



John Walker's Passage. By Darrell Varga. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 141 pp. ISBN 9781442614192.

John Walker's Passage makes a valuable contribution to contemporary film studies, reflecting on the definitive work of one of Canada's finest documentary filmmakers. Darrell Varga's close analysis of *Passage* (2008) situates the film within John Walker's prolific body of work and the tradition of documentary filmmaking in Canada. The book attests to the strength and significance of this powerful, provocative, and distinctly Canadian film, and thereby occupies a central place in the University of Toronto Press "Canadian Cinema" series.

Passage retells the story of Sir John Franklin's fatal 1845 expedition to discover the Northwest Passage. The film meanders between dramatic re-enactment and documentary to illuminate two perspectives frequently downplayed or ignored in popular accounts of this historic expedition. The first is the perspective of John Rae, a Scottish explorer who travelled the Canadian Arctic extensively before returning to Britain with scandalous details concerning the fate of Franklin and his crew. The second, an Inuit perspective that questions the accuracy of conventional British accounts of the Franklin expedition and its legacy; powerfully conveyed in the film through the oral testimony of Inuit politician Tagak Curley. In *John Walker's Passage*, Darrell Varga argues the filmmaker's choice to include these marginal perspectives deviates from a dominant tendency for historical documentaries to "provide tidy answers to complex questions" (p. 5). Instead, *Passage* reveals the fictionalization of history and "sets in motion a process of discovery and a deconstruction of the historical record, inviting us to think about representation and the spaces of nation and empire" (p. 7). Like the characters in his film, Varga argues persuasively that Walker's status on the margins of Canadian documentary filmmaking has enabled him to make a distinctive contribution to cinema.

The book consists of a short introduction, four body chapters, and an annotated filmography, featuring a selection of John Walker's key works. In the Introduction, Varga outlines the aims of his study which include: introducing the filmmaker and exploring some of his key works; analysing *Passage* and suggesting that, among other things, it represents "the culmination of this director's filmmaking obsessions" (p. 1); and finally, to reflect on the ideas of Canadian political economist Harold Innis and discuss the influential role they played in the making of *Passage*. In the following chapters, Varga accomplishes these tasks by interweaving relevant biographical and historical details with excerpts from production notes, quotes from the filmmaker, and close analysis of his films. Throughout the process, Varga's own meditations on theories of representation, the art of documentary filmmaking, and Innis' writings on communication and culture contribute added depth to this rich scholarly undertaking.

The first two chapters set the stage for a closer analysis of *Passage* by chronicling significant events and artistic influences on John Walker's path to a career in documentary filmmaking. Background on the filmmaker doubles as the focal point for Varga's exploration of the history of documentary filmmaking in Canada. The first

chapter introduces the ideal of the “innocent eye” and a “keen relationship with nature” as key formative elements of Walker’s work (p. 11). The former stems from the filmmaker’s early exposure to an artistic movement that saw documentary as an art form that offered unique ways of seeing and engaging with the world through observation and “suspended judgement” (p. 11). The latter influence rooted in Walker’s upbringing and continuing fascination with the Canadian North.

The second chapter expands on these artistic influences, looking more closely at the filmmaker’s aesthetic, the subjects of his early films, and the role technology plays in his practice. Varga describes Walker’s sustained attempts to lobby Canadian funding agencies on behalf of independent documentary filmmakers. This account is neatly fused with an analysis of several films to underline one of the filmmaker’s principle concerns: “the need to find one’s own voice” (p. 25). An unwavering commitment to this ideal, both in terms of policy and practice, is reflected in the subject matter Walker has chosen to explore and the position he has occupied on the margins of documentary filmmaking in Canada.

Chapter Three carefully analyzes *Passage*, placing emphasis on the film’s distinctive stylistic and structural merits. The analysis centres on the filmmaker’s innovative technique of weaving together scenes from a historical re-enactment of the Franklin story with documentary footage shot during production of the film. According to Varga, this complex layering of perspectives “turns the relation of fiction and documentary into a dialectic where notions of truth are always on shifting ground but guided by the filmmaker’s point of view” (p. 50). This dialectic exposes the fabrication of “official” historical records while simultaneously drawing attention to Walker’s role in the production of *Passage* and hence the “constructedness of documentary” (p. 101). The author provides ample evidence of how this dialectic plays out in the film, concluding that opening up a space for interaction is precisely what distinguishes the work from conventional approaches to documentary.

The final chapter returns to the seminal ideas of Harold Innis relating them to the practice of documentary filmmaking and the making of *Passage*. After elaborating on Innis’ theories concerning the relation between time and space and his view of the importance of balancing oral and spatial modes of expression, Varga contends that documentary filmmaking offers a medium with the potential for these ideas to be realized in practice. To make this case, the author briefly alludes to the dialogue that unfolds between oral and print-based cultures in the film before concluding, rather abruptly, by describing the important place *Passage* occupies within the tradition of documentary filmmaking. The consequence is for Innis’ insights to largely remain at the level of theoretical abstraction, in spite of the many concrete instances in the film where Walker demonstrates how this sharing of experiences can operate in practice.

Passage weaves together documentary and drama to delve deeper into the complex nature of truth, history, and representation. Like the film, the strength of Varga’s study lies in its capacity to pull together a range of threads to convincingly demonstrate the importance and enduring legacy of John Walker’s contributions to documentary filmmaking in Canada. The book will appeal to audiences seeking a fresh take on some

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complex historical conundrums and be of particular interest to filmmakers, historians, film scholars, and educators alike.

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