

On the point of irrational detonation: Peter Watkins' *The Journey*, 1987

What we endure in the present is historically formed and to that degree subject to rational analysis, but it exists now as a critical mass on the point of irrational detonation.

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Notes on Exterminism, The Last Stage of Civilization

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As an experiment with the form, the force and the performance of documentary, the fourteen hours and thirty three minutes of *The Journey* 1987, is the culmination of Watkins' exploration of the nuclear state that began with the visionary annihilationism of *The War Game* 1965 and continued into the rarely screened dramas *The Trap* 1975 and *Evening Land* 1976. *The Journey* accordingly revisits earlier fictional signatures such as the statistical reports of *Culloden* 1964 and the youth interviews of *The Seventies People* 1974 replaying them as documentary positions that seek to make sense of the exterminist logic of Cold War politics during the 1980s. Conceived in Stockholm in late May 1983, filmed in twelve countries and edited in Canada, *The Journey* was finally premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1987.

In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 1988, Guy Debord argued that 'nuclear practices, both military and civil demands a far higher dose of secrecy than in other fields'. Guy Debord, Thesis XIII, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie, Verso, 1988, p.35. *The Journey* endorses this verdict and effectively envisions the far-reaching extent of a 'society built on secrecy'. (Debord, 1987, Thesis XVIII, p.47) The occult mood of the 1980s was powerfully evident in the BBC nuclear conspiracy drama *Edge of Darkness* 1986, scripted by dramatist Troy Kennedy Martin. Here state security and big business converged in the sinister organizational complex of the Northmoor nuclear waste plant in the North of England.

The Journey, by contrast, marshals the powers of audiovisual montage against the covert forces of what Austrian critic Robert Jungk named the 'nuclear state' in 1979. Watkins' teams train their cameras onto rural geographies and idyllic views that seem, on first sight, to be pleasingly picturesque. These perspectives are revealed, gradually, as environments cloaked and weaponised against unsuspecting civilians. The peaceful landscapes of Norway and Northern Germany and the serene shoreline of the Pacific Islands turn out to provide aesthetic cover for intensely militarised terrains that hide nuclear weapons and conceal atomic detonations. These occluded yet pervasive nuclear geographies create a duplicity at the level of landscape that becomes deceptive and suspect.

The Journey aims to visualize capitalist and communist societies as two forms of a single transnational system that critic Sabu Kohso has named the 'global nuclear regime', a system whose powers of occultation can be revealed and resisted by the powers of cine-education. Through photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims,

the television-critique of Canadian evening news, information displays, comparative statistics, animations, discussions with families in Mexico, Norway, Germany, Russia, Japan, Scotland, America and Australia, community meetings in Mozambique, France, Scotland and Tahiti, interviews with World War II survivors in Japan and Germany, emergency evacuations reenacted in Australia, Norway and America and states of emergency enacted in Britain, *The Journey* operates as an exhaustive experiment in localised long distance cine-politics that aims to alert audiences and participants to the scale of what Watkins calls the 'militarization of the planet'.

Throughout the film, we watch families looking at enlarged images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims. These appalling black and white photographs of peeling skins, charred corpses and scattered skulls bring the impact of 1945 into the kitchen tables and front rooms of 1986. The cowed silence produced by these images speaks of a delayed reaction, as if these families, have until now, managed to evade any sustained sensorial confrontation with the impact of the atomic bomb. What the camera reveals is the struggle to respond. It watches as mothers, fathers, grandmothers and teenagers of varying ages and nationalities look away from the photographs and shrink from the camera's gaze. The film weaves these painful hesitations, inadequate articulations and shared silences into versions of what philosopher Gunther Anders called 'Promethean shame'.

Over time, the family, the workplace, television and school emerge as social factories that reproduce and reinforce the incapacities of the interviewees to interpret or to make judgements. Confronted with pictures, probed by questions, each interviewee seems to slowly awaken from an intangible somnambulism. When an American man recounts his dawning realisation that he, like everyone working at his company Hollywell, manufactures parts for nuclear weapons, his wife nods sympathetically, announcing, in a tone of near wonder, that 'I was living in oblivion...' What becomes apparent is that the militarization of the planet has not, in the words of Alexander Kluge, become 'an experience capable of public decipherment.'

Although Watkins insistently questions his interviewees, there are multiple instances in which his questions take the form of words transcribed onto the screen like a blackboard. They address the viewer as a student participating in a classroom discussion. Indeed, *The Journey* was conceived in nineteen 'units,' each lasting approximately forty five minutes and concluding with a question mark, designed to be screened by community groups, adult education classes and in small public screenings. In 1990, Watkins and his collaborator Vida Urbanavicius completed a 339 page Users Guide that proposed ways of utilizing *The Journey* as one possible 'model of an alternative future relationship' between the public and mass media.

Watkins' role is to draw responses from different families, to screen video recordings of families responding to earlier discussions to other families and then to film the former as they respond to the latter. This incremental feedback aims to create a skeptical self-awareness in the participant and the viewer, each of whom is encouraged to become aware of their role within the communication matrix that organises their society. *The Journey* transposes and inverts the televisual structure of *The Peace Games* first seen in *The Gladiators* 1968. Instead of pitting soldiers against each other for entertainment as in *The Gladiators*, *The Journey* functions as a form of

peace education that alerts viewers to the ways in which television operates as a war game played by corporations upon its viewers.

The Journey performs its own media critique by studying the ways in which television shapes the common sense of political events. Watkins' Canadian production films television crews preparing for the so-called Shamrock Summit of Reagan and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada in 1986. It observes and analyses the anti-Summit demonstrations and continually contrasts Quebec's evening news broadcasts with its own footage.

The Journey's instructional aesthetic underlines the controlling capacity of the media. The film is populated by guides whose role is to help the viewer navigate its elaborately plaited montage. Photographer Bob Del Tredici performs the first such role. By pointing to details inside his enlarged black and white aerial perspectives, Tredici exactingly reconstructs the far-reaching scale of America's 'nuclear weapons production complex' circa 1986. Throughout *The Journey*, he reappears to narrate the stages by which two hundred separate parts converge upon the Pantax Nuclear Weapons Final Assembly Plant in Amarillo, Texas to be assembled into a nuclear bomb.

This process is only the first of many journeys that constitute *The Journey*; the film is made of journeys of each of its families which are interrupted, revisited, elaborated and sustained across the film. The journey described by Del Tredici is continued by American peace activist Shelly Douglas who identifies the white trains that transport the assembled nuclear warheads from the trainyard at Amarillo, Texas across America to the Trident nuclear submarine base in Bangor, Washington, outside Seattle, where she lives.

Duval explains how she alerted friends to the imminent arrival of the train until a 'chain of little communities' grows up 'all along these railroad tracks.' These strangely apologetic protests are glimpsed throughout *The Journey*. A woman in a red blouse and long black skirt walks slowly towards the track. A middle aged man in a white hardhat intercepts her path by clasping her left arm. A second man arrives followed by a third and a fourth. The five whites stare as the great white train fills the foreground, like a moving wall, its bell clanging.

The protestors do not throw themselves in front of the great white train. They congregate as if to announce that 'we are here and we are watching.' The protest makes their helplessness public. It helps them to manage the fear which they must have felt at the indifferent movement of the train. As if to atone for this sense of dread, the camera returns to walk alongside and inside the railtracks towards the gates of the base at Bangor. Banks of grass loom on either side. Footsteps press forwards, aiming at the vanishing point of the railroad. This journey, split into scenes and matched with the white male voices of the American military, feels like a pilgrimage undertaken to remind viewers of the existence of the great white train.

The Journey is an epic directed against forgetting that has itself been largely forgotten. Its duration has prevented its entry into popular awareness. As a result, its accretional montage, its communicative ethics, its stricken silences, its faith in the power of image and its premonitory sound design remain latent, still to be

encountered. Its heroic project of ensuring the implications of atomic explosion enters into what WG Sebald called the 'internal constitution' of this country, still lies ahead: untested, unproven, unresolved.

By Kodwo Eshun
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