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King in the Wilderness

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King in the Wilderness

Abstract

This is a film review of *King in the Wilderness* (2018), directed by Peter W. Kunhardt.

Keywords

Martin Luther King, Nonviolence, Vietnam War, Poverty, Economic Inequality

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



King in the Wilderness (2018), dir. Peter W. Kunhardt

This documentary focuses on the last three years of Dr. King's life (1965-68) during which he experienced new challenges and developed new views. The narration comes entirely from 22 eyewitnesses who knew him, including Harry Belafonte, Jesse Jackson, and Andrew Young (who was present at the Sundance premiere). They portray him as a man with struggles and flaws, but also one with immense conviction who often found his views in collision with others.

It was during this time period that Dr. King took a public stance against the Vietnam War, which he had been reluctant to do, especially as this put him in opposition to his great ally in the civil rights movement, President Johnson. It was also a period in which King began to focus on the problem of structural economic poverty as one that affects people of all races. King went to Chicago to see the poverty in person, but was shocked when he was met with overt racism from

Neo-Nazis. Racism was just as present in the north, and in many ways it was more visceral. His principles of nonviolence, anti-war, anti-poverty, and anti-racism all went together during this time—even though not everyone agreed that nonviolence was the right method. Stokely Carmichael became more vocal in his endorsement of “Black Power” which expressed a militant view at odds with that of King. These were also the years when J. Edgar Hoover continued his surveillance of King, seeing him as dangerously close to communism.

King’s friends saw the stress he was under, but also note that he was not about to back down on anything, even when it cost him personally. Archival footage and photos enrich the narrative and add to its poignancy when you see the exhaustion in King’s face. But shortly before the end of his life, he seemed to accept the possibility of his own death in a way that gave him some peace. His famous, prophetic speech in Memphis—“I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man”—suggests he had an intimation of his death.

At the showing, Andrew Young added more personal reflections to what he has said in the film about the fundamental nature of King’s beliefs on nonviolence, which were non-negotiable for him. There is much in the story of King’s last years that many people do not know, which this film tells extremely well. Had he lived, King might have been able to turn the civil rights movement to act not only against racism, but in more thoroughgoing ways against militarism and economic inequality. We will never know. But we do have his legacy and beliefs, which should be heard and studied, now more than ever.