

Remembering 'Return to Waterloo' - film review

by Erin Quigley



'Return to Waterloo' (1984), **Ray Davies** of **'The Kinks'** departure into directing, establishes itself as a musical drama that questions the thoughts of a seemingly average commuter (Ken Colley) on his daily, mundane train journey from Guildford to Waterloo. The 58-minute film centres around the astutely unnamed protagonist's perverse fantasies whilst giving a voice to almost everyone he encounters, through Davies' solo music, as he remains eerily silent. The plot is energetic and, although muddled in places, the film stands as a thought-provoking conceptualisation of transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau's saying, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation".

Despite the film's delineation of Thatcher's 1984 Britain, its themes of upper-class hypocrisy prove contemporary, with misguided exceptionalism arguably being as pervasive as ever in our current zeitgeist. The message of this film is not the only thing that has survived the 36 years since the film's release, as the film's interpretation of the

musical genre has continuously resurfaced, an example being Rufus Norris' 'London Road' (2015), based on the musical of the same name which opened at the National Theatre in 2011.

As much as 'Return to Waterloo' may have inspired other work, the influence of 'The Who's' 1975 operetta 'Tommy' cannot go unmentioned as a huge development in the visual album category. With its satirical extravagance and mixed reviews, 'Tommy' paved the way for Davies to accomplish an entirely more fluid and provocative contribution to the album-film wave of the 70's and 80's.

'Return to Waterloo' is Davies' sole directorial endeavour, which leaves the films cinematographer Roger Deakins to be the films prevailing rock-star. Deakins has an exceptionally impressive filmography, from 'The Shawshank Redemption' (1994) to 'Blade Runner 2049' (2017) to '1917' (2019), firmly establishing him as one of the all-time best in his field. Although 'Return to Waterloo' is without question one of the most unknown projects Deakins has shot, it is unreservedly not of peripheral importance. With Deakins' early career mainly consisting of documentaries concerning musicians, e.g. 'Van Morrison in Ireland' (1980) and 'Blue Suede Shoes' (1980), 'Return to Waterloo' is a perfect embodiment of the effortless transition from Deakins' preliminary work, to his renowned work in major Hollywood motion pictures.

Even though the film has somewhat of a cult following, understandably largely consisting of Ray Davies or Roger Deakins enthusiasts, I believe 'Return to Waterloo' should be more widely remembered for its understanding of the power of music in film and as a reimagining of the musical film genre in general.