

REVIEWS

Gwynne Dyer's

War

"The media are not ways of relating us to the old 'real' world: they are the real world, and they reshape what remains of the old world at will" - McLuhan

Gwynne Dyer's documentary essay series *War* was without a doubt one of the more intelligent discussions of the complexities of contemporary global tensions. Beginning Oct. 2 over seven highly informative Sunday evenings on CBC television, international affairs journalist Dyer's often cynically amusing, at times depressing, yet always knowledgeable commentary, provided, against the background of battlefields, expert testimony and documentary footage of military exploits, some understanding of the problems of modern warfare.

From a general overview of the rise of total war, waged by mass armies, officered by military management, to an examination of the longevity of specific conflict dynamics (the Mideast), to current armed stalemates (Western Europe) and beyond to the nuclear dilemma and what to do about it, Dyer, assisted by a production team of largely young filmmakers, probed many facets of the modern military juggernaut.

The series culminated in a final warning that if the planet is to survive, a solution other than war must be found. Dyer suggests that such a solution can only be holonomic, that is, one involving a world-body possibly like the UN. All in all, the series was a splendidly written, intelligently literate treatment of some of the big questions by documentary filmmakers - relative newcomers to the bizarre world of television.

Yet within a week of *War's* ending Nov. 13, all of the series' patient effort of elaboration seemed to dissipate in the hysterical media fallout from the American made-for-TV melodrama *The Day After* as the U.S. indulged in symbolic mourning for the lost images of a more hopeful world. The ensuing deluge swept up people like Gwynne Dyer, suddenly much in demand for his thought-provoking series, only to transform him into an advocate of the solutions in 20 words or less so favored by the medium of television. Those who had earlier been impressed by Dyer's sagacity in the *War* series might have been struck by certain thoughts about the workings of television, which retrospectively offered another perspective of the *War* series itself.

For the high-profile (1,023,000 viewers per episode) appearance of a documentary series on a medium from which it has largely been eradicated raises questions about the real limits of the documentary as a means of reflection upon the world, especially when contrasted with television's extraordinary powers of symbolization. If the National Film Board, for one, thinks that television is going to save its filmmakers, greater thought should perhaps be given to the message of the medium itself.

In the light of *The Day After*, the *War* series appears as an outstanding example of the literate, pre-electronic mind

utterly foreign to television, yet which stubbornly endures in the dying Canadian tradition of the documentary film. This "documentary mentality" graphically illustrates McLuhan's adage that the content of one medium is often the content of another. In the case of *War*, the content was Dyer's text, a non-fiction form of written expression that operates on the stated contrast between the rigorous, the seemingly logical, the central point of view, alternating with unstated absences, blindneses, and apocalyptic terrors. For instance, that a major documentary series on contemporary warfare could overlook the role of the information media in the preparation and waging of war, despite the recent controversy over the Falklands, has to be taken as (deliberate?) blindness since raising the question might have put into doubt either the 'truth' of the documentary or the omniscience of Dyer's argument.

If there is any truth or omniscience on television, it is that the medium is playing to an invisible crowd. And to the viewer, television watching is itself a distracted form of play: an aesthetic-imaginative experience produced by an image-dispensing machine indifferent to the distinction between a 'serious' documentary such as *War* or a 'trashy' melodrama like *The Day After*. For Freud says somewhere that in imaginative works we seek compensation "for the impoverishment of life": the imaginative mode makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death. We die imaginatively yet we survive, ready to die again just as safely. Yet the difference between *The Day After* and *War* can be stated more precisely in that the former can display the realistic appearance of an imaginary event (the nuclear destruction of Lawrence, Kansas) while the latter hesitates before the 'imaginary' event of a real appearance (that the missiles you see can indeed be used). The one manages to make death visible and so (perhaps) imaginatively dispels it; the other cannot make death visible and because of death's absence only makes it more terrifying.

Yet the *War* series' greatest strength

was to, again and again, show that electronic technology has reduced both soldiers and potential victims to people sitting in front of TV screens: the former looking at the screens in the hope that nothing will happen, the latter doing the same in the hope that something will. Dyer's series attempts to show on television that nuclear warfare is the limit of the image: the terrifying blackness beyond which the camera cannot go, the point at which the image regresses. Indeed to convey something of Hiroshima's ground zero, the series showed paintings by survivors - paintings and text. The content of one medium is the content of another.

One could thus say that the text-content of the *War* series became the image-content of *The Day After*, a made-for-TV film that roared in, commercials and all, where Dyer feared to tread. It allowed one to see the terrifying unknown or something akin to it, no matter how meretriciously done. In this sense, the difference between *War* and *The Day After* is that the latter could posit television, while the series could not, and so the series' impact would be vaporized by television itself. ABC knew exactly how to play an hour-and-a-half film into a week-long media-event; in the case of *War*, seven hours of film produced only a dull half-hour with Patrick Watson. *The Day After* allowed (American) television to do what it does best: to focus all attention upon itself and display its power to summon forth statesmen and generals from the brink of the Apocalypse. *War's* far more potentially probing point simply drifted off into the ether.

The danger - and perhaps there is one - is that something like *The Day After* fear of nuclear death. The danger would be that, by transforming the unthinkable into the viewable, it becomes the image equivalent to the concept of "limited or winnable nuclear war", the strategic creation of those whom Dyer calls "the military metaphysicians" that is at the heart of much current Western anti-nuclear agitation, including at the origin of the *War* series.

McLuhan used to hope that television,

by heightening the visibility of human frailty, had the power to make nuclear weapons self-liquidating. Whatever their flaws, certainly both programs appealed to the power of television's ability to reshape the old, 'real' world. And if that is the effect of such programs, then television can truly hope to yet replace the Bomb as the ultimate weapon of our time.

Michael Dorland ●

WAR (Series) title Don McWilliams, Caroline Leaf **mus.** Larry Crosley **mus. rec.** Louis Hone **sup. sd. ed.** Bernie Bordeleau **re-rec.** Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll **post-sync. exf.** Ken Page, c.f.e. **unit admin.** Carmel Kelly, Bob Spence **p. coord.** Claire Stevens **post-p. coord.** Grace Avrih **res.** Elizabeth Klinck **film res.** Donna Dudinsky **series dev. & edit. d.** Gwynne Dyer, Michael Bryans **presented by** Gwynne Dyer **series p.** Bill Brind, John Kramer **exec. p.** Barrie Howells **p.c.** National Film Board of Canada **Film 1: The Road to Total War d./p.** Barbara Sears **sc.** Gwynne Dyer, Barbara Sears **loc. d.** Douglas Kiefer, Michael Bryans, Tina Viljoen, Marrin Canell, Paul Cowan **ed.** Hannele Halm **cam.** Douglas Kiefer, Paul Cowan, Kent Nason, Jean-Pierre Lachapelle, Michel Thomas-D'Hoste **sd. rec.** Hans Oomes, Bev Davidson, Richard Besse **sd. ed.** Bernie Bordeleau **Film 2: Anybody's Son Will Do sc.** Gwynne Dyer **d./cam.** Paul Cowan **co-d./ed.** Judith Merritt **2nd cam. op.** Michael Mahoney **sd. rec.** James McCarthy **loc. man.** Richard Bujold **sd. ed.** Bill Graziadei **Film 3: The Profession of Arms sc.** Gwynne Dyer **d.** Michael Bryans, Tina Viljoen **ed.** Tina Viljoen **add. loc. cam.** Douglas Kiefer, Paul Cowan **cam.** Douglas Kiefer, Paul Cowan, Susan Trow, Kent Nason, Andy Kitzanuk, Savas Kalogeras **sd. rec.** Hans Oomes, Bev Davidson, Art McKay, Yves Gendron, Jacques Drouin, Raymond Marcoux **sd. ed.** John Knight **p.** Michael Bryans, Tina Viljoen **Film 4: The Deadly Game of Nations sc.** Gwynne Dyer **d./cam.** Paul Cowan **ed.** Robert Fortier **2nd cam. op.** Michael Mahoney **sd. rec.** Yves Gendron, Shuki Zuta **add. photog.** Savas Kalogeras **sd. ed.** Jackie Newell **Film 5: Keeping The Old Game Alive./cam./p.** Douglas Kiefer **sc.** Gwynne Dyer, Barbara Sears **ed.** Joan Henson, Richard Todd **sd. rec.** Hans Oomes, Bev Davidson **sd. ed.** Bernie Bordeleau **Film 6: Notes on Nuclear War sc.** Gwynne Dyer **d./ed.** Tina Viljoen **add. loc. d.** Douglas Kiefer, Marrin Canell, Michael Bryans **cam.** Douglas Kiefer, Kent Nason, Jean-Pierre Lachapelle, Don Virgo, Barry Perles **sd. rec.** Hans Oomes, Bev Davidson, Richard Besse **sd. ed.** Bill Graziadei **p.** Tina Viljoen, Michael Bryans **Film 7: Goodbye War d.** Donna Dudinsky, Judith Merritt, Barbara Sears **sc.** Gwynne Dyer, Barbara Sears **add. loc. d.** Tina Viljoen, Douglas Kiefer, Paul Cowan, Michael Bryans **ed.** Judith Merritt **cam.** Douglas Kiefer, Paul Cowan, Kent Nason, Susan Trow, Martin Duckworth **sd. rec.** Hans Oomes, Bev Davidson, James McCarthy, Yves Gendron, Richard Nicol **sd. ed.** Noel Almey **p.** Donna Dudinsky **dist.** National Film Board of Canada **color** 16 mm **running time:** 7 x 56'50"

● Times of the sign: WWI soldiers, during a semiological pause, in the first episode of the seven-part documentary series, *War*

