

Reviews (Films / Documentaries / TV Shows)

Babylon Berlin [TV series]. Seasons 1 and 2.

Directed by Henk Handloegten, Tom Tykwer, and Achim von Borries. 2017.

X Filme Creative Pool; et al. 8 episodes per season (45 minutes each).

It is 1929 in Berlin, Germany. Evil rises during the country's darkest hour. The Communists are in open protest, the Trotskyites are scheming, the police are brutal, and the Weimar Republic is on the verge of collapse. One detective with a shaky hand, honor, determination, and a scratched-out photo as a lead is Germany's last hope. *Babylon Berlin* is co-directed by three compelling German-born artists: Tom Tykwer, famous for international hits like Academy Award winner *Run Lola Run* (1998) and Golden Globe winner *Cloud Atlas* (2012); Achim von Borries of the European Best Film winner *Good Bye Lenin* (2003) and Golden Bear nominated *Alone in Berlin* (2016); and Henk Handloegten, known for *Paul is Dead* (2000) and *Learning to Lie* (2003). *Babylon Berlin* is a massive undertaking, with millions of dollars poured into making the first two seasons: it has the biggest budget for a non-English TV series, according to *Deutsche Welle* magazine, and a third season (not reviewed here) has been filmed and released (January 24, 2020). *Babylon Berlin* initially aired on *Sky Deutschland* before making its way onto *Netflix* where I viewed the series. The recreations of Germany before World War II are phenomenal, looking more like real life than computer renderings and immersing me to the extent that I eventually felt lost not wearing a vest and trench coat. While I would not recommend watching this show dubbed in English (as too much is lost in translation), such a version is available. I recommend the original German version which comes with subtitles. For the cautious viewer, it should be noted that *Babylon Berlin* is rated "R" due to its lewd language and pervasive nudity.

If your taste in media leans toward action, then this series is comparable to the mini-series *Generation War* (2013) in terms of its immersive and dark depiction of German war hardships, and even has the same lead actor, Volker Bruch. If it leans more in the direction of drama, a look into everyday life in the city, and diseases, then another Netflix series, *Charité* (2017-present), is comparable to *Babylon Berlin*.

The series takes place during the golden age of *film noir*, the late 1920s, when criminals were abundant, and the police were trying to keep up with them. Based on German author Volker Kutscher's 2008 novel, *Der nasse Fisch: Gereon Rath's erster Fall* ("The Naked Fish: Gereon Rath's First Case"), *Babylon Berlin* tells the story of Gereon Rath, a World War I veteran and now inspector sent from Cologne to investigate a pornographic photo, which leads him to an illegal underworld pornographic filmmaker known as *der König* ("the King"). A chase soon ensues as an assistant named Krajewski flees the crime scene and almost shoots down our protagonist, but Rath's new partner, Bruno Wolter, jumps in

just as the bullet flies through the barrel and barely misses him. Wolter keeps the little gun (remember that gun: it becomes crucial during Season 2) and gives Rath the bullet as a condescending “welcome to Berlin” gift. Krajewski is set free, but only because they use him as an informant and as a spy who turns out to be useful to the police come the end of Season 1. Krajewski trembles and suffers from PTSD, just like our protagonist, Inspector Rath, and we see Rath empathize early on with this man who suffers even more than he does, yet Rath can afford the expensive medicine that keeps it all under control, so he does not have to lose his job, which is one of the secrets he keeps from his colleagues.

We go then from the main character’s story to what appears to be a train robbery-turned hijacking. We later find out that the Russian-speaking thieves are Trotskyites who are fleeing Stalin and the Bolsheviks who have taken over the Communist Party. Their aim is to seize the gold that is stashed away on a train destined for Istanbul where Trotsky waits to take his place as the true ruler of the Soviets after being exiled by Stalin earlier that same year. For those who do not know much about the conflicts inside the Soviet Union, the series does not go into any details, almost leaving the audience as ambivalent as the German police force who, whenever a dead Russian appears, simply scoff, “Let them kill each other,” for it is simply a Russian affair. There were supporters of Trotsky around the world, especially in Germany, at the time, and while the events between the Trotskyites and the Stalinist secret police stationed at the Berlin embassy were not officially on record, the creative liberty is impressive and believable.

The gold apparently comes from the aristocratic parents of a traveling singer, Svetlana Sorokina, who had liquidated their assets into gold shortly after the fall of Russia’s imperial family. Svetlana is the last survivor of her family. Actually, her story changes, depending on who she is talking to: she could be greedy, she could be a traitor, she could be a blonde, and so forth. The only thing the audience knows for certain is her exploitation of Alexei Kardakov and the legion of Trotsky supporters. This gold train is essential through Season 2’s finale due to an accidental revelation that the rest of the cargo train is carrying “pesticides” for red-eye scar-man Alfred Nyssen whose company had manufactured Phosgene, a poisonous gas used during World War I. Our hero and his sidekick, Charlotte Ritter, a flapper girl who is trying to make enough money to escape the slums and pay for her sister’s education, must find out why poisonous gas is being sent to Berlin and how it is connected to the photograph, to a mob boss named “the Armenian” (who is blackmailing politicians with secret films of them having masochistic sex in his mansion), to an attempted coup d’état, and to Soviet spies.

At one point, while Rath is investigating the government for illegally building up the German army and air force, he questions a high-ranking Russian who may or may not know anything, and their interaction truly summarizes Rath’s tenuous position between his career and his personal life. To the Russian’s puzzled remark, “I don’t understand you. You work against your own land,” our protagonist quickly replies, “I work for the police.” By this point in Season 2, I

was convinced that Rath was the only man I could trust out of all of the conniving characters in this series who are sneaking around or attempting to benefit themselves somehow. Rath simply wishes to benefit the city in which he now resides: Berlin.

At first glance, *Babylon Berlin's* underlying theme can easily be missed, but after watching Seasons 1 and 2, it becomes obvious to anyone familiar with Weimar Republic Germany: the societal conflicts of the 1920s will lead to the rise of the National Socialists. The two women from Kreuzberg (a district in south-central Berlin), innocent bystanders shot by the police right in front of Rath and Wolter during Communist rallies in early May 1929, soon become martyrs for the Communists after local newspaper headlines read "200 Dead on the First of May." Their bodies are mournfully paraded until the police can answer for their conduct against Berlin's citizens. The "coppers" (as the police are derogatorily labeled) do not give up that easily: the moment they are confronted, Wolter and Rath deny being shot at by fellow police (which they were) while investigating in the Kreuzberg area.

Without spoiling too many plot details, Season 2 introduces us to the "Black Reichswehr" unit, an illegal paramilitary force maintained in violation of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Characters we witness the most are its main officers like Bock, Gessler, and Seeger, all of them intimidating older men who are up to no good. In secret meetings, they chant "unbeaten in the field," reflecting the prevailing myth that if Germany had had more time it would have won World War I for it had been undefeated in battle. This provides an excellent perspective on post-World War I German sentiments, especially when Gereon Rath has his flashbacks about his brother, Anno, in the trenches in France. While watching the violent clashes between Socialists and the police, the monarchists' lust for revenge on France, and the machinations of mob bosses, blackmailed politicians, and creepy men with facial scars who are slowly exerting their power over the police, we gradually witness the rise of the Nazis in Germany. Be prepared: even though the two seasons reviewed here are essentially one story with extra cliffhangers, there is considerably more drama and less *film noir* in Season 2. The latter also provides more backstory and character development, making *Babylon Berlin* even more suspenseful.

This profound historical drama is a must-see for fans of *film noir* and expressionism. That said, there are some notable historical liberties that need to be addressed. Seeger was indeed a World War I veteran, but he moved to California in 1922 and lived to be 106 and passed in 2007, the last World War I veteran in California. August Benda, head of Berlin's Political Police in the series, is based on a Jewish man, Bernhard Weiß, who was Police Vice President until 1932 when he fled to London. The "Black Reichswehr" conspiracy of 1929 to restore Kaiser Wilhelm II as German Emperor may have happened (there had been re-installation attempts in the past), but there are no confirmed records, only spy stories, granting the writers all the creative liberties they needed.

The ending of Season 2 seems like a real season finale, which is not to say that the ending of Season 1 was not satisfying. It wraps up the first few mysteries, such as the gold train, yet other mysteries remain. We see that some characters who have been alluded to as Nazis are, in fact, Nazis and are trying to take out people in the police and the government simply because they are Jewish. Furthermore, we see a group of Nazi protestors at a train station getting beat up by the Security Police; Svetlana Sorokina is not who she says she is; the crime mob boss assists Rath; and Wolter does something regrettable. The hypnosis scene from the very first episode is identical to the last scene of Season 2, Episode 8, so the doctor in this scene must be someone very important to Gereon Rath. So, time to check out Season 3.

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*Bobby Kennedy for President [TV documentary series].
Directed by Dawn Porter. 2018.*

RadicalMedia; LOOKSfilm; Trilogy Films. 4 episodes (58-65 minutes each).

Years before his own attempt at winning the U.S. presidency, Robert F. ("Bobby") Kennedy led his brother John F. Kennedy's bid for the country's highest office, serving as his campaign manager. Bobby Kennedy's integrity and focus showed, time and again, the abilities and motivation of this true American man. This review pertains to the 2018 documentary *Bobby Kennedy for President*, a tale of Bobby Kennedy's career, his role in his brother John F. Kennedy's cabinet, his own candidacy for president, his assassination, and the aftermath of his tragic death. This documentary has enhanced my respect for and knowledge of Bobby Kennedy, his involvement in desegregation, his interaction with Cesar Chavez, and his tenure as United States Attorney General. While Bobby Kennedy is overshadowed by his brother, this documentary reveals that he was more than just another chapter in the history of the Kennedys, and that he had great promise as a candidate for president in his own right. *Bobby Kennedy for President* is directed by Dawn Porter, an American documentary filmmaker and founder of the production company Trilogy Films. Porter studied at Georgetown University law school and has won various independent film awards for her documentaries.

Bobby Kennedy for President is a limited series of four approximately one-hour-long episodes, each portraying a different phase in Bobby Kennedy's career. The documentary shows a man who matured throughout his life, who evolved from representing one side to representing many sides, and who learned that the laws of the land needed to change to end the mistreatment of minorities. *Bobby Kennedy for President* features footage from those who witnessed Bobby Kennedy's life at one time or another, including celebrity artists like Harry

Belafonte, Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., those involved in his campaign for the presidency, and those present on the day he was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California (June 5, 1968). The documentary suggests that Bobby Kennedy inherited the direction in which his brother had intended to take the country, that he was devastated after his brother's death, and that he initially dismissed his own chances to one day be president. However, after his interaction with those who were seriously disadvantaged and discriminated against, Bobby Kennedy eventually decided to get involved and run for the country's highest office. The documentary also provides a perspective on the years after Bobby Kennedy's death, and it captures the tensions and emotions of those, both young and old, who were touched by Bobby Kennedy's determination and integrity, and who were inspired by his example to get involved both socially and politically.

In Episode 1 ("A New Generation"), we see John F. Kennedy running for office, with his charismatic brother Bobby Kennedy as his campaign manager. Then, while Bobby Kennedy served as Attorney General under his brother, he was viewed as a stern individual, pursuing and exacting justice on anyone who crossed his path, even going after Martin Luther King Jr. in the process. On the other hand, he also once had a conversation with singer-activist Harry Belafonte and received a reality check that not everyone is given the same rights and opportunities; this talk seems to have led Bobby Kennedy to recognize the mistakes of traditional politics and the injustices inflicted on the African American community. The episode finishes with the tragic loss of his brother. Episodes 2 and 3 ("I'd Like to Serve" and "You Only Get One Time Around") address Bobby Kennedy's election to the U.S. Senate, Civil-Rights advocacy, and ultimately his run for the office of president; his interaction with important activists like Caesar Chavez, which earned him the favor of communities that were, at the time, neglected by mainstream politicians; and his assassination. Episode 4 ("Justice for Bobby") deals with the trial of the assassin and with Bobby Kennedy's profound legacy.

Bobby Kennedy for President certainly aspires to be a great documentary. It contains high-quality historical video footage that has been enhanced to meet today's standards of quality and is supplemented with captions. The documentary's contents follow each major step of Bobby Kennedy's life and include his family, friends, and others. The viewer really gets to witness Bobby Kennedy's emotions, from his tears after his brother John F. Kennedy's death to the outrage he felt when he realized the plight of "minorities," and many other angles that purport to show the real Bobby Kennedy. The documentary presents two sides of Bobby Kennedy, that of a sincere family man and that of a man determined to never consider failure as an option. Overall, the documentary is well structured, includes many significant events and important figures, and provides background information that enhances the narrative. Historians and all others interested in the life and legacy of John F. Kennedy's brother will

definitely appreciate *Bobby Kennedy for President*. The documentary provides a clear sense why Bobby Kennedy inspired many of those involved in his life. In addition, the issues covered in this documentary continue to be relevant in today's heated political climate. The creators of *Bobby Kennedy for President* are clearly devoted to accuracy and, by including ample historical video footage, allow the viewer to relive the series of events that inspired many historical figures to reach out to this one man, Bobby Kennedy, who was believed to have the potential to bring unity and healing to this divided country.

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The Crown [TV series], Seasons 1 and 2.

Directed by Philip Martin, Benjamin Caron, Stephen Daldry, Julian Jarrold, and Philippa Lowthorpe. 2016 and 2017.

Left Bank Pictures; Sony Pictures Television Production UK. 10 episodes per season (47-61 minutes each).

What if you were able to step behind the closed doors of Buckingham Palace and look into the personal lives of the members of one of the most famous families in the world? *The Crown* does just that by dramatizing the life of Queen Elizabeth II of England as she is thrust into queenship following the 1952 death of her father, King George VI. The show focuses on how Elizabeth, from her time as a 25-year-old newlywed, faces joys and trials as a new monarch in the slowly declining British Empire. Throughout the first two seasons, viewers meet familiar historical figures and watch events unfold from the perspective of British leaders. Since the lives of members of the British royal family are highly private, much of what is portrayed in this series are dramatizations of what might have happened. Season 1 of *The Crown* began streaming on Netflix on November 4, 2016. As of fall 2019, there have been two seasons, with a third season to be released on November 17, 2019 (announced by the streaming service via a formal declaration on an easel outside Buckingham Palace). The first season begins in the late 1940s and continues into the mid-1950s. The second season picks up where Season 1 leaves off and concludes in the early 1960s. The creator of the show, Peter Morgan, has worked on his fair share of historical dramas. He has written screenplays for several shows dealing with the British monarchy and contributed to one of the most popular films of 2018, *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Season 1 of *The Crown* begins with the marriage of Princess Elizabeth (Claire Foy) and Philip (Matt Smith), the newly created Duke of Edinburgh. In the first episode, viewers encounter a happy, united marriage, resulting in the birth of two children and filled with social events as the couple settles in Malta. This picturesque family life changes drastically due to King George's declining health, calling the newlyweds back to London where they take up residence in Clarence House. With one lung removed, King George VI (Jared Harris) is weak, but still able to reign, and just a few weeks after his surgery he once again meets with

Prime Minister Winston Churchill (John Lithgow). When his health complications continue, the King learns that he has been diagnosed with lung cancer and may only have a few months left to live. Following this shocking revelation, he decides that Princess Elizabeth should learn how to rule the kingdom and receive more responsibilities, beginning with the upcoming Commonwealth Tour, much to Philip's displeasure. Before the couple departs, the King takes Philip shooting and clearly lays out his expectations concerning the Princess, stating, "She is the job. She is the essence of your duty." The episode ends with a glimpse of the future as Elizabeth sits behind her father's desk with little realization that it is to be her own in a mere matter of months.

The next episode begins with Elizabeth and Philip embarking on the Commonwealth Tour as the King's health continues to decline back home in London. While the happy couple travels to a secluded treehouse in the African wilderness, the King enjoys what is to be his last night in the company of his other daughter, Princess Margaret (Vanessa Kirby), and his wife, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (Victoria Hamilton). The next morning, it is discovered that he has passed away in his sleep, and the government scrambles to get into contact with Elizabeth, now "Her Majesty the Queen." Back in Africa, the couple take their time, not aware of the situation at hand. Upon their return to civilization, Elizabeth's personal secretary notifies Philip of the news. Philip in turn goes to break the tragedy to his wife just as she is in the middle of writing a letter to her "papa." With the news of her father's death comes the realization that she is now Queen, and Elizabeth quickly puts her new responsibilities before her own feelings. Once she has announced that she will keep her own name as her royal name, her secretary responds with, "Then, long live Queen Elizabeth." With this simple phrase, both Elizabeth and Philip begin to realize what their future holds. When they return to Buckingham Palace, Elizabeth goes to greet her mother and sister, only to be met with the formality of curtsies, something with which Princess Margaret struggles. As Elizabeth steps into her new role as monarch, she faces new experiences and works to establish her place as Queen which can be seen throughout the remainder of the first season.

With Elizabeth now on the throne, the series is successfully set up and can now focus on the events of her reign. In Season 1, these events primarily include the forbidden romance between Princess Margaret and Captain Peter Townsend; the deadly, thick smog that rolled over London for a number of days in 1952; the declining health of both Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden; and the matters involving Elizabeth's coronation. As she struggles to establish her authority as Queen, Elizabeth also faces issues in her marriage. Philip resents his new boundaries and living in his wife's shadow. In an attempt to quell his frustrations, Elizabeth appoints him as Chair of her Coronation Committee, and while this works for the time being, strains soon return. In Season 1's final episode, tensions between the couple appear to be higher than ever, and the Queen Mother suggests sending Philip to open the

1956 Summer Olympics in Australia and let him enjoy being in his own spotlight. Philip reluctantly agrees but sees it as a punishment rather than an opportunity. With the couple at odds and the nation in decline, the episode ends with a reflection of the past season, as the royal photographer tells Elizabeth to leave behind Elizabeth Windsor as there is now only Elizabeth "Regina."

In Season 2, we see tensions between Elizabeth and Philip even higher than before as he travels the world for five months in 1956 with a crew of men on the royal yacht *Britannia*. Through letters written by Michael Parker, Philip's private secretary and best friend, it is discovered that the men have had little regard for their marriages while abroad. With beautiful, exotic women in every port, this trip appears to be a five-month-long bachelor party rather than a royal tour. With the possibility of infidelity lingering throughout the season, other matters at play include the romance and marriage between Princess Margaret and Tony Armstrong-Jones; dark secrets revealed about the Queen's uncle, the Duke of Windsor and former King Edward VIII; political upheaval in the colonies; and the transition into a new era of monarchical rule. One of the most memorable episodes of Season 2, "Dear Mrs. Kennedy," revolves around a visit from two of America's most popular historical figures, President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jackie Kennedy. As everyone excitedly awaits the arrival of the beautiful Mrs. Kennedy, Elizabeth begins to be overwhelmed with self-doubt. Next to a woman who is said to be both intelligent and beautiful, she cannot help but feel second best. After a seemingly pleasant evening with the First Lady, word gets back to the Queen that Mrs. Kennedy had some rather rude things to say about her. In an attempt to disprove Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth travels to Ghana without the approval of her government's cabinet to personally work to sort out the situation there. To stop the impending decolonization, she takes a risk and dances with the African leader, something completely unheard of up until this point, and successfully resolves the issue. It is revealed that this was JFK's plan all along, which leaves Jackie in a difficult situation. The issues between the two women are resolved over afternoon tea, and just a few weeks later Elizabeth finds herself writing her condolences to the widowed Jackie Kennedy. Another pivotal episode from this season is titled "Vergangenheit." Those who know little about the history of the royal family may be as shocked as Queen Elizabeth was to discover that her uncle, the former King Edward VIII, had been a Nazi sympathizer and even traveled to Germany with his wife, Wallis Simpson, to visit training sites and early versions of the concentration camps. On top of this, he appears to have aided in the fall of France as he alerted "Nazi friends" that the Allies had captured their original plans of invasion. The other storyline of this episode shows Queen Elizabeth's interest in evangelist Billy Graham's teachings. After seeing him preach on television, she decides to invite him, much to her mother's and Philip's chagrin. After Elizabeth learns of the issues concerning her uncle, she turns to Graham for guidance, specifically concerning forgiveness. As a Christian she wants to forgive her uncle, but due to the serious nature of his

actions she cannot bring herself to do so. Graham tells her that if she cannot forgive someone, she should forgive herself and pray for the one she wants to forgive. In order to show historical proof of the contents of this episode, it concludes with actual photographs of the former king and his wife's trip to Germany, including a photograph of him looking particularly smug next to Adolf Hitler himself. As Season 2 wraps up, Elizabeth and Philip have seemingly resolved their issues just before the birth of their last child. The final scene includes the majority of the cast as they take a family portrait, which can also be seen as one final cast picture since a new cast portrays the "older" selves of these characters in the just released Season 3.

The Crown is a series that can be enjoyed by a wide audience. Whether you are a lover of history, British culture, or drama, you will find something in this series that captures your interest. Though there are some episodes that may seem a bit duller than others, each is necessary in the continuous narrative of the royal family. Though this is a dramatization inspired by real-life events, it is, in my opinion, interesting to speculate about the family dynamics that might have been at play during some of these historical encounters. If you want to be entertained and watch the extravagance and elegance of the British monarchy unfold on your television screen, I highly recommend this show. That said, if you are looking for the real-life events of the royal family backed by hard evidence, I suggest looking elsewhere, such as the many documentaries on the Queen and her family regularly airing on the BBC and PBS.

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Narcos [TV series]. Seasons 1-3.

Directed by Andrés Baiz, Josef Wladyka, Fernando Coimbra, Gerardo Naranjo, Guillermo Navarro, José Padilha, and Gabriel Ripstein. 2015-2017.

Dynamo; Gaumont International Television; Netflix. 10 episodes per season (43-60 minutes each).

"Well, I make a living making deals. So, be cool. Relax. You can accept my business ... or accept the consequences. Silver or lead." In Colombia, the hub of what would become the most prolific, violent, and organized drug empire in the world, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria (1949-1993), the kingpin of said empire, said these words to law enforcement officers. At least, this is what the popular Netflix series *Narcos* suggests. Set in the time period between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, *Narcos* recounts and dramatizes the history of the Medellín drug cartel, as well as that of the Cali Cartel which succeeded it. The storyline primarily follows the perspectives of DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) agents Steve Murphy (portrayed by Boyd Holbrook) and Javier Peña (portrayed by Pedro Pascal), as well as Pablo Escobar himself (portrayed by Wagner Moura). The show's creators, Chris Brancato, Bernard Carlo, and Doug Miro, are U.S. American

writers and producers. This review explores the progression of the series season by season and briefly dissects its historical dramatizations that hit and miss the figurative marks of historical accuracy.

The series opens with a statement, an explanation of the term “magical realism:” “Defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe, there is a reason magical realism was born in Colombia.” What follows is the jarring dramatization of a Colombian nightclub in the city of Bogotá being attacked by Colombian law enforcement in 1989. At first glance, it seems strange to attach a definition of “magical realism” to the macabre sight of innocent Colombians being slain alongside notorious drug lords. To provide additional context, the audience receives a narrative exposition on surveillance, and how its antiquated methods pale in comparison to what is used today. This is an important note to keep in mind as, in *Narcos*, the commonly unreliable nature of surveillance is central to how Colombian law enforcement interacts with the cartel. We are also introduced to many of the main characters, all mobilizing in some way after a main cartel target, Poison, has been identified and tracked down by cellular-phone surveillance. While Poison is shown organizing a night out, we see copious amounts of cash, contraband, and weapons. We briefly see a colorful club filled with individuals dancing, drinking, and lounging. Then follows the merciless, indiscriminate slaughter of all in the nightclub. After the violence, the opening credits roll and the show begins. In a comparatively short review on a series that spans thirty episodes it may seem superfluous to delve into such detail concerning the first six minutes of the show; however, these six minutes set the general tone for most of the series: scenes of luxurious, blissfully ignorant living, followed by either exposition of the nastiness that underpins it all, or by direct expressions of the latter in the form of indiscriminate killing and violence.

The themes and images of grandeur, luxury, drugs, and, of course, the violence that comes with it all, stay consistent throughout the series, as does the theme music chosen to introduce each episode: “Tuyo” (“Yours”), created by Brazilian songwriter Rodrigo Amarante de Castro Neves, is a slow tango with lyrics describing water that kills the thirst, swords that guard treasures, and lights of the moon on the sea. These lyrics seem to lend themselves to a narcissistic viewpoint, fitting of what is to come in the series. Season 1 is generally dedicated to the rise of Pablo Escobar. Even prior to leading his Medellín Cartel, Escobar is already transporting illegal contraband into Colombia. This contraband, as we see in our first encounter with Escobar in the series, ranges from television sets to vehicle stereo systems. The show portrays Escobar’s beginnings through his partnership with the character Mateo “Cuca” (“Cockroach”) Moreno, a Chilean drug lord who introduces cocaine and its industry to Escobar and the latter’s cousin, Gustavo Gaviria. The harmonious relationship with the bribed law enforcement officials of Colombia is apparent in the first interaction we see, but the relationship between Escobar and those who

do not aid his endeavors is first seen clearly in the case of Moreno. As their relationship deteriorates into a power struggle, Moreno bribes the same officials that are allowing Escobar to traffic freely, which ultimately leads to the execution of Moreno and the officials that have accepted his bribes. As Escobar's business begins to bloom, he encounters Carlos "El Leon" ("The Lion") Lehder, the spark to Escobar's explosive international sphere of influence.

Lehder becomes Escobar's lead transporter of cocaine into the United States via a plane route to Miami. The explosion of cocaine distribution and use in Miami prompts local DEA forces to respond by ramping up their efforts to control the epidemic. When it is apparent that billions of U.S. dollars are flowing from the States into Colombia, this, as opposed to the horrific violence resulting from the increased drug trafficking, prompts the sending of a DEA task force to Colombia, including Steve Murphy. As this is happening, Escobar seizes an opportunity to unite with competing contraband trafficking networks in Colombia to combat a Communist guerilla group, M19. Once Escobar succeeds, via retrieving kidnapped Ochoa Cartel daughter Martha Ochoa from M19, the unification of the contraband factions demarks the advent of the Medellín Cartel. The series also depicts Escobar's political rise after this unification, as he eventually becomes a congressman in Colombia. We learn of his lifelong aspiration to become president of Colombia, but this fantasy comes crashing down when he is expelled from parliament following revelations concerning his criminal past. After an extradition agreement with the United States for "narcos" ("drug lords") is passed by the Colombian government, agents Murphy and Peña begin to intensify their search for incriminating evidence on Escobar. Once such evidence is found and Escobar becomes an internationally recognized criminal, he goes into hiding, refusing to show himself while the extradition laws remain on the books. Through relentless violent measures taken against both government officials and Colombian citizens, including the destruction of an airliner (killing 107 innocent people), Cesar Gaviria, the president at the time of the violence, accepts a plea deal on Escobar's terms. This is where La Catedral comes into play, a prison built in Medellín in accordance with Escobar's own directives where he remains for some time free from direct control by the Colombian government. During this La Catedral phase, there are two important developments, namely, Escobar's slaughter of his two close business associates, Gerardo Moncada and Fernando Galeano, and the Cali Cartel's consolidation as a drug empire of its own apart from the Medellín Cartel. Escobar ultimately escapes the prison after a failed raiding attempt by the Colombian military to transfer him and makes his way back to Medellín.

Season 2 follows Escobar after he has eluded Colombian law enforcement officials at La Catedral. Its simpler story line details the downfall of the Medellín Cartel and of Escobar himself, ultimately leading to his death. While stealthily navigating the streets of Medellín, Escobar begins to collect the resources he has at his disposal to regain his firm grip on the Medellín Cartel. However, this effort

is hampered by several antagonists: the Cali Cartel in alliance with the Moncadas, the death squad “Los Pepes,” the Colombian police, and the Colombian people themselves. The first three of these are obvious, as Escobar’s pursuit of expanding his power and wealth has created staunch animosities between him and many groups. The Colombian people, however, are slightly more complicated as a force against Escobar. One of the most dependable factors in Escobar’s rise to power had been his attachment to the people of Colombia. With a certain populist flair, Escobar had given back to the people in the form of money and goods, and as the self-proclaimed voice of the people against the politicians. During his massive struggle with the Colombian government, however, Escobar takes part in a move that completely shatters the people’s support for him: the bombing of the Presidential Palace Mall. The attack kills hundreds of innocent people and marks the end of Escobar’s connection with the Colombian proletariat. These compounding factors, along with the systematic destruction of Escobar’s resources, including many of his associates, lead him to flee Medellín and seek shelter with his father. Once Escobar returns to Medellín after a short, sour stint with his father, he begins planning his return to prominence. It is here that his demise begins. During a phone call to his wife, Tata Escobar, he is tracked by the same surveillance that had led to Poison’s death and is killed on a rooftop while trying to escape.

Season 3 focuses on the Cali Cartel that becomes a drug empire in the power vacuum created by Escobar’s death. The perspective now shifts from Steve Murphy to Javier Peña, Murphy’s partner during the hunt for Escobar. At a gathering with his father, Peña recounts what he may have left behind in his dedicated chase of Escobar, and his father tells him that, although he has found nastiness after he has left his simple town, he should refrain from renouncing what he does best. This is a clear lead for Javier to return to the DEA. While the Cali drug empire is thriving, Peña aids in the investigation of money laundering when the head of the empire, Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, announces that the empire will disband and return to its “foundational” legal practices. Other factions, including the Juarez Cartel, are involved, but the season clearly focuses on the Cali Cartel. After Gilberto has been apprehended, his brother Miguel takes control of the empire. However, the cartel’s decline continues when Colombian police and DEA forces, supported by informants from within the Cali Cartel, pressure the drug empire. Ultimately, due to informants, Miguel is arrested and tried, and the Cali Cartel crumbles, leaving Colombia cartel-free. The next season of *Narcos* will take place in Mexico and will follow Javier Peña but has already been branded as the first season of an entirely separate series.

Narcos ultimately serves as a well acted and scenically beautiful dramatization of the rise and fall of Colombian drug cartels. Unfortunately, however, it is full of historical inaccuracies. Naturally, as the production does not claim to be historically accurate and touts the old “based on true events” label, it would be unfair to expect ontological and historical prowess. The issue is,

though, that some of the inaccuracies undermine the show's overall narrative. While much of the primary footage is reliable, several details are out of place. For example, Steve Murphy, Season 1's main protagonist, did not arrive in Colombia until 1991, nearly six years after the show portrays him as having been sent there. While the writers of the show suggest Tata's further involvement in the Cali Cartel after her husband's death, Tata Escobar never met with Cali Cartel heads in real life. Tata fled Colombia for Mozambique promptly after Pablo Escobar's death, sharply contrasting with events included in the show's storyline. Regarding similar works, there has been substantial focus on Pablo Escobar's drug empire in the film industry. The bulk of material on Pablo Escobar comes in the form of documentaries and made-for-television mini-series. Documentaries on Pablo Escobar offer a more realistic timeline and series of events, however, *Narcos* is the production with the highest budget to date, allowing its producers to recreate the atmosphere of 1980s-1990s Colombia. Yet, clearly, the deeper pockets of Netflix executives do not include a deeper, meaningful adherence to the historically documented events in Pablo Escobar's life.

Narcos is a fantastic dramatization of the past but, for the most part, cannot be relied on as a source of reliable historical information regarding the Colombian drug trade. It is recommended to watch the show for leisure and to avoid it when searching for any meaningful analysis of the topic it purports to portray.

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Norsemen [TV series]. Season 1 and 2.

Directed by Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen. 2016 and 2017.

Viafilm; Sagveien Resort; Norsk Rikskringkasting. 6 episodes per season (21-30 minutes each).

"Raiding is pretty much our primary industry. We are the Vikings after all," says Arvid to his not-so-loving, nagging wife as he packs for his next expedition outside Norheim. As chieftain of the Norwegian land of Norheim, Arvid is one of the main characters in Netflix's comedy series *Norsemen* which tells the story of a group of Vikings living in the village of Norheim around the year 790 AD as they explore new lands outside their small community and struggle to find a proper replacement after the death of their honorable leader Olav. However, do not let this premise fool you. *Norsemen* presents its viewers with a satirical parody of Viking life that delivers at least a few good laughs. Something of a love child between the surreal comedy of *Monty Python* and the historical drama of History Channel's *Vikings*, *Norsemen* is an entertaining, anachronistic display of the Viking stereotypes that have been widely circulated and engrained into popular memory. By combining what is known of Viking culture with satire,

humor, and contemporary social issues, *Norsemen* presents Viking behavior that reiterates stereotypes while poking fun at its hypocrisies in an amusing, yet at times vulgar, manner.

Conceived by writers Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen, *Norsemen* premiered on October 14, 2016, on NRK1 (Norsk Rikskringkasting 1) in Norway as *Vikingane*. Produced by Viafilm, the series was originally filmed in both Norwegian and English, with the English version premiering on August 18, 2017, via Netflix (USA). Filmed primarily in Avaldsnes and Karmøy in Rogaland County, Norway, *Norsemen* offers sensational views of the land's bountiful nature in stunning cinematography, permitting viewers to imagine the barely disturbed forests of the eighth century. Helgaker and Torgersen have written and directed two seasons, each consisting of six roughly thirty-minute long episodes. The main cast consists of the talented Kåre Conradi, Nils Jørgen Kaalstad, Silje Torp, Trond Fausa, Øystein Martinsen, Jon Øigarden, Marian Saastad Ottesen, and Kristine Riis, who together bring life to their characters and to the situations they encounter.

In *Norsemen*, Viking men and women deal with contemporary issues such as love, friendship, warfare, and work. Season 1 begins with a group of Vikings triumphantly coming home to Norheim after a raid. The crew includes Olav, Norheim's chieftain, Arvid, a brutal Viking warrior, Frøya, a female shield-maiden, and Rufus, an enslaved actor from Rome. Once settled back into their typical lives, Olav becomes ill and is eventually killed by his envious brother Orm. Seizing his opportunity, Orm assumes the leadership position and institutes rules and regulations that only benefit his role as chieftain. Several members of the raiding group find it difficult to readjust to their lives at Norheim, with Arvid noting that sitting at home while everyone else is raiding is "not honorable," which alludes to the Vikings' moral code of honor and shame. The group travels west, using a secretive map that the evil Jarl Varg, leader of a nearby village, wants to obtain. They pillage an area that seems to represent Britain, robbing a group of Christians of their belongings and the money they had saved for a new hospital. The season also focuses on Rufus, a slave freed at Orm's behest, and his desire to turn Norheim into a cultural center. While criticizing the Vikings' lack of art and culture, he creates projects that he believes will compete with the likes of Rome's Coliseum and theaters. The last episodes end with an attack on Norheim by Jarl Varg who instructs his men to rape and pillage all they see. Both sides eventually come to an agreement when Jarl Varg's hands are accidentally cut off; they are hilariously replaced with two makeshift prosthetics of a wooden spoon in one hand and five short bones on the other representing fingers. Embarrassed by his actions as a weak leader and chastised by the community, Orm tries to escape from Norheim with Rufus and Liv, Arvid's nagging wife. The season ends with a huge Norheim celebration of victory and the news of Arvid becoming a new father.

Season 2 of *Norsemen* focuses on the changes of leadership in Norheim and more raids to nearby lands. The season opens with a successful and violent raid in Northumbria led by Arvid. Once they return, the village's lawspeaker declares Arvid the rightful chieftain of Norheim, leaving Orm as a slave. Arvid introduces the idea of "protection money," forcing nearby villages to pay tribute, and he tries to live up to the image of Viking raids as ruthless. The season emphasizes, however, the love triangle between Arvid, his wife Liv, and the shield-maiden Frøya. Arvid falls in love with Frøya as they connect during their raids, but Liv manages to continue to manipulate him to stay in their marriage. Arvid's situation becomes even more complicated as Hilgurd, the widow of the fallen chieftain Olav, claims to be pregnant with his child. Arvid hilariously acknowledges this fact, even though he knows that he never even slept with her. It is revealed that she has lied the whole time about her pregnancy, carrying a pillow underneath her dress and saying that a wolf had come and snatched her baby after its birth. The season also explores Orm's attempts to escape from slavery and reclaim his throne, even accepting assistance from the evil Jarl Varg. He is seen complaining of the slave work and is despised by the slaves themselves as he cannot seem to connect with them. Hostilities linger between Norheim and Jarl Varg, so Arvid and Varg attempt to make peace at the *thing*, a governing assembly. However, Arvid violates the peace by attacking another man, resulting in him having to leave Norheim and becoming an exile. With Orm assuming the role as leader once again, Jarl Varg and Frøya end up in a brutal fight, resulting in her death. The second season ends with the abandonment of Norheim and the Vikings with all their belongings sailing in longships to another land with the goal of colonization. Renewed for a third season, *Norsemen* will hopefully showcase the Vikings' colonization efforts in the same amusing manner that has left viewers intrigued with the series.

Advertised as a series about contemporary issues set within the context of the Viking Age, *Norsemen* plays with stereotypes that have largely been accepted by society and critiques of the Vikings. Throughout both seasons, the characters portray the Vikings as savage pillagers and rapists that lack hygiene and intelligence. For example, the first episode of Season 1, "The Homecoming," shows the crew returning home from a raid in the west. Worried that her chieftain husband might not return home, Hilgurd sacrifices two slaves by decapitating them. The third slave, Kark, amusingly attempts to talk his way out of being killed by focusing on communicating how unreasonable killing three slaves would be because the Norse god Odin should have already been satisfied with the first two. In that same episode, the female Viking warrior Frøya boasts of all the monks she has raped during the raid because "that's what you do when you pillage." She even wears a necklace of severed penises from the men she has overpowered throughout her journeys, much to dismay of her husband Orm. By incorporating a female rapist, the creators mock the Viking rapist stereotype and traditional views of female aggression. Frøya herself is reminiscent of Freydis, a

female Viking warrior mentioned in *Eirik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, narratives written in the thirteenth century. Freydis accompanied her comrades on expeditions to Greenland and Vinland, killing natives and slaves to achieve their goal of exploration and settlement. The character of Frøya brings to life the written record of Viking shield-maidens, and her comedic relationships with her inept husband Orm and foolish boyfriend Arvid will give viewers at least a few chuckles.

Throughout its first two seasons, *Norsemen* parodies other Viking stereotypes, including those regarding issues of slavery, culture, and homosexuality. Slavery is depicted as gross, grueling work in unsanitary conditions. However, Kark volunteers to be enslaved and enthusiastically offers to do additional work despite living in a chicken coop and consistently being viewed by society as subhuman. One slave, Rufus of Rome, denounces enslavement by convincing Orm that he needs to showcase their culture like that of the Romans while criticizing the Vikings' lack of culture. He schemes his way out of enslavement and dons the position of creative director, leading a team to fashion a theater complex and sculpture to build Norheim as *the* center of Viking culture. The sculpture itself ends up being a mashed pile of discarded swords and other metals welded in an incoherent form. Despite the stereotype of the uncultured Vikings derived from biased Western texts, they were in fact adventurers with a distinct culture that was rich with oral histories, art, and gaming. *Norsemen* also parodies the Viking perception of homosexuality in a comedic, yet vulgar way. According to Viking law, homosexuality was considered shameful unless a person took the active role. In Season 1, Episode 6, "The Duel," Orm takes this norm and interprets it in his own way. Having had sex with one of Jarl Varg's men during the attack on Norheim, Orm defends his actions by saying he did in fact take on an active role by kissing, thrusting his hips, and going along enthusiastically. This scene illustrates the creators' attempts to both showcase real Viking norms and highlight their hypocrisies through the use of humor.

In terms of its writing, Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen have created scripts that are intriguing, hilarious, and at times controversial. Both seasons proceed through a coherent set of chronological events, highlighting contemporary issues within a Viking context. Many of these issues include those between husband and wife, such as Liv pestering her husband Arvid to join her with friends on a double date to discuss poetry. The writers try to have audiences connect to the storylines even if they are portraying a culture that existed nearly one thousand years ago, and they are successful in their portrayal of tension-filled relationships. The addition of curse words also helps audiences connect to such relationships, as we tend to use them on a daily basis (a trait shared by the main characters). The cast outstandingly portrays each character with enthusiasm and commitment, delivering each deadpan comedic line with a sense of seriousness. As a satire presenting surrealist comedy, some viewers may not like *Norsemen*, but there are instances when viewers should at least

appreciate the juxtaposition of Viking culture with modern-day language and social issues. Throughout the series, however, rape is a major theme that is distorted. Characters in *Norsemen* nonchalantly threaten men and women with rape (also called “defiling” in the show) to highlight the stereotype of the Vikings as vicious pillagers and rapists. Jarl Varg, for example, threatens Arvid with raping his wife Liv unless he returns with the coveted map to the west. With the consistent references to rape throughout the series, one cannot help but see this theme as vulgar and derogatory. In the wake of the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, modern audiences, and especially women, may be reluctant to view a series that discusses such themes even if it is a satire. In an era where sexual violence is blasted by the media showing such scenes runs against the advocacy of the #MeToo movement. Viewers will note the casual reference to the presidency of Donald J. Trump in Season 2, Episode 5, “The Thing.” After being reinstated as chieftain, the self-centered Orm deliberately holds up the white power “O.K.” hand gesture while saying, “Let’s make Norheim great again.” By including this brief reference, writers Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen satirize the actions of the U.S. president who has used similar language during his campaigns.

Despite some aspects that may polarize audiences, *Norsemen* is filmed in the highest quality with amazing performances from its Norwegian cast. Gorgeous landscape cinematography of the forests, lakes, and oceans provides viewers with an idealistic view of the undisturbed land of medieval times. Costume design and props offer viewers insights into the Vikings’ daily life, from the fur coats of the elite to the dirty rags of those enslaved, the weapons utilized, and the homes and tents they lived in. Interestingly, *Norsemen* distorts the traditional Viking imagery of horned helmets. The Vikings themselves never wore horned helmets, a myth that dates back to nineteenth-century artists. In Season 1, Episode 4, “The Raid,” Viking warrior Ragnar explains that the horns on his helmet are “fashion” and that the rest of the crew could benefit from expressing themselves through dress and taking fashion risks. The performances by the talented cast bring Viking culture to life, albeit in a satirical way. Norwegian actor Kåre Conradi delivers a sensational performance, depicting Orm as a self-centered, egotistical, and weak excuse for a Viking. Similarly, Øystein Martinsen portrays the slave Kark with such sincerity that it leaves viewers empathizing with the character and his shortcomings. *Norsemen*, however, does not depict the lives of Viking children or teens, primarily focusing on the adult members of society. This is principally due to its TV-MA rating stemming from profanity and sexual references. It would be interesting, however, to see what outlandish antics teenagers would be up to during this era.

As a parody of Viking stereotypes, *Norsemen* follows in the footsteps of the British comedy troop Monty Python. Whereas *Norsemen* parodies the Viking Age, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) parodies King Arthur’s quest for the Holy Grail. Both works use surrealist comedy and satire to present a history that

is still intriguing to contemporary viewers. *Norsemen* also follows the success of and shares similar themes with HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the History Channel's *Vikings*. The fantasy drama *Game of Thrones* largely uses medieval imagery, and its excitement surrounding royal succession is also found in the fight for the position as chieftain of Norheim in *Norsemen* (not to mention a similar degree of murder, blood, and gore). Although factually flawed (especially in its later seasons), the History Channel's *Vikings* presents a somewhat more historically accurate rendition of the Viking Age, while *Norsemen* parodies its drama with more comedic and lighthearted elements. Most importantly, however, *Norsemen* offers a new perspective on the Vikings that encourages viewers to alter their traditional views of actual medieval Norsemen and Norsewomen.

Despite certain drawbacks, *Norsemen* represents Viking life in a way that intrigues audiences and is so silly that it guarantees at least some laughs. Although not everyone may appreciate its deadpan delivery and satire, *Norsemen* leaves audiences with a new image of the Vikings as men and women who probably had to deal with problems pertaining to work and relationships just like the viewers of the show today. This parody acts as a mirror to the social issues and relationships of contemporary society, and using Viking culture as its medium allows *Norsemen* to be an enjoyable viewing experience. With a third season in the works, viewers may get more laughs as the villagers of Norheim attempt to colonize new lands. Whether the characters will succeed or fail in these endeavors, *Norsemen* will likely continue to succeed in presenting Viking behavior that reiterates stereotypes while highlighting its duplicities.

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Taco Chronicles [TV documentary series].

Directed by Carlos Perez Osorio. July 12, 2019.

Netflix. 6 episodes (25-31minutes each).

Netflix's Spanish documentary series *Taco Chronicles* or *Las Cronicas del Taco*, created by Carlos Perez Osorio and Pablo Cruz, producer of films such as *Miss Bala* (2019) and *Sin Nombre* (2009), serves Mexico's rich cultural history on a warm and soft *tortilla*. Which of the six styles of *tacos* is your favorite: *al-pastor*, *carnitas*, *canasta*, *carne-asada*, *barbacoa*, or *guisado*? Each episode includes a particular style's origins, traditional and modern methods of preparation, oral histories of *tacqueros*, and a comical narrative by the *taco*-style itself. The authentic, expertly chosen music complements the film and draws viewers into the scenes as if they were really in Mexico. The cinematography is astonishing and may be classified by some as "food porn," for example due to its heavy use of mouth-watering close-ups of *carne asada* in slow motion. However, I believe

the true essence of this documentary series lies in its interviews which showcase the connections between a nation whose cultural identity has become so intertwined with the *taco* that the two are inseparable.

Episode 1 in the series begins with the stunning shot of a roaring fire that is engulfing marinated pork rotating on a *trompo*. In Mexico City, the *al-pastor taco* is king, and the interviews with random Mexican citizens validate this truth: "If Mexico City had a flag, an *al-pastor taco* would be its emblem." (02:43) Where did the *al-pastor taco* originate from, though? Gastronomic writer Pedro Reyes enlightens viewers by explaining that its roots can be traced back to pre-modern Asia Minor, to the region known as Anatolia in today's Turkey. The Ottoman Empire's cuisine, exemplified by Lebanese *shawarma*, Greek *gyros*, and the Turkish *döner kebab*, entered the New World via Veracruz and settled in Puebla, Mexico, where the lamb and mutton of the Near East were replaced by pork and placed on a flour *tortilla* with some chipotle *salsa*, giving birth to the *al-pastor taco*. Spit-roasted layers of leg or loin meat, thick or thin cuts marinated in *adobo* are the foundation of the *al-pastor taco*, and *adobo* recipes vary with the different *taqueros* who guard their secret ingredients. The episode emphasizes that the best places to find traditional *al-pastor tacos* are the legendary *taquerias* of Lorenzo-Boturini street in Mexico City: *El Pastorcito*, *Gabacho*, and *Los Gueros* are the establishments to visit. The episode introduces the histories of a variety of different people, such as Filemon Herrera Garnica, proprietor of *Los Gueros*, and his 46-year-old *taqueria*, with photographs showcasing the history of his family; interviews with Isidro Hernandez Trejo and the story of how a body shop by day becomes a *taqueria*, *El Vilsito*, by night; or the story of Braulio Ramirez, a boy who works as a waiter for *El Borrego Viudo*. Episode 1 ends by reminding the audience of the importance of not just the *al-pastor taco*, but the *taco* in general when it concerns the connection between food and identity in Mexico. Chef Roberto Solis says it best: "Ultimately, that is what we want to achieve when making a *taco*, to make a connection with people's souls, and if they are not Mexican, they can become Mexican through *tacos*." (26:40)

Episode 2 is all about the *carnitas taco*. What sets the *carnitas taco* apart from the other styles is that it uses practically the whole pig: a single bite might contain a piece of meat from just about any part of the pig. The tenderness and savory meat is indistinguishable; all you know is that it tastes incredible. The history of how *carnitas* came into being is explained by Marino A. Collazos, proprietor of *Cocina M*, who relates that the oldest document on *carnitas* is 500 years old, and that pigs are not native to the Americas but were brought and left in *La Española* by Christopher Columbus. Later, Hernan Cortes brought them from Cuba to Mexico, and the story goes that, in 1521, Cortes organized a huge banquet in the palace of Coyoacan to celebrate the defeat of the Aztec Empire. Cortes had a pig butchered, cooked in its fat, and served with Tlaxcalan corn bread (which is like a corn *tortilla*, only thicker), and this was the birth of the *carnitas taco*. The modern-day version of the *carnitas taco* was born in the city of

Michoacan. According to the documentary, “Michoacan has a very strong pork culture.” (06:00) While the *carnitas taco* is the star of the episode, the actual focus is on the histories of the people who are involved in the *carnitas* business and the importance of all the various people associated with *carnitas* in some capacity. There is, for instance, the significance of copper pots and the history of Antonio Parra from Santa Clara del Cobre, who has been making copper pots for 50 years (and his father before him for 70 years), as copper pots made by hand are believed to give *carnitas* more flavor. Then there is the story of Jaime Ayala and how, for five generations, his family has dedicated everything toward the *carnitas* business. Jaime starts work at 2:30 a.m. and ends once he has sold all his *carnitas*, and then repeats this cycle all over again. Jaime says, “Some people think this is an easy job. But [you are] spending half your life virtually sleepless because our hours of rest are very few. Sometimes in life, we need to lack something, to be in need, to suffer a bit, so that we can value our job, value people, and so that you can value your own life.” (26:20) These histories elevate *carnitas* into a *taco* that demands commitment and love.

Episode 3 highlights the simplicity of the *taco de canasta*. This “basket” *taco* has three fillings, potatoes, beans, and *chicharron* (fried pork belly), and, best of all, it comes to you. *Tacos de canasta* are loaded into a basket on a bicycle in the morning, warm, fresh, and ready for the hungry people who are commuting throughout the city. Think of this like the ice cream man who drives around in neighborhoods, except this ice cream man is a *taco* basket man or woman who is going to give you a delicious, savory *taco* at low cost. The *taco de canasta* originated from a need: men working in factories in the early 1900s would crowd around the food brought to them in baskets, and thus the name of this type of *taco* was born: *tacos de canasta*. There are many great stories in this episode, but the one of Marven, Mexico City’s “Lady *Tacos de Canasta*,” stands out. According to Marven, becoming the basket-*taco* “Lady” was just a coincidence, and it occurred when he went to sell *tacos* at the Pride Parade. He had gone to the parade before but had never dressed up. Videos of him dressed as a woman, selling *tacos* with a very manly voice, went viral, and he quickly embraced the idea of becoming “Lady *Tacos de Canasta*.” Marven explains that, in Oaxaca, *muxe* (a person assigned male at birth, but dressing and acting like a woman), is often referred to as a third gender, a blessing for the family, and considered good luck. Simple and affordable, the *taco de canasta* is for everyone, regardless of social or economic class, and always delicious.

The best-known style of *taco* in the U.S., the *carne-asada taco* (grilled-meat *taco*), is on the menu in Episode 4: “An *asada taco* tastes like heaven. It tastes like home, like family, like friends, like partying. An *asada taco*, it is everything, man.” (00:55) I believe there is nothing more traditional in Latino culture than to enjoy a good barbeque on the weekend, having *carne asada* with friends and family. Because the *carne-asada taco* is so famous, it is a *taco* that brings together people of all races: “*Asada tacos* are the most basic *tacos* in the USA. If an American who

knows nothing about *tacos* comes to a Mexican restaurant, the first thing they will order if they are nervous is *tacos de asada*." (09:45) The story of the *carne-asada taco* began in 1521, when Gregorio Villalobos brought 50 head of cattle from La Habana to Veracruz as milk and field cattle. 300 years later, grain-fed cows made an appearance, such as the Hereford and Angus breeds, and thus the juicy meat many enjoy today became available. When it comes to *carne asada*, all you need is some good grilled meat, a warm *tortilla*, and good *salsa*. This fourth episode does not highlight the *taqueros*, the people who sell the *tacos*, but, rather, the people who prepare the ingredients necessary for the *carne-asada taco*: *rancheros* like Hector Ivan Quiroz Coronado who breed cows and work tirelessly to sell the best meat; *carnicerias* like Nereida Vejar who butcher the animals and cut the meat with precision; and *tortilla-makers* like Ms. Amanda who craft the tasty *tortillas*: "Wherever there's a fire, our country's hearts beat." (25:50)

Episode 5 focuses on an ancient cooking method and, quite honestly, the most difficult *taco*-style, namely, the *barbacoa taco*. This style originated from the Mayan people who perfected a technique called *pib*, where they cooked pheasant, deer, and a species of wild boar (called peccary) underground. The *pib* technique was adopted by other cultures in the region and later evolved through the Spaniards' introduction of lamb and goats, giving birth to the *barbacoa* of today. *Barbacoa* is prepared in a type of well that is lined with agave fronds and agave leaves. At the bottom sits a cauldron full of broth to capture the juice that drips down from the meat so that it can later be used as a soup. The lamb meat is wrapped in agave, sealed by a lid, and buried in dirt or mud. What makes the *barbacoa* special is the amount of work and time that is required to create it, and you can enjoy it only on weekends, typically in the morning when the well is dug up: "Everybody knows *barbacoa* is sold early, at midday at the latest. Fresh from the pit, they sell it, it sells out, and the *taquero* leaves." (21:50) In that regard, the *barbacoa taco* brings together entire communities in Mexico for the weekends, and there is a deep respect for the *barbacoa* and the tradition that has persisted through generations of families.

Guisado, the stew *taco*, is the focus of Episode 6, and it is unique in the sense that it incorporates stew as the main component on top of the *tortilla*. The story of the stew *taco* begins at home, but there are tales of how King Moctezuma II, when he was hungry, requested *guisados* of all kinds, so that he could eat a variety of different *tacos*. Later on, the Mexican Revolution immortalized the *guisado tacos* because of their simplicity and ability to incorporate any meat and herb. For instance, according to writer Alonso Ruvalcaba, a typical *guisado taqueria* "should have some ten different dishes, maybe." (15:50) However, the greater the variety of stews available the more popular your location will be, because part of the fun of stew *tacos* is combining an array of different ingredients to produce something truly unique. Above all else, I believe it is nostalgia that makes the *guisado taco* memorable in Mexican culture, and the episode truly resonates with that belief: "My mom used to make this kind of

stew, but she passed away. That's also the reason why we come here, for the longing." (23:16) The first place where one would eat a *guisado taco* would normally be one's home where it would be prepared by the mother or father, and that memory is what gives the *guisado taco* its profound social value.

Taco Chronicles is an amazing documentary series that captures the cultural history of the Mexican people in a very sentimental way. Historians, the Mexican community, Latinos in general, or just anyone who loves *tacos* or even just food will enjoy this series. *Tacos* are not just nourishment; they reflect the identities by which Mexicans build connections within their communities and with the world. The histories of the people who made and make these *tacos* are insightful and inspiring. The term "street food" is tossed around in almost every episode of *Taco Chronicles*, which reminds me of a similar documentary series, *Street Food* (2019), created by David Gelb and Brian McGinn, which highlights Asian street food and the vital role it plays in the respective Asian nations' cultures. The nice thing about *Taco Chronicles* is that we focus entirely on one country, exploring in-depth the *al-pastor*, *carnitas*, *canasta*, *carne-asada*, *barbacoa*, or *guisado tacos*. So, which *taco* is your favorite? Is it because of taste? Or memory? Or both?

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They Shall Not Grow Old [documentary film].
Directed by Peter Jackson. 2018.

House Productions; Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London; WingNut Films.
129 minutes (extended cut).

"We were just kids, and it was like a great big game to us, apart from the actual killing." (00:02:51) War is never easy to portray with accuracy. Emotions run high for viewers on all sides of a conflict, especially when such a conflict takes place on a global scale. For many nations and peoples, World War I lives on as a reminder of the carnage and bloodshed of modern warfare. While authors, artists, and filmmakers have attempted to portray the war by focusing on combat, on its complex political origins, or on the conquering of an "evil foreign power," few have attempted to capture the experiences of average soldiers. *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a documentary film commissioned by Britain's Imperial War Museum and directed by Peter Jackson, best known for his work on the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and *Hobbit* (2012-2014) film trilogies. A departure from Jackson's fantastical films, *They Shall Not Grow Old* received the 2019 award for Outstanding Achievement in Sound Editing from the Motion Picture Sound Editors association, and it is one of only a few recent films to receive a 100% rating on the film review website "Rotten Tomatoes." I believe that the film's success is based on its exploration of what life was like for average British soldiers sent to the front lines in western Europe. It does not concern itself with

explanations about the start of the war, or its conclusion. The audience simply experiences the same information, or lack thereof, that British soldiers received when they were shipped off to the continent.

The opening scene reflects the film's overall tone: a fade-in from black and the sound of men whistling. Then follow photographs of soldiers who served during the conflict, as actors read excerpts from the diaries and memoirs of these same eleven or twelve different men. In excerpts from 1914, they talk about how excited they were to serve their country, to experience war, and to fight alongside their closest friends. However, the tone shifts as the documentary cuts to the endings of these works, with stories of desperation, depression, and hopelessness, with 1917 passing and no end to the war in sight, and all this before the documentary's title even appears on the screen. (00:03:41) This juxtaposition of emotions, brilliantly executed and repeated several times during the film, gives the audience a fair warning of what they are about to experience.

After the opening credits, we see black-and-white footage of peaceful European cities and farmlands across Germany, France, and England, accompanied by audio clips of soldiers talking about the "the peace before the storm of war." (00:03:50) As English and German men are playing rugby, there is news of something referred to as the "Serbian Incident." While some find the news rather shocking, most agree that, despite the sudden outbreak of war, they will continue their fun and games and simply have the war start the next day. Then follows footage from 1914, with countless British men lining up and waiting to enlist. Soldiers discuss how excited they were to sign up for the war, while women and older folks questioned young men who would not enlist immediately. The audience is guided through the process of joining the army. Personal stories of soldiers who lied about their age in order to join are combined with the footage. One seventeen-year-old was told to go home, have a birthday, and come back the next day so that he would be eighteen, while another was congratulated by an officer for the impressive feat of celebrating three birthdays in one afternoon in order to enlist while still at the age of fifteen. (00:10:24)

The audience learns about the daily routines of soldiers experiencing training for the first time. Gear inspections are conducted, and many find that their clothing does not fit their smaller statures. All these soldiers receive during their training is a knife, fork, razor, spoon, needle, thread, toothbrush, half-pint mug, spare pair of socks, and spare shirt. Audio footage of soldiers describes the life of these trainees during mealtime, weapons training, and classroom lectures regarding war strategies. The day began at 6:00 a.m. with breakfast and physical exercises. Marching drills followed, with lunch at noon and weapons training soon thereafter. This cycle was repeated daily, with increased disciplinary measures used on those who stepped out of line or refused to take things seriously. We hear differing opinions concerning the drill sergeants, with some soldiers understanding the need for such harshness during times of war and others refusing to cooperate and, instead, choosing to play pranks on their

commanding officers. These pranks frequently led to group punishments, and sergeants used the group's anger as a deterrent against those who acted out.

Once their training was completed and they had been shipped over to the European continent, the soldiers came face to face with the destruction of war. Photographs and film reels of destroyed villages are juxtaposed against soldiers talking about their excitement to see real combat. As anxious villagers rush out to greet them, the new arrivals catch the glances of the soldiers they have come to replace. The excited talk ceases immediately, and the soldiers concentrate on the hollow expressions and dead stares of their fellow servicemen instead. Doubts about the reality of war begin to creep in.

When the newly trained cadets arrive at the trenches, the film's artistic style shifts, as Jackson and his team have adapted (or "modernized") the original archival footage by adjusting the number of frames per second and by carefully colorizing the material. These techniques create an eerily immersive experience that brings the audience closer to the soldiers they are observing. There is an immediate connection and solidarity between the audience and the soldiers, as both find themselves in an unfamiliar place without knowing why they have been sent there. The documentary then contrasts the daily life of soldiers in the trenches with their previous routines during training. While one third of the force was trying to sleep (either while standing or while lying on the ground or in the mud), one third was working sentry duty, and the final third was digging and expanding the trenches. The days were monotonous, and the audience feels this through the audio commentary from the soldiers' diaries. Struggles with hygiene and the graphic realities of attempting to live in the trenches are put on full display, from soldiers having to boil their tea in water heated by artillery guns, via flies crawling all over them while they are trying to defecate, to lice and maggots infecting almost every ounce of food or drink stored nearby. Jackson does not hold back when depicting the grotesque aspects of soldiers' lives during World War I, and this choice is deliberate. The scenes feel claustrophobic, because soldiers were indeed closed in by the walls of the trenches, forcing them to focus on the outrageous sights all around them.

At this point the documentary arrives at some of its most graphic scenes. Jackson now focuses on the effects of rain and wet conditions on the soldiers serving in the trenches, as well as the effects of gas attacks. The remastered footage displays a World War I gas attack, with the chemicals spreading all around as soldiers dive to the ground, praying they can put on their masks in time. Audio and video footage of men choking is combined with descriptions of organs bursting open or melting, making the audience feel sick to their stomachs. Before allowing the audience to recover, the documentary describes trench foot, a condition which befell many soldiers due to the wet winter conditions of the Western Front. Images and audio descriptions of human skin sliding off from the ankles down permanently burn themselves into the minds of those watching the film. Jackson's skills as a director and cinematographer shine brightest in these

moments, as they ensure that the audience will remember what they have just witnessed, even if they would much rather forget.

The documentary then moves into its final act. The soldiers with whom we have spent our time are told by their commanding officers that a full assault on the German trenches will take place within the next few days. Interestingly, it is never revealed to the audience when this assault will take place. It is clear from the conditions on the front lines and the time spent with the soldiers that it must have occurred in either 1916 or 1917, but an exact date is never given. This is a conscious choice on Jackson's part, as it ensures that the audience has the same amount of information as the soldiers. There is nothing to indicate how much longer the war will last. Could it be the final assault? Or is this a pointless charge toward death with years of carnage remaining? The tension and eeriness of the calm before the battle are captured through the silence of these scenes. There is no background music, only the audio footage of soldiers describing their anxiety and fears concerning the coming storm, with many saying the wait before the assault was more maddening than the actual charge. Jackson builds up the tension by dragging out these scenes for as long as possible, making the audience anxious to see who will survive the coming bloodshed.

The documentary has now reached its climax, as we see the soldiers charging forward into "No Man's Land." Some are immediately shelled to death and taken out by sniper fire, while others make it into the enemy trenches, only to be bayoneted before they can react. Countless deaths occur on screen, and survivors question in voice-overs why they were subjected to such mindless destruction. Almost as soon as it has begun, the assault comes to an end. Survivors hobble back to their own trenches, and soldiers tell stories of mercy killings performed on those horribly mutilated during the charge. Soon after, the soldiers are informed that an armistice has been signed and that the war has come to an end. There are no cheers to this news; rather, the soldiers are confused and dumbfounded. Some describe that they felt as though their way of life had just come crashing down, as if they had been fired from the only job they had ever known. (01:26:14)

As the trenches are left in the distance and the sound of explosions fades, the film returns to black-and-white footage. The soldiers are brought back home and find a world in which they live as outcasts. Family and friends do not want to speak of the war, and civilians fail to grasp the physical, mental, and emotional toll the war has taken on the servicemen. As an audience, we are left with video footage of soldiers relaxing in the park, attending weddings, and spending time with their families. These happy occasions, however, are juxtaposed with images of businesses refusing to hire servicemen and audio footage of soldiers describing the night terrors that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

While other World War I documentaries, such as *Gallipoli* (2005), *The Millionaire's Unit* (2015), and *25 April* (2015), have focused on the glory of battle and the carnage of modern warfare, none have captured the same emotional

response as Jackson's work. While these films allowed audiences to see what others went through, they do not put the audience in the shoes of the soldiers. Anyone with an interest in World War I or world history in general should be sure to view this documentary; by the same token, anyone squeamish or with a weak stomach may want to look away during certain segments.

Jackson has created a documentary that feels "alive," in which the audience experiences World War I through the eyes of everyday British soldiers who have little knowledge of the international political events that brought the world into one of the bloodiest wars in human history. By omitting supplementary information and focusing solely on the diaries and memoirs of soldiers who served on the Western Front, Jackson is able to bring this vision to life. Whether it is optimism, joy, disgust, fear, desperation, or melancholy, the audience witnesses all that these men who served must have felt. The audience shares in the hopelessness and isolation felt by survivors, when no one seemed to be able to understand what they had experienced and how the war had changed them. As the film comes to a close, we see one final soldier going back to a store he had frequented before the war. The man working behind the counter recognizes him as an old customer. He exclaims: "Where have you been? Working nights?" (01:32:04) Then the screen fades to black, a familiar whistling tune begins to play, and soldiers are heard marching once again.

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Viking [film].

Directed by Andrey Kravchuk. 2016.

Direktsiya Kino; Studio Trite; Dago Productions; Channel One. 128/133/142 minutes (12+/18+/Blu-ray).

Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, a tenth-century Arab traveler known for his encounters with the Rus' Vikings, described the latter as "perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blond and ruddy." (Ibn Fadlan, *Risala*) He also characterized these physically impressive Rus' as "the filthiest of God's creatures. They have no modesty in defecation or urination, nor do they wash after pollution from orgasm, nor do they wash their hands after eating. In this they are like wild asses." Ibn Fadlan's account matches the Viking Rus' portrayed in Andrei Kravchuk's 2016 film *Viking*. I will start by examining the film's cinematography and briefly explain the plot. I will then examine its historical accuracy, discuss the music, and ultimately explain why Kravchuk's *Viking* is an okay-to-miss film.

Viking's opening scene is everything a viewer would expect from a film on the Norsemen. The first shot is of a snowy tundra with Viking warriors hunting, riding horses, killing, and fighting each other, with blood and snow everywhere. The cinematography in this scene, along with the rest of the film, is beautifully

done. The hunting portion of the opening scene includes a massive European bison charging a Viking leader who is yelling and egging the beast on. The CGI (computer-generated imagery) used to create the truck-sized bison is magnificent, keeping the audience on their toes, engaged, and awestruck. If only the rest of the film followed suit.

Viking's director Andrei Kravchuk, who has directed five films and five television shows, is mostly known for *The Italian* (2005). When released on December 29, 2016, *Viking* was the third-most expensive film to come out of Russia, with a budget of \$20.8 million. The film grossed \$32.3 million and was met with sub-par reviews. In theaters, the film was released in two versions, one being 12+ for families and the complete version being 18+ (there is also an extended version on Blu-ray). The original film was released in Russian, Swedish, and Norwegian, and then dubbed in English in 2017 and released on Amazon Prime Video in 2018. The version reviewed here is the 18+ version, dubbed and subtitled in English, and available on Amazon Prime Video.

The film starts with a map of Kievan Rus' in the tenth century, explaining that Rus' leader Svyatoslav I has died and that his lands have been divided among his three sons, Oleg receiving the land of the Drevlians, Yaropolk receiving Kiev, and Vladimir receiving Novgorod. Oleg is the Viking in the opening scene who takes on the bison, eventually slaying it (but not without taking a horn to the face and subsequently bleeding everywhere). *Viking* is in the "medieval grunge" category, visually dark, with mud and blood a constant in almost every scene. The beautiful snowy landscapes of Crimea are the only light portions of the film. The feeling, tone, and atmosphere of the film is comparable to *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017), and *Outlaw King* (2018).

Viking then follows Oleg who gets into a confrontation with his brother Yaropolk. Oleg flees from Yaropolk and dies in the process. Yaropolk is blamed for his death. One of Oleg's surviving soldiers, who had previously served Svyatoslav I, escapes, vowing to enact vengeance upon Yaropolk. This soldier makes his way to the third brother, Vladimir, the film's main character. Vladimir is convinced to form an army of Viking mercenaries to conquer Kiev from his brother Yaropolk and the rest of the lands that had belonged to their father. The film is somewhat historically accurate when it comes to the basics of the rise of Vladimir the Great, the future Grand Prince of Kiev. Beyond that, *Viking* follows Vladimir's career, picking and choosing when to be historically accurate and when to take its own liberties.

The film's historical inaccuracies are a reason for the many mixed and negative reviews. The battles, military strategy, and weapons, while not completely accurate, are acceptable for the time period. There is a lack of chain mail amongst the elite and rich warriors; they all seem to have the same basic leather armor. But these inaccuracies do not go too far, and they do not take away from the film. For example, there are no stereotypical Viking horned helmets or an abundance of pure blonde hair and exaggerated beards. *Viking*

never claims to be a historical film, but after watching the audience is left wondering what the film's main theme might have been. Is it about Vladimir? Is it about the rise of Christianity in Kiev? Is it about the infighting between brothers? Or is it a story of love about Vladimir's multiple wives?

Vladimir eventually kills his brother, takes the latter's wife (now his second), and becomes the Grand Prince of Kiev. With his brothers out of the picture, he seeks to establish himself as a strong leader. To do so, Vladimir brings back the worship of his late father's god. This god demands blood in the form of human sacrifices. Vladimir obliges. *Viking* first introduces Svyatoslav's god, then Christianity. The late Yaropolk's wife (now Vladimir's new wife) happens to be a Christian, as are some of Yaropolk's former soldiers, a few of whom are now serving Vladimir. Throughout the film Christianity is brought to the forefront, whether in the form of a soldier's prayer or via Vladimir's second wife explaining monotheism to him. The establishment of Orthodox Christianity in Kiev seems to be one of the film's underlying themes, but the audience is left unsure what the main takeaway might be. To add to the confusion, Vladimir's second wife and his first are constantly at odds about which religion to follow, about political strategy, or about the lack of attention one receives in comparison to the other, and *Viking's* forced sex scenes and romantic moments with these two women often seem contrived.

The story continues with Vladimir fighting soldiers who had previously served Yaropolk and are now aligned with a nomadic Turkish tribe which relies on horses. This tribe is called the Pechenegs, an actual people in this historical setting who warred against the Kievan Rus' for hundreds of years. Vladimir cannot fight these forces on his own, as his mercenary forces are not being paid well enough, and he does not have the resources available to change that. Enter the Romans. Throughout the film the term "Romans" is used to denote the Byzantines (which is what they called themselves, too). For the sake of this review, I will keep consistency with the film and use the term "Romans."

The Romans come to Vladimir in his time of need with a job offer. They need help putting down a rebellious section of their vast empire and want to hire the Rus' to do their bidding. Vladimir agrees on one condition, namely, that once the rebellion has been put down, he can marry the Roman Emperor's sister, Anna. The film follows Vladimir into a visually and audibly stunning battle scene. One of the film's positive attributes is the music, composed by Igor Matvienko. This battle scene is one of many that give off a grandiose atmosphere. The soundtrack features ancient instrument replicas synthesized with modern-day technology, and the symphonic music during the battles and dramatic sequences creates an epic feeling. Once the battle is won, Vladimir is allowed to marry Anna, but he must first leave his father's god, convert to Christianity, and be baptized.

Vladimir then enters a massive and beautifully ornate Orthodox church. He is introduced to Christianity and the fundamentals of Holy Confession and Baptism. Before the priest, Vladimir admits to killing his brother and breaks

down crying. This scene seems too abrupt: Vladimir breaks down crying two minutes into the conversation. There is no lead into his emotional breakdown. This adds to the feeling of a weak Vladimir, a main character in whom it is hard to put too much stock. Throughout the film, Vladimir fails many times and does not seem strong enough to lead his people. The film's ending seems to be about Vladimir's religious conversion and healing. He shows himself as a true Christian after Holy Confession, receives baptism, and begins building churches in Kiev. The film lights up during these final scenes, there is no more mud or blood or grit, and Vladimir's entire kingdom receives mass baptism to the accompaniment of joyous music. The ending seems abrupt and forced, leaving the audience thinking, "Oh, is it over?" *Viking* concludes with an intertitle of Romans 8:24: "For we are saved by hope."

Viking's Vladimir is depicted as a lost leader who, at times, seems confused and weak. He routinely walks into situations not as the agent, but as the regent. This is, of course, not the actor's fault (Danila Kozlovsky); it is the fault of the writers. Vladimir is certainly not portrayed as one would expect, namely, as a strong, determined, and courageous leader. In an attempt to humanize this historical figure, the writers have created an inconsistent character who only remotely resembles the historical Vladimir who established Orthodox Christianity in Kiev, who aided the poor, and who created a better education and court system. Even the title of the film is questionable: *Viking* is not about Scandinavian Vikings; it is about the establishment of Orthodox Christianity in eastern Europe, about the Rus', and about Vladimir. A more apt title would have been: *Vladimir the Great: The Story of the Kiev Rus'*.

The cinematography, the music, and the CGI are done extremely well. However, the same cannot be said for the English subtitles and dubbed voices. Granted, many dubbed films run the risk of looking cheap, but *Viking* takes this to an extreme. There are many instances where the dubbed English voice does not even match the character that is talking on screen. In some cases, the voice actors do not match the "expected" voice of the on-screen actor, which creates many unpleasant moments in the film. The subtitles were either done by a computer program or a poor translator. For example, the words "trader" and "traitor" routinely get mixed up. In one important scene, a character says, "A gift from God," and the subtitles read, "A gift of from." This takes the audience out of the moment who are now watching the subtitles to see what other mistakes may occur. When the film changes locations, and there is an establishing shot on the screen, the name of the new location appears for no more than half a second. There is simply not enough time to read even "Kiev" or other intertitles and thus establish shot locations. The cheap English audio and poor subtitles certainly take away from *Viking's* beautiful cinematography and atmosphere. Thus, while the actors and director have done a good job, the production company and writers have made *Viking* an okay-to-miss film.

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Yesterday [film].

Directed by Danny Boyle. 2019.

Decibel Films; Dentsu; Etalon Films; Perfect World Pictures; Working Title Films. 116 minutes.

“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away / Now it looks as though they’re here to stay / Oh, I believe in yesterday.” (00:13:40) The film *Yesterday* is a romance, but it is not merely a romance of love. It is a romance of history. The story begins with an amateur singer, Jack Malick, from the United Kingdom, whose songs no one seems to care for, except for his manager, Ellie. Ellie is very much in love with him, but he is unable to declare his love for her. He is ready to give up on trying to make it as a singer when she tells him that miracles happen. And one soon does. As Jack bicycles home, he is hit by a bus at the exact moment all the electricity goes out in a global blackout. He wakes up to find that he is the only person who remembers the songs of the Beatles, a wildly popular band in the 1960s, especially in Britain and the United States.

Jack tries to remember as many songs as he is able, and with the help of Ed Sheeran, a famous British singer today, as well as the help of a materialistic American producer, Jack becomes a worldwide phenomenon. But as Jack gains fame, he starts to lose Ellie. He is still powerless to declare his love for her, and their paths, with his new-found fame, diverge. Captivated by his success, he is unable to declare to all that the songs are not written by himself but by a band that no longer exists. But through the Beatles’ songs he sings (“In My Life,” “The Long and Winding Road,” and “Help!”) and a meeting with a still-living John Lennon—a once-member of the Beatles, poet, and activist—Jack is able to overcome his obstacles. Lennon tells Jack that, although not famous in this alternate life, he is happy, for in his life he fought for what he believed in, and he fought for love. Jack seems to understand now. Jack is able to go back into the world, declare the truth of where the songs came from, and declare his love for Ellie. They marry, have children, and live happily ever after (with the song “Obladi Oblada” in the background, and “Hey Jude” during the end-credits).

History plays a central, romantic role in the film. Through the beautiful songs and lyrics of the Beatles, which are made completely new again, and through the physical meeting with John Lennon, Jack is able to get what he needs to change and better his life. This is obviously not possible, but it is the dream of history: to recreate the past as if it were completely new and to meet its characters and places as if they were real. And a dream of another order is to see how those characters would react to today and see how we would react to them. The film tries to do this by creating a world where those individuals are still alive in our

present and their works and actions are new in that present. And it presents those works and actions as relevant and important. The film is traditional and classical in that regard. Its premise is that there are certain things that carry over and would be recognized through time and space: love, beauty, truth, and courage. Some reviews have been critical of the film in that they believe it assumes that the Beatles' popularity would carry over to today. But those reviews seem to miss the point of the film. The film is primarily about Jack. We see through him and his life how those songs are relevant. Jack's life and his problems are similar to ours. Are love, courage, and honesty still important? Do these not carry over in time? *Yesterday* says that they do, and Jack's problems seem regular enough that it is convincing.

There are other films on the Beatles, even those in which they play themselves, such as *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). But those films are not situated in our time as this one is. There have been films that try to bring the past into the present and see how we would react. One example is *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) in which historical personages are brought into 1980s San Dimas, California, by two teenagers. That film succeeded because it seemed to bring out something of those personages and how they are relevant and important today. *Yesterday* captures something of the Beatles and John Lennon and shows us how they are relevant and important today. Accordingly, the film succeeds as well.

The film is directed by Danny Boyle who has directed such films as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Steve Jobs* (2015). It is written by Richard Curtis who has written such films as *Notting Hill* (1999). These films also make extraordinary people and circumstances relatable to us. And they have some of the magic and charm of Hollywood. This film carries some of that magic as well, albeit more literally: the notion that we can recreate the past as if it were completely new and real. While we cannot make it real again, as this film does, we can make its principles relevant and, to some extent, new again. The film is recommended.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Amer Hamid of Woodland Hills, California, earned his B.S. in Computer Science at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana (2003). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), focusing on American history and English literature.