The Bomb Beneath Us: *Culloden*, *The War Game* and *The Journey*

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'The Bomb Beneath Us: *Culloden*, *The War Game* and *The Journey*', in Çağla Özbek/ Emrah Serdan, eds., *Peter Watkins: No Shortcuts*, Görültü, Istanbul 2026, pp. 186-97.

A number of colourful apocryphal stories surround the famous Hotel Moskva, which hosted visiting state officials and foreign dignitaries. In one, told to me by a Moscow taxi driver, during its demolition in 2004, workers discovered a colossal bomb, primed for immediate use, hidden in the basement. It had been there since the battle for Moscow in 1941 on the bet that, should the city fall, the hotel would be used by Nazi forces as their headquarters. The bomb had sat there ever since. The story may serve as a parable for the nuclear-armed state. The bomb may deter or destroy malefactors, but the price paid is to sleep each night on a bed of high explosives, which may at any time—by accident or design—be detonated. And, in daily life, the bomb's existence is largely forgotten.

As a number of commentators have pointed out, Peter Watkins' films are Brechtian in their concerted efforts to reveal the means of filming, estrange their subjects, inform their viewers, and activate histories in the light of the present.[1] While Brecht, at least in theory, favoured the audience's exercise of reason over its feelings, Watkins works on both in a deeply affective type of filmic pedagogy.[2]

This essay will try to evoke that affective aspect through an account of the author's experience at two moments, living both with and (as we shall see) without Watkins' work, while dwelling in a nuclear-armed nation, and in a media environment swamped with conventional forms, by the ideological habits of what Watkins calls 'the monoform', which is designed to abolish any risk of boredom at the cost of also abolishing critical reflection.[3]

The first moment was about 1970 when at primary school Watkins' film *Culloden* (1964) was projected for a class as a way to educate us about the Highlands uprising of 1745-46. The BBC had commissioned the film, employing Watkins as director, and had complete control over when and where it was shown.[4] It seems that the film was often shown in schools, though perhaps seeing it at primary school before the age of eleven was less usual, given its graphic depictions of

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[1] See, for instance, the discussion of Watkins in Angelos Koutsourakis, *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 178-85.
[2] See Sulgi Lie, 'The Futurity of the Past' in Wolf Kino, ed., *Future Revolutions: New Perspectives on Peter Watkins*, Pogobooks Verlag, Berlin 2018, p. 47.
[3] Watkins has made many statements on the monoform. See, for example, 'The Dark Side of the Moon: The Global Media Crisis' in Wolf Kino, *Future Revolutions*, pp. 9-25.
[4] See John R. Cook, 'The Last Battle: Peter Watkins on DVD', *Film International*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 2003, pp. 54-5.

violence. It may be that the Quaker and thus pacifist leanings of my school had something to do with that.

Culloden was utterly unlike anything that I had seen on television, especially when set against dominant US TV shows of the time such as *Batman* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, with their charismatic stars, fast cutting, camp air, cartoonish violence and candy colours. *Culloden* was slow, starkly monochromatic, and unlike monoform shows that sought immersion and escapism, disoriented the viewer by moving between interviews with the actor-participants (anachronistically filmed in the eighteenth century), a contemporary journalist's commentary and an authoritative voiceover. Violence was not sanitised, glamourised or framed as virtuous but was rather cast both as an impersonal and arbitrary matter (there is a hard little lesson on the effects of grapeshot), or a clumsy, close-up and naked exercise of power. Situated far beyond the realm of heroes and villains, almost no one comes out of *Culloden* well. Bonnie Prince Charlie is styled as a grossly incompetent and complacent fop who leads his army to disaster. The British state ruthlessly destroys not just the rebel army but the very life and culture from which it had sprung, in an act of genocide which had strong echoes with the attempts to suppress anti-colonial movements in Malaya, Kenya, Algeria and Vietnam.[5] Bound by debt, greed, vendetta or feudal ties, the ordinary combatants on both sides were forced into warfare by a system that cared nothing for their lives. The whole film was a concise instruction in imperialism, class difference, militarism and their ideological masks, while it at least implicitly criticised mainstream media conventions.

[5] Nicholas J. Cull, 'Peter Watkin's Culloden and the Alternative Form in Historical Filmmaking', *Film International*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 2003, p. 50.

Seeing it as a child, what stayed with me most were the faces—the puzzled but obtuse visage of the Prince, the brutal expressions of murderous British infantrymen, and above all the filthy, battered, scarred and exhausted faces of the Highlanders. Watkins had learned a good deal from Soviet film makers of the silent era, and his choice and use of such faces echoed that in Eisenstein and Pudovkin. I had never seen faces like that on film or TV, and they stayed with me, so that watching *Culloden* again, more than half a century on, I was struck by wave after wave of recognition.

Watkins' next film, *The War Game* (1965), which took on the subject of a nuclear strike on England, was of course suppressed by the BBC. The Corporation had been quietly pressured by Harold Wilson's Labour government which was afraid that its stark education in the effects of a single nuclear bomb hitting Kent, revealing the total inadequacy of civil defence provisions, and the likely turn of the authorities to violent oppression as all social norms collapsed, would sow alarm and despondency, and strengthen the peace movement.[6]

The BBC eventually showed it twenty years later in July 1985, close to the fortieth anniversary of the attack on Hiroshima, and I saw it then. If the effect was muted, it was partly because the work was by then an antique, both in terms of its film style, and in the speech, manners and

[6] John R. Cook , 'Who Banned *The War Game*? A Fifty-Year Controversy Reassessed', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 14, no. 1, January 2017, pp. 39 – 63.

dress of its participants. In addition, Watkins' careful hedging of the events shown ('This is the phenomenon which could perhaps happen in Britain'), doubtless designed to placate those voices at the BBC who would insist on objectivity and balance, weakened the effect of some of the scenes shown—without saving the film from its banning.

Many of the effects of *The War Game* were familiar from *Culloden*: the mix of interview and commentary, the highlighting of the film crew's presence, the ordinary people serving as actors, and the knowing violation of romantic myths. Just as the hugely influential Walter Scott vision of the Highlands was eviscerated in *Culloden*, which showed a venal feudal system forcing its people into battle, in *The War Game*, the steadfast stiff upper lip of the English was tested to destruction in an irradiated Kent, ridden with mass casualties, fire storms, famine and looting.[7]

1985 was, however, an extraordinary moment for the film to be shown. The British 'independent nuclear deterrent' (we will come back to those terms) took the form of a submarine-borne missile system of fantastic expense. Within the deranged logic of nuclear deterrence, that made a certain sense, especially for a small country, since there is little point in launching a pre-emptive strike against a nation which has its weapons secreted at sea. Israel has the same arrangement. Yet, flouting this logic, in 1980 the US had been permitted to deploy its medium-range Pershing missiles at two sites in the UK in a marked escalation of the Cold War that made the country a direct target. The move led to a strong revival of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which

[7] See Cull, 'Peter Watkin's', p. 48; and Carmen Gray, 'Britain Can't Take It: The War Game and Propaganda of Resilience', in Wolf Kino, pp. 50-1.

gathered hundreds of thousands of people on its demonstrations, and of course to the famous women's protest encampment at the Greenham Common base.

It became obvious, too, that the independent nuclear deterrent was anything but, since the hardware and software were controlled by the US. As a foundation stone of the British state and its projection of post-imperial power, this arrangement tightly binds the nation to US foreign policy, as if with a necklace of barbed wire.[8] Its effect was seen in British silence or complicity in numerous illegal US military actions from Vietnam to Grenada and Panama, and it would be seen again in the disasters of Iraq, Libya and Syria, in which polity and media alike were tied to the exercise of US power, no matter how horrific the consequences.[9] It is seen too in the media frenzy unleashed when any politician who questions nuclear weapons comes even close to the assumption of power, as in the fervid assaults on Michael Foot and much later Jeremy Corbyn. It continues today with British complicity in arming and supplying intelligence to the Israeli assault on Gaza, even as it became clear that the plan was for genocide.

[8] The UK state claims that the system has 'operational independence', meaning that it can be used without US say-so. However, the whole apparatus is interwoven with the US military-industrial complex to the extent that its Trident missiles are leased from the US. For a statement of the official position, see George Allison, 'What is Operational Independence, and Why is Trident Considered Operationally Independent in UK Service?', *UK Defence Journal*, 9 March 2025; https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk

[9] I have analysed the photographic dimensions of those actions in my book, *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2020.

A remarkable fictional BBC series also shown in 1985, *Edge of Darkness*, explored the fundamental character of the nuclear force to the constitution of the British state, its use of lethal force against its own citizens should they threaten it, and the manifold and existential risks under which it places us all.[10] The series was remarkable in its focus on this issue at a time of widespread dissent, and its successful dramatization of the issues. In a famous moment, a dissident Colonel with CIA links, played by Joe Don Baker, brings two blocks of plutonium into a large meeting of senior military officers, government functionaries and entrepreneurs involved in a plan to put nuclear weapons into space. He removes them from his briefcase with the words:

> This future nuclear state will be an absolute state whose authority will derive not from the people but from the possession of plutonium. And to make sure we all know what we're talking about, I brought some with me today.

The assembled dignitaries flee the room in abject terror.

Watkins is a harsh critic of the usual conventions in film and TV, especially of rapid cutting, continual novelty, emotionally manipulative music, and boilerplate acting. Even when TV deals with grave and neglected issues, when it does so by using such means, the effect is still to sedate the viewer into thoughtlessness and integrate them into the hierarchy. For example, the handling of slavery in *Roots* (1977), as examined by Watkins and student collaborators at Columbia, fitted such a manipulative mould:

> I asked them to really look at the role of the actors, and at the pat narrative structure, with the violins playing and the guy coming back home after twenty years away from his slave family and the tears, the synthetic tears, rolling down the faces of the black ladies. It's puke-making.[11]

Slavery and the Black experience in the US were brought to mainstream TV but active resistance was never shown and barely alluded to. When such issues are treated in the manner of *Love Story* or *Kojak*, Watkins claims, it produces a 'conservative, if not neo-fascist, schmaltz!'[12]

Was *Edge of Darkness* a monoform TV series? In some ways, yes—it leant upon appealing professional actors, a compelling story, and a plangent and some would say obtrusive musical score. In other ways, though, the viewer swiftly realises that they are not in the usual TV-wonderland. The inclusion of news broadcasts, comforting in their extreme conformity, is set against the existential violence of the whole, in a manner that may owe something to Watkins. The presence of the anti-nuclear campaigner and Labour MP Michael Meacher, shown at a political meeting, likewise pries open the narrative frame and questions the status of the work as pure fiction. The frequent use of subdued available light is associated with realism and documentary, and the cutting is not to the usual seven-second tempo that Watkins saw as a key part of the monoform. The director, Martin Campbell, had enough confidence in the visual

[10] The comparison with *The Journey* is also made briefly by Kowdo Eshun, 'On the Irrational Detonation' in Wolf Kino, *Future Revolutions*, p. 105.
[11] Scott MacDonald, 'An Interview with Peter Watkins', *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, vol. 34, no. 3, Summer 1982, p. 49.
[12] Ibid.

strength of the material and the commitment of viewers, to hold shots for much longer. A 40-second night-time tracking shot across fences, guards and a notice warning about irradiated fuel introduces the first episode. The intimate and playful relationship between a police detective and his daughter (played by Bob Peck and Joanne Whalley) is established through a single 57-second shot of the two as they talk behind a rain-swept windscreen.

Edge of Darkness contributed to a widespread culture of protest against nuclear weapons and the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction by highlighting the dangers of annihilation and the authoritarian impetus of states as they forced such arrangements on their citizens. Made when the Thatcher regime was dividing the nation and breaking up its institutions, the series appealed to a unitary public sphere at the very moment when concerted moves were being made to fragment it through exposure to market forces.[13]

At this time, Watkins was pursuing the issue of nuclear arms with remarkable commitment in making *The Journey* (1987), a film far more uncompromising than *The War Game*. I did not see it when it appeared, and indeed few people did. It had limited outings at film festivals, and was only shown on television by three local channels in New York City and in Canada in 1989. No TV company has touched it since. Watkins describes the basic process of making the film in which he interviewed families or groups of people in various countries 'to find out what they knew about the state and consequences of the world arms race […and] the role that mass media and educational systems played in shaping a world view […]'.[14] These people are not accredited experts. While some of them are witnesses to the bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Hamburg, others are merely people caught up in some way with the nuclear state who are on the

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[13] As pointed out by Sean Cubitt in his book *EcoMedia*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2005, ch. 6.
[14] See the material on Watkins' site: http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/journey.htm

journey of working towards an understanding of it. These discussions occupy much of the film as, initially at Watkins' prompting, people slowly think through the issues, and eventually exchange views among themselves, and with other groups.

The discussions are accompanied by overtly pedagogic elements—the blackboard-like texts and question marks as intertitles, Watkins' clipped and precise announcements of fact, and the slow showing of large black-and-white prints by Bob del Tredici of bomb factories, their functionaries, and the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Graphic images of atom-bomb casualties are often shown even to children. While it was filmed across the world in places including Scotland, Norway, Canada, the USSR, Polynesia, Mexico and Mozambique, the landscapes shown are rarely picturesque or sublime but often appear under flat light in shots that highlight roads, railroad tracks, nondescript buildings, and the ruination brought to the land by military 'development'.

The film's epic fourteen-and-a-half-hour length in no way extends to its method which is slow, deliberate, repetitive and pedagogic, or its style, which is for the most part prosaic, if not dour, and makes little attempt to court the viewer. Indeed, as a report on the use of the film in teaching at Colgate University notes: 'At first, student reaction to this revolutionary work is frequently sheer boredom mixed with puzzlement at so many broken conventions.'[15] In an excellent essay about another very long Watkins film, *The Commune*, Matthew Beaumont says that it demands of its viewers 'unrelenting attention' and 'affective involvement'.[16] Now that it is

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[15] Nigel J. Young, report on *The Journey* for the Department of Peace Studies at Colgate University, NY, 1971, as quoted at http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/journey.htm

[16] Matthew Beaumont, 'Polyform Film: Peter Watkins and the Paris Commune', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 40, no. 8, pp. 1132-57. Beaumont also has insights into Watkins' 'antinomian' anti-capitalism without socialism

available on YouTube, few people appear to have watched this production, even when divided into roughly 50-minute episodes. It is indeed totally unsuited to the hyper-accelerated attention economy of social media.

Yet, at the same time, in its quiet fashion, *The Journey* evokes much of the anti-nuclear feeling of its time, in its landscapes, in its enactments of forced evacuation in an emergency, and in the generally mildly delivered thoughts of its participants. There is the repeated presence of the long-distance trains that carry nuclear bombs from the factory where they are made across the US in trains painted a stark white (aptly, the colour of death in Japan). Watkins talks to the activists who live alongside the tracks, and walks them himself. The trains deliver the bombs to a base where they are inserted into Trident missiles, those used in the 'British' deterrent.

Watkins asks a Scottish family who live close by the UK and US nuclear submarine bases at Faslane and Holy Loch about their dreams. A young man tells of seeing missiles flying above his town, in the knowledge that it will mean the destruction of everything and everyone that he knows. At this time, I lived in a house that backed onto a railway track in north London. In the dead of night, strange trains would slowly pass bearing their loads of heavily reinforced metal flasks carrying nuclear waste. They are seen in the opening passages of *Edge of Darkness*. One would wake to their ponderous and ominous sound, quite unlike that of normal trains, and sometimes wake in dread from the nightmares that haunted so many across the world in the 1980s as the world seemed to creep closer to war.

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which, in his view, prevents the director from fully connecting critiques of media conformity and the actions of the state.

Such emotions are captured by Watkins' long film, as its insistent repetition or near repetition adds to its cumulative effect. As Scott MacDonald points out in his analysis of the film, a few lyrical scenes—a long shot of a child sleeping in Polynesia, the Japanese child, Yoriko Shinya, playing piano with remarkable accomplishment—point to all that could be extinguished.[17]

Another film, seen at the cinema, from primary school days also stays with me—David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). A film about war, imperialism, and the psychic costs of battle, it was often delivered in highly considered and composed long shots with a mobile camera. Think, for instance, of Lawrence walking along the carriage rooves of an Ottoman Empire train, captured in an attack, cheered by the Arab guerrilla force below, and in the next shot captured on camera by a journalist, as his white robes flow against a sharp blue sky, while Maurice Jarre's music swells to a crescendo. The film is no simple celebration of war, and the immediately preceding scene clearly shows Lawrence's derangement by all that he has experienced. Yet it trades on the sublime spectacle of war in the vast open spaces of the desert, vaunts bravery, and works on an epic scale which is an ideologically loaded symbol of war's tragedy and magnificence. For a child, it was a seductive vision.

In utter contrast, *The Journey* works at the level of the anti-sublime. The state and business-run building and maintenance of genocidal weaponry is de-glamourised, and its bureaucratic elements highlighted. Del Tredici's photographs of its directors show dumpy and obtuse men. The fate of humanity is mapped out under strip lights, on spreadsheets and memos, as if it was any other business. We may well think of Hannah Arendt here in the blindness of these functionaries to the purpose of their jobs, and the skewed rationality behind the unthinkable and the inhuman.[18]

Throughout *The Journey*, Watkins, from his humanist perspective, like many of those he talks to, remains aghast at what the state has done and is prepared to do. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were test sites for the effects of different nuclear bombs. It is noted that the timing of the explosion of the Hiroshima bomb was set for rush hour, to catch as many people as possible in the open. A centre set up in Hiroshima by the US to monitor the long-term effects of the bomb obliged people to submit to medical examinations but denied them treatment. In the film we hear Watkins say of this: 'I didn't know that. Did you?' *The Journey*, then, shows its participants and its director alike awakening through education and conversation to the bomb beneath their beds, and enjoins its viewers to do the same.

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[17] Scott MacDonald, 'The Filmmaker as Global Circumnavigator: Peter Watkins' *The Journey* and Media Crisis', in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds., *Documenting the Documentary: Close Reading of Documentary Film and Video*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1998, pp. 360-378.
[18] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised edition, The Viking Press, New York 1965.