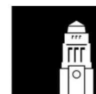

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AHR Roundtable

Sound and Silence in Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old*

Jessica Meyer

ONE OF THE MORE UNUSUAL artifacts of the end of the First World War is a photograph of the sound pressure impulses recorded by American ranging equipment of artillery fire at the front one minute before and one minute after 11:00 A.M. on November 11, 1918. Titled *The End of the War: A Graphic Record*, the image has recently been turned into an aural reconstruction by spatial and sound designers Coda to Coda as part of the Making a New World season at the Imperial War Museums (London) (2018). Drawing on Laurie Anderson's 1978 *Handphone Table*, the installation interprets the visual image as a "sound bar" that can be heard via bone conduction, displaying to the audience the end and aftermath of the Great War as a combination of gunfire, silence, and birdsong.[1]

That noises, and their absence, should be used as part of commemorative practice in this way is not, perhaps, surprising. Sound, as David Hendy has pointed out, was a defining feature of the war, whether for British civilians hearing the bombardment of the Western Front on the Kent coast when the wind was in the right direction, or for soldiers learning to make sense of the multiple sounds that defined their troglodyte world of threats heard but not seen.[2] The noise of war, particularly artillery fire, is a common trope in the personal narratives of the men who fought in the war, appearing in letters, in diaries, and, long after the war had ended, in memoirs. The language men used to describe the noise of war that they experienced was often metaphorical, with references to fireworks displays, trains, and storms

[1] "Making a New World: Armistice Soundwave," Coda to Coda, November 6, 2018, https://codatocoda.com/blog/making-a-new-world-armistice-soundwave.

[2] David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London, 2013), 269–273.

common, a tactic that could be both expressive and obscuring, evoking comprehensible images and associations while masking for the reader the full terrors that sounds could produce.[3]

In British culture, however, the dominant memory of the war has been shaped not by sound but by its inverse, silence. The two-minute silence marking Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, as Adrian Gregory has suggested, was never simply an absence, but rather "a space filled by discourses and . . . a profoundly multi-vocal ritual."[4] As culturally influential has been one of the most persistent myths of the war, that its veterans were silenced by their experiences, unable to speak to civilians who had not been there about what they had seen, felt, and done.[5] The many, many histories of the war that draw on the personal narratives of veterans—whether contemporary letters and diaries or more retrospective memoirs, oral histories, and interviews—would seem to regularly challenge this idea, yet it remains remarkably persistent, in part because of the limits of the film and recording technologies of the time. While such technologies existed, they were in their infancy, so that sound recordings like *The End of the War* could be preserved only through *visual* images, and the medium of film, while potentially more immediate than any other available, was still

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[3] Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009), 31.

[4] Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994), 7.

[5] Joel Morley, "Dad 'never said much' but . . . : Young Men and Great War Veterans in Day-to-Day-Life in Interwar Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 29, no. 2 (2018): 199–224, here 205; Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005), 176–177; Michael Roper, "Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War," *History Workshop Journal* 50, no. 1 (2000): 181–204, here 199; Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London, 1979), 244.

always silent. The symbolic silence of memorial practice thus fuses with the actual silence of the historic artifacts that shape it.

Therefore while the critical response to Peter Jackson's film *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) has focused on the colorization of the footage from the IWM's film archive, for me the film's greatest contribution to our understanding of the history of the war is in its use of sound. Jackson includes sound in the film in two ways: through the introduction of audio interviews with veterans of the conflict from the IWM's sound archive, and through the addition of a soundtrack that combines the voices of the men filmed, as interpreted by lip readers, with the underlying noise of the landscapes of the war. The first of these techniques is a traditional one, dating back to earlier televisual documentaries on the war, most notably the BBC's pioneering *The Great War* (1964).[6] The critical response has tended to view these interviews as having the virtues of authenticity associated with "the man who was there."[7] This contrasts with what Adam Gopnik describes as "the sapient sounds of experts and academic historians" implicitly associated with other, less innovative, documentaries about the war.[8] Yet, as Dan Todman points out, these interviews are themselves retrospective, the reconstructed memories of men who had lived through a lifetime of experience (including another world war) before they were given the public space to reflect on what their service in the First World War had been like.[9] They tell us as much about the war as it was and is remembered as about the war as lived experience.

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[6] Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh, 2009), 65.

[7] Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York, 1997), chap. 1

[8]Adam Gopnik, "A Few Thoughts on the Authenticity of Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old,'" *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-few-thoughts-on-the-authenticity-of-peter-jacksons-they-shall-not-grow-old.

[9] Todman, *The Great War*, 198–212.

The second technique is the more original in its attempt to capture the historical moment. However, like the much-discussed colorization process used in the film, which it parallels, the construction of the soundtrack through a combination of lip reading and archival oral history sources raises questions about process, history, and authenticity.[10] While lip readers may give us back the words men spoke on camera, they do so through the filter of their own contemporary interpretation. In comparison with the extensive discussions around colorization, there has been little reflection on the methodologies employed by these contributors to the film.[11] To what extent does their work reflect regional accents and the well-documented changes in pronunciation over the course of the twentieth century?[12] What account was taken of the shift in usage in the English language, a process extensively detailed by Julian Walker?[13] The soundtrack gives the men in the film a voice, complete with slang and obscenities, designed to make their story more accessible to the viewer by highlighting

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[10] Martyn Jolly, "Oh What a Lovely War," blog post, November 12, 2018, https://martynjolly.com/2018/11/12/oh-what-a-lovely-war/.

[11] Claudy Op den Kamp, "Too Good to Be Forgotten: The Copyright Dichotomy and the Public-Sector Audiovisual Archive," *IASA Journal*, no. 46 (May 2016): 33–41; Martyn Jolly, "Corrosive Colourisation," blog post, January 24, 2018, https://martynjolly.com/2018/01/24/corrosive-colourisation; Bridget Keown, "Colourizing and Fictionalizing the Past: A Review of Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old*," *Nursing Clio*, February 12, 2019, https://nursingclio.org/2019/02/12/colorizing-and-fictionalizing-the-past-a-review-of-peter-jacksons-they-shall-not-grow-old/.

[12] John Ayto, "Twentieth Century English—An Overview," August 16, 2012, *Oxford English Dictionary* blog, https://public.oed.com/blog/twentieth-century-english-an-overview/.

[13] Julian Walker, *Words and the First World War: Language, Memory, Vocabulary* (London, 2017); Julian Walker and Christoph Declercq, eds., *Languages in the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War* (Basingstoke, 2016); Peter Doyle and Julian Walker, *Trench Talk: Words of the First World War* (London, 2012); "About," *Languages and the First World War* (blog), https://languagesandthefirstworldwar.wordpress.com/about/.

the continuities with the linguistic present. But is this voice, filtered through the understanding of lip-reading interpreters, an improvement on original source material available in other media? The phonetically spelled letters of Ernest McDowell to his mother, for example, may not contain swear words, but they do give a powerful impression of this young man's Northern Irish accent, with their substitution of "use" for "you."[14] Through such collections, which form a considerable part of the IWM's manuscript archive, we can gain access to voices from the past that echo with our present as strongly as any spoken word.

It remains, then, for the final element of sound in the film, the underlying track of noise rather than speech, to demonstrate how this form of technical enhancement of film records can help to challenge the myth of the silence of the First World War. By including a complex noise-scape, the soundtrack makes audible not only the dominant artillery fire recorded and remembered by so many servicemen, but also the full array of noises created by non-human actors and inanimate participants—the jingle of harness and the creak of gun carriages, horses snorting and birds singing, the crash of tiles slipping from a roof minutes after the shock of a shell explosion. The soundtrack complicates the interpretation of Coda to Coda's installation, reminding the viewer that birdsong continued throughout the war alongside the gunfire even if it was, in John McCrae's famous words, "[s]carce heard amid the guns below."[15] The war was not a silent experience, and Jackson's film has the power not merely to remind us of this, but to raise questions about what this non-silence meant, both during the war and in the construction of its memory.

Jackson's film may therefore be said to bring the past to life, although possibly not in the ways in which most television reviewers meant in their discussions of the colorization process. In allowing us to hear more of what was, or at least might have been, heard at the

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[14] Ernest McDowell to Mother, October 9, 1914, privately held.

[15] John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields" (1915), line 5.

time, Jackson has returned a vital and all too often forgotten element of the experience of war to historical consciousness. In doing so, he challenges us with this film to reconsider not merely how the war was experienced by those who fought in it, but how we have chosen to remember it.

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