scene that is clearly a sort of genderswapped *Lady of Shalott* or Ophelia:



John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1851-2.

At long last, Schofield finds the 2<sup>nd</sup>, only to realize that they are already in the process of going over the top. In his efforts to reach Colonel MacKenzie with his letter calling off the attack, Schofield, gripped with the madness of obsession, runs across No Man's Land as the shells fall around him, perpendicular to the line of battle, knocking over his comrades and nearly getting killed over and over again. He reaches his goal, delivers his message, and while he is too late to save the first wave of men cut down by German machine guns, he does manage to convince Mackenzie (played by an particularly intense and mustachioed Benedict Cumberbatch) to call off the attack. In the aftermath, he locates Blake's brother, played by none other than *Game of Thrones*' Richard Madden (the irony of a Stark playing the brother of a Baratheon will not be lost on fans of the series) and delivers the news of Blake's death. "I am so glad you were with him," Madden says, as he shakes Schofield's hand and tries and fails

to prevent the tears from falling.

At the end, we discover that Schofield has a wife and child at home, whose picture he regards lovingly as he finally gets a few moments of rest beneath a twisted tree, still standing despite the bombardment and destruction all around.

In a last response to the critics, I have this to say. Yes, it was technically perfect. But this movie also had *soul*. This was a film that portrayed the horrors and the despair of the Great War realistically, that depicted soldiers who were anything but gung-ho, soldiers who questioned where they were and what they were doing. It could not have been set at any other time than 1917, when the German “retreat” freed up more land than the Allies had been able to recapture since August of 1914. The date displayed at the beginning of the movie is no coincidence either: April 6, 1917 is the day the United States entered the war. In its last moments, the film depicts a figure at rest, able to finally hope, to consider a future. This reflects the actual attitudes and emotions felt by the beleaguered British and French who had fought themselves into exhaustion and madness in the three years prior.

*1917* is a masterpiece. It is the Great War movie that everyone can love. If the theater we viewed it in was any indication—it was so crowded I couldn’t even sit with my family—it is reaching people. *1917* has accomplished what so many other films and television series produced over the last six years could not: it has engaged the general public with WWI. Mendes’ triumph is thus not just one of aesthetics or skill or “polish”; it is a triumph of thought. If only we could have a film like this every year, the world might well reconsider its addiction to war.

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# Mr. Tolkien's War: A Review of Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old,' by Rob Bokkon

Anyone who knows me at all well can tell you that I don't really have a personality, per se: what I have instead is a gigantic amalgamation of obsessions. Fandoms. Things like the life and work of Prince Rogers Nelson. Hungarian cuisine. The history of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. The films of Peter Jackson. The Great War.

So, obviously, when word came through that those last two things were colliding, in the form of a documentary commissioned by the Imperial War Museums, I was nearly beside myself. If anyone could capture the horror and the bravery of the Great War, it's the guy who gave us the Pellenor Fields and the Battle of Five Armies on the big screen. I counted the days until the release date. I jabbered about it to all three people I know who love WWI as much as I do. I was, to put it mildly, stoked.

Which remained my default state right up until I sat down in the theater to absorb what I truly hoped would be a modern masterpiece. The truth, as always, was rather more complicated.

The version we saw was bookended by both an introduction, and making-of featurette, from Mr Jackson himself. It is my current understanding that the greater theatrical release of the film will not include these, which is a pity, as the film loses much of its impact when one is unaware of the sheer labor of love involved in the restoration of the old footage. And, of course, consider yourselves warned that SPOILERS

ABOUND, both for the film and for the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The theater was almost three-quarters full, which surprised us; the crowd was fairly diverse, but included a high proportion of fit middle-aged guys in outdoor-pursuits gear, who by their conversation seemed mostly to be veterans. We live in a university town, so the history dorks (us) were also well-represented. The former dean of the college of arts and letters was there. Enthusiasm was high.

And then we fucking sat there for thirty solid minutes. Not thirty minutes of previews, mind you, but some “edutainment” compiled by Fathom Features that consisted of an “interactive” quiz, six multiple-choice questions about the Great War—“Did the Great War take place in A: 1914-1918, B: 1861-1865, C: Never, D: Last Week” and “Was Baron Von Richtoven, aka the ‘Red Baron’, a A: toilet cleaner in Bournemouth, B: your mom, C: a famous WWI flying ace with 80 confirmed kills or D: the inventor of owls?”—designed for people who have never heard of the Great War.

But when the film finally began, and the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed.

Because this movie is *stunning*.

It begins and ends with images of the war with which we are familiar, in shades of silver and black and white, complete with the sound effect of an antique projector. The voice-overs are the voices of old men, disconnected from their source, joined to past time and image only by association. Jackson’s decision to jettison traditional narration in favor of archival recordings from Great War veterans is meant to grant immediacy to the film by immersing the viewer in direct experience rather than received history.

The question that must be asked is, “Does this work?” And the answer is, yes and no. While my socialist soul champions the

decision to represent the War exclusively from the perspective of the people who actually fought the damn thing, the narrative feels tailored nonetheless. Blame it perhaps on the source material, as the archival audio was taken from something like 600 hours of interviews done in the '50s and '60s by the Imperial War Museums, who clearly have their own version of the War they wish to promote. A version of the war where the sun still has not set on the British Empire, George V regards us all favorably from the wall of every post office, the tea is hot and everyone knows their place.



Still from Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old.'

There are moments—a few—in the voice-overs where a note of fatalism or horror or even protest will arise. Mild moments, expressed with little fervor, which seem to be included only to evoke veracity. At the end, we get a series of voices reminding us that war is useless, pointless, a waste. A series of voices that feels tacked-on, as though we as an audience of modern sensibilities expect to hear this condemnation. Overall, throughout the film we hear the stories of Tommies who were happy to be there, who'd "go over again," who missed

it when they left, who saw it as “a job of work that had to be done.” Is this the overarching experience of the average British soldier in the war?

My reading has told me otherwise. Robert Graves’ *Good-Bye to All That* certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Siegfried Sassoon would undoubtedly curl his lovely aristocratic lip at the very notion. Is it worthwhile to hear these voices, these stories? Absolutely. Is it honest? This I cannot answer, but I have doubts.

But never mind that. You’ll forget all your criticism, all your doubt, if just for a moment, when that color footage hits the screen.

Jackson has always directed with a cinematographer’s eye, and this film is no exception. The first few shots of Tommies arriving in France, clad in khaki (a very authentic shade of khaki, as it turns out; Jackson spent weeks getting the color exactly right from uniforms *in his private collection*, since Peter Jackson is the world’s biggest World War I geek), baring their very British smiles for the camera: these are enough to make you forget that this footage ever existed in another form. The color used is not the bright and hyper-real shading of a modern film. The tones are very much those of a color photograph from 1914, which just serves to make the images seem more immediate and real.

The soundtrack at this point becomes a thing of pure artifice, but what artifice—Jackson’s otaku devotion to detail has never been showcased to greater effect. As revealed in the making-of featurette at the end, lip-readers were employed to pore over the footage and to reconstruct all possible dialogue. Then, by identifying uniforms or cap-badges, Jackson was able to place the regiments, and based on their origins (Royal Welch, Lancashire, &c.) actually found actors from the appropriate locales and hired them to do the voice-overs. Further, every boot hitting the mud, every rustle of a rucksack, every clank

of a helmet being thrown to the ground is there.

My jaw stayed on the floor for a long while. It is beautiful, there's no denying that. It is a labor of love. And in true Peter Jackson style, the camaraderie of camp life, the minor inconveniences and sanitary arrangements, or rather the lack thereof, the cheerful bitching about the cheap beer and wretched cigarettes lasts only a little while, to be replaced by the screaming terror of battle and its stomach-turning consequences. Jackson has never pulled his punches when it comes to revolting images (if you've ever seen [Dead Alive](#) or [Meet the Feebles](#) you'll know what I'm talking about) and this film is no exception. Popcorn went untouched when the images of trench foot, bloated corpses, maggots and rats swarm across the screen.

And yet, it is here that the film reaches its greatest artistic heights. Again and again I was reminded of the works of Otto Dix. For those who don't know him, Dix was an enthusiastic volunteer for the German army in 1914, whose drawings from the front remain a poignant and disturbing testament to the aesthetic impact of conflict. His true fame came during Weimar Berlin, which earned him the enmity of the Nazis, who denounced him as a "degenerate artist."

In *They Shall Not Grow Old*, a shot of a disemboweled cavalry horse strongly recalled Dix's *Horse Cadaver*, the animal's ruined body a testament to the service of all the animals who aided in the war effort.



Otto Dix, "Horse Cadaver from the War."

Many times Jackson shows bodies dangling, untended and ignored, from barbed wire, akin to those from the *War Triptych* or the obviously named but no less striking *Corpse on Barbed Wire*.



Otto Dix, "Near Langemarck (February 1918)."



Otto Dix, "Corpse on Barbed Wire."

A group of Tommies, exhausted, huddled together in their trench, are positioned almost exactly like Dix's *Resting Company*, the only difference their uniforms. The parallels were too obvious to ignore; Jackson, in his years of searching through the footage provided by the War Museums, had clearly

searched for and found footage that matched the works of Dix. Otto Dix, perhaps more than any other artist, truly captured the soul-killing dread and visceral, bleak reality of this war. Jackson, in his deep and thorough understanding of his subject, chose images echoic of Dix's in order to evoke in the viewer that same sense of despair, of resignation, of trauma. This conscious homage is my favorite takeaway from Jackson's film.

Whether conscious or not, however, Jackson's most prominent homage, and ultimately the film's downfall, lies in its obvious parallels to his most famous subject matter: the works of Tolkien.

J.R.R. Tolkien served in the Lancashire Fusilliers, as a signal-officer. He saw action at the Somme and lost two of his closest school friends to the War.

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.

Of course, Jackson cannot be blamed for telling the truths of the War; this narrative, though romanticized and muddled, parallels the experience of many Englishmen during the War. It was certainly Tolkien's narrative. It is the very Englishness of the narrative that presents us with the film's biggest problem, one Andria Williams (of the Military Spouse Book Review, and a Wrath-Bearing Tree editor) also covered extensively in [her review](#), which is that of representation.

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 French of course are mentioned, and even seen in a few shots, but overall the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish troops, every face a white face. The British West Indies Reserves are never seen. The film is innocent of a single Sepoy, there are no Gurkhas, no Malays.

In the featurette at the end of the film, Jackson addresses these concerns with a literal wave of the hand and a dismissive remark about the focus of the picture and the material available to him, while the screen actually shows unused footage of black troops, giving the lie to his explanation even as he offers it. What really pissed off your humble reviewer was the sentence Jackson used to cap this segment of the featurette: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars."

Wow. OK. Certainly it's not an academic film, but to suggest that giving representation only to white British troops on-screen is in some way justifiable because the film is "by a non-scholar" rubbed me the wrong way. Mr Jackson, you're going to tell us that you, the man who owns a closetful of original WWI uniforms—the man who literally minutes before was showing off his collection of *actual Great War artillery pieces*—the man who admitted to owning every issue of *The War Illustrated* magazine—you, of all people, would offer this lame excuse?

I think the issue here is not an actual dishonesty on Jackson's part, however. I believe that his inability to see his own biases stems from a long association with the works of Tolkien, in which the War of the Ring is fought and won by the Men of the West, the people of Gondor and Rohan. (Although as noted by other viewers of this film, even Tolkien's coalition was more diverse than the one shown in *They Shall Not Grow Old*—at least the Fellowship included elves and dwarves).

The issue of Tolkien's source material, and whether or not it is actively or casually racist, is one that encompasses far too great a scope for this review. Certainly Tolkien did not think himself a racist, and was a vocal opponent of Nazi racialist theories, even going so far as to send a series of nasty letters to a German publisher who wanted to reprint *The Hobbit* in the late '30s but only after confirming if Tolkien was "arisch"—that is, Aryan. He also hated apartheid, having been born in South Africa, and was similarly vocal in his condemnation of the practice.



J.R.R. Tolkien in  
WWI uniform.

Yet there are Tolkien's own works, which reflect the unthinking cultural biases of a man born in the Victorian era who came of age in the Edwardian. The nations of the East (Rhun, Harad, &c.) are all populated by dark-skinned Men who are under the thrall of Sauron. Tolkien's own remarks about the appearance of Orcs (found in his letters) include a distressing description of them as like "the unlovliest of the Mongol-types," and he explicitly stated that the gold-loving Dwarves were based on the Jewish people, for whom he nurtured a public admiration his whole life, but the association is an uncomfortable one to modern thought.

In conclusion: should you see this film? Absolutely. Should you see it with caveats and reservations? Clearly. Beautiful

but flawed, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a necessary film, but an incomplete one.