Peter Watkins: The Journey
The Journey
Peter Watkins

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.

As an experiment with the form, and the force of documentary, the fourteen hours and thirty minutes of The Journey 1987, is the culmination of Watkins' exploration of the nuclear state and 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 Watkins' photographic interests such as those captured in 12 Colleen men 1964 and the youth interviews of The Seventies People 1974-replacing them as documentary positions that seek to make sense of the extremism of Cold War politics during the 1960s. 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’. The Journey endorses this verdict and effectively envisions the far-reaching extent of a society built on the nuclear. The film was shot in twelve countries and was made on a tiny budget. Watkins' monumental film 870 min explores the state of the arms trade, military expenditure, the environment and gender politics that are more relevant than ever.

The Journey, by contrast, marshals the powers of audiovisual montage against the covert forces of what Austrian critic Robert Jungholz called the 'invisible war'. Watkins teams them onto their cameras onto rural geographies and idyllic views that seem, on first sight, to be pleasingly picturesque. These perspectives are revealed, gradually, as environments shadowed and weaponized against unyielding documentary. The political landscapes of Norway and Northern Germany and the serene shoreline of the Pacific Islands turn out to provide aesthetic cover for intensively militarised terrains that Watkins' audiences are meant 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 railroads 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, seems 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 accelerant montage, its counter-cinematic ethos, its stricken silences, its faith in the power of image and its prismatic construction remains latent, still to be evoked. Its heroic project of ensuring the implications of atomic explosion enters this world in a way that is unique to Watkins’ films. The Journey’s capacity to recollect, represent and ‘point to the others’ 

The Journey’s influence is felt in the way Watkins’ documentaries and television films continued to use the techniques and ideas explored in this project. The Journey is one of the few films that has been used as a basis for further works. It has been used to produce a series of films and television documentaries, including The Man Who Knew Too Much, a TV documentary series that continued the themes and ideas explored in The Journey. The Journey has also been used as a basis for a number of books and articles, including a book by Watkins himself, The Journey: A Film of the 1980s, which was published in 1988.

The Journey has been screened in a number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. It has been featured in a number of film festivals, including the Berlin International Film Festival, where it was shown in 1987. The Journey has also been screened in a number of museums and art galleries, including the Tate Modern in London, where it was shown in 2004.

The Journey was made in collaboration with The Otolith Collective, and is distributed by Peter Watkins’ company Hollywell, which manufactures parts for nuclear weapons. The film has been used as a basis for a number of educational projects, including a set of films and a series of workshops, which are designed to educate viewers about the dangers of nuclear weapons and the importance of nuclear disarmament.

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 atomic bomb home. In the kitchen, we are shown the sadomasochistic torture Watkins reveals the struggle to survive, which watches as mothers, fathers, grandmothers and teenage 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 struggles to speak. Watkins’ project succeeds in expanding documentary’s powers of polemic, calls the ‘militarization of the planet’. The Journey aims to alert audiences and participants to the scale of what Watkins has undertaken to remind viewers of the existence of the great white train.

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demonstrations in Quebec. It watches Radio-Canada producers at a breakfast meeting as they discuss the forthcoming visit of Reagan to Quebec. Different families respond to photos of victims of Hiroshima. Each family remembers and discusses the lack of information about the atomic bomb and the impact of nuclear war. The great white train continues to travel through the American countryside and families express their ignorance of its existence.

**Chapter 4: film reels 7 & 8 (43 min 54 sec)**

Different families sit at tables and struggle to respond to enlarged photographs of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Ortega, a Mexican family are introduced. A Haitian group analyses the secrecy of French nuclear tests in the Pacific. This policy is linked to the ways in which French government has allowed Polynesian workers to be exposed to high levels of external radiation. A discussion group in a television studio in Toulouse is introduced. On the walls of the studio can be seen maps depicting nuclear sites throughout France.

**Chapter 5: film reels 9 & 10 (44 min 32 sec)**

As television producers prepare for the so-called Shamrock Summit between Reagan and Mulroney in Quebec City, anti-Reagan demonstrations intensify. A Scottish group that meets to discuss the role of American military bases in Gaeltacht is introduced. Watkins shows families a dot graph that visualizes the total number of nuclear bombs in the world. He describes Americans plans to install nuclear weapons in a number of unsuspecting countries. The Smillies, a family based in Dumbarton, Scotland, express their opposition to the Trident submarine.

**Chapter 6: film reels 11 & 12 (46 min 21 sec)**

The community group in Lewis in Scottish Highlands expresses a growing sense of frustration against nuclear bases. By contrast, Alexander Kolosov from the Kolosov family in Leningrad feels protected by the armed forces in the USSR although he acknowledges that this safety comes at a great cost to the country. The difference between the American approach to intervention abroad and its response to problems within Middle America is raised. In Norway, the Vikan family participate in a mass enactment of an emergency evacuation, leaving their home to move north towards their local evacuation centre in a high school.

**Chapter 7: film reels 13 & 14 (39 min 35 sec)**

Canadian television broadcasts the Shamrock Summit in Quebec. The film returns to the Pacific Ocean. The Crippen family discuss the lack of available information on nuclear weapons. Ron Crippen, the husband reflects upon his ignorance about the work he does at the Honeywell factory. Ms Saeki recalls popular Japanese support for war. Her reconstruction is contextualized by the activist Jikken Li, the Chairman of the Korean Hibakusha Association in Hiroshima. He describes how the Japanese imperialist aggression provoked the atomic annihilation of its cities. He reminds viewers that Japan unilaterally invaded and occupied Korea in 1910 and that many of the Koreans forced to work in Hiroshima were imprisoned in 1945. The Hendricks, an African American family is introduced as they prepare to participate in an emergency evacuation exercise in upstate New York. Mr Hamada, another Hiroshima survivor, is introduced recalls his journey to find his missing father in Hiroshima.

**Chapter 8: film reels 15 & 16 (44 min 37 sec)**

This chapter links forms of structural violence with anti-Summit protests in Vancouver. A young woman from the 25th September Co-operative describes the importance of education while Gerard and Ouida, an Algerian couple analyse the division between classical Arabic spoken on television and Arabic spoken in everyday life that is excluded by the former. Mrs Biernam, a survivor of the Allied bombing of Hamburg in July 1943 is introduced. The film alternates between scenes of the Hendricks in New York and the Vikans in Norway as they negotiate the emergency evacuation procedures. Mr Hamada's recollections are matched with footage of an underground nuclear bunker in Hamburg. The Journey switches perspective by cutting to the 64 acre Pikyarskoye memorial cemetery in Leningrad. It shows Russians enduring a stroll along the wide boulevards. On either side of the concrete path are grass mounds indicating mass graves of 10,000 bodies, victims of the German army’s siege of Leningrad from 1941 to 1944. The Hendricks tries to leave the school evacuation. The film follows two children running in panic towards a school; these are revealed to be the Vikan children participating in the evacuation exercise by running towards an underground bomb shelter in their school.

**Chapter 9: film reels 17 & 18 (44 min 15 sec)**

Demonstrators burn the US flag during the protest against Reagan's visit to Québec City; this brief event dominates Radio-Canada's evening news coverage. The Journey visits La Trèbe valley outside Melbourne. Its camera travels across the epic vista of smoke emanating from the nuclear power plant. The Barnes family returns. The film introduces the nuclear power plant at La Trobe Valley. The film introduces locals from the Duvel family in Germany, is critical of her local teachers' efforts to retain neutrality during a discussion.

**Chapter 10: film reels 19 & 20 (43 min 52 sec)**

Archival footage of atomic detonation plays as the ITN newreader explains that Aboriginal claims about exposure to radiation fall out of atomic testing during the 1950s have been vindicated by the British government who have finally admitted responsibility. The Barnes family discusses nuclear testing in Australia. The film watches the Tahiri group as they study a video recording of the discussion by the Toulouse group on the history of French atomic testing in Polynesia. Watkins discusses the extent of Soviet bases in Afghanistan and shows a map of American bases in Australia and Japan to the Crippen family. Ellen Crippen is surprised at the number of US troops in Japan and the UK. Yonko Shinya of the Mori family in Tokyo describes her love for the piano and plays the first of several compositions heard throughout The Journey.

**Chapter 11: film reels 21 & 22 (48 min 45 sec)**

Yonko Shinya's piano provides a soundtrack for scenes of the nuclear world. Smudged white faces lit by the wavering circles of battery powered torches, emerge from the darkness of the cellar. The enactment takes on a heightened expressionist quality as people confound their fears and reflect upon their pre-nuclear lives. The Vikans are redirected towards another evacuation centre. This ongoing enactment is linked to an ongoing discussion about the role of the teacher within contemporary school systems. From the Duvel family in Germany, is critical of her local teachers' efforts to retain neutrality during a discussion.

**Chapter 12: film reels 23 & 24 (44 min 55 sec)**

The Journey follows the Hendricks family into the chaos of the evacuation in upstate New York. The journey of the Vikans towards their central evacuation point is scored with the voices of Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of State for Defence justifying the USA's need to pursue its strategic modernisation programme in order to avoid "condemning its inferiority" to the Soviet Union. Watkins links this rationale for military expenditure is linked with the state of education in the US. He contrasts American families with maps that list American colleges receiving military contracts. The continued lack of knowledge on the scale of American presence in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific Polynesia and the scale of French nuclear testing in so-called French Polynesia is attested to by an introduction of the Sumwela family in Tahiti and by the discussion among the Smillie family about the planned French nuclear testing of the British nuclear bunker in Hamburg. The Journey switches perspective by cutting to the 64 acre Pikyarskoye memorial cemetery in Leningrad. It shows Russians enduring a stroll along the wide boulevards. On either side of the concrete path are grass mounds indicating mass graves of 10,000 bodies, victims of the German army’s siege of Leningrad from 1941 to 1944. The Hendricks tries to leave the school evacuation. The film follows two children running in panic towards a school; these are revealed to be the Vikan children participating in the evacuation exercise by running towards an underground bomb shelter in their school.

**Chapter 13: film reels 25 & 26 (42 min 12 sec)**

Mr Hamada recalls finding his dying father in a first aid station in Hiroshima. He recalls the radio broadcast of the unconditional surrender of the Emperor: ‘The emperor spoke of having endured every kind of hardship, of having been patient and now it was defeat and unconditional surrender.’ My father cried and asked me to take him back. There it was, as if everything was going to come out. Among his last words, I still remember, ‘Why did we fight such a silly war?’ In the underground bunker in Hamburg, we watch hands turning giant wheels that power the emergency air system to the chaos of the evacuation centre in upstate New York. A policeman with lime green hair and her daughter back into their car and several policemen manhandle her husband Bill Hendricks for reasons unknown. Throughout these scenes, an anonymous white male voice recites an endless list of products required during an emergency evacuation. Scenes from the presidential Gala are contrasted with recollections of Portuguese colonialism by an elderly woman from the 25th September Co-operative. The film cuts from the scene of the co-operative working their land to the ingratiating spectacle of a Canadian country and Western singer looking towards the Reagans and Murneys. Seated in the Royal Box, they look down at her and us. In Japan, Kikkawa recalls that by 1945, 2,4 million Koreans were based in Morwell, Australia, playing the role of survivors in a post-nuclear world. Smudged white faces lit by the wavering circles of battery powered torches, emerge from the darkness of the cellar. The enactment takes on a heightened expressionist quality as people confound their fears and reflect upon their pre-nuclear lives. The Vikans are redirected towards another evacuation centre. The ongoing enactment is linked to an ongoing discussion about the role of the teacher within contemporary school systems. From the Duvel family in Germany, is critical of her local teachers' efforts to retain neutrality during a discussion.
Chapter 14: film reels 27 & 28 (45 min 24 secs)
In a state of emergency, Watkins explains, the British army would be granted sweeping powers to control the civilian population. The BBC would become the official mouthpiece of the emergency, offering neutral information that simultaneously legitimates that role. The Journey shows the frame of the portable television monitor in which a newsreader waits to read the news. The title theme begins, followed by the newsreader’s grave delivery: ‘Late last night, her majesty’s government decided to enact the dormant Emergency Powers Act legislation.’ In this near future scenario, councillors in Glasgow are called to the hall and then met by police and forcibly walked into police vans. At the gala, the singer sympathetically calls on Reagan and Mulroney to join her onstage to sing 'Irish Eyes are Smiling'. The Journey compares its own footage of the gala at the side of the parking lot, broadcast of the same event in order to reveal decisions made by the latter, prompting the question: ‘How much do we know about the language system of TV’? Marita Duvel from Germany continues to discuss the difficulties that teachers face in presenting information in a neutral manner. This is connected to the Smiley family’s recognition of the struggle required to resist, as exemplified by the protest camp at Greenham Common. This feminist struggle is highlighted with the figure of Ouiza Safou in Paris who analyses the subordinated position of women in contemporary Algeria.

Chapter 15: film reels 29 & 30 (48 min 51 sec)
In the cellar in Morwell, Australia, a teacher recalls class discussions on life after the bomb. As the white train continues its journey to the summit itself, it reveals how fully the commercial media is distance between the two families might be closed. Chapter 17: film reels 33 & 34 (49 min 47 sec)
The light is switched on in the cellar at Morwell to reveal a powerfully composed portrait of faces, each of whom articulates their reactions to the experience. At the school at Frosita that played the role of the evacuation centre, Watkins asks the local Norwegians to discuss their experience at the mock-evacuation exercise. As a result of the role of Civil Defence measures in an actual emergency. One woman dismisses the entire enactment as ‘senseless, totally senseless, its madness to transport people to this place.’ The chapter enters into a sequence of long distance messaging. At home, different families watch an excerpt of the recorded interview with the Kolosov family in the USSR. Elena Ortega and her family in Mexico City; the Mori family in Tokyo, the Crippen family in the US, the discussion group in Toulouse, the Tahitiant group and the Hendricks family, each watches the Kolosovs explain their fear of war. The camera returns to the Kolosovs in Leningrad to watch them formulating a response to the Smillies. It reverses direction to go to Dumbarton to watch the Smile family, watching the last section of the interview with the Kolosovs on their television and recording a new response. The process of one family sending and replaying to a visual message that is watched by other families forms the geographical distance between families into a shared understanding of the processes of separation. The main title of The Journey is repeated which begins in silence. Each family discusses, many for the first time, their experiences of seeing and listening to a discussion by a Soviet family in a domestic setting.

Chapter 18: film reel 35 (31 min 12 sec)
American families reflect upon their exposure to the Kolosov family and to the Ortega family from Mexico. The German survivors of the Hamburg bombing and the Vikan family draw conclusions from their experience, speaking of different peoples to support the peace movement. Hinao Lucas of the Tahitian family reflects upon the difficult economic conditions facing Pacific Islanders. Ouiza and Gerard, the Algerian couple analyse the long term effects of colonialism and emphasise the disenfranchisement of women in Algeria.

Chapter 19: film reels 36, 37 & 38 (57 min 39 sec)
In Leningrad, the Kolosov family watches the second videotape of messages recorded by each of the Smillie family in Dumbarton. Masha, the daughter, Lidia, the mother and Alexander the father responds in turn. The film moves between pointing towards future challenges, explained by women from the 25th of September collective to the problems of memory faced by Mrs Biermann, survivor of the Hamburg firestorm. The Journey returns to a scene of Yoriko Shinaka playing piano for the last time. Watkins requests audiences watch the credits as they have been edited to form an arrangement of the ‘sounds and images of our planet, the people of our planet at this crucial moment in time’ Musical refrains from earlier chapters are replayed, this time interrupted by the blackness of closing credits, disrupted by sudden silences and by concluding scenes filmed near windows and curtains that throw an unexpected brightness into the film. What emerges is a finale of voices, light, words, music, gestures and darkness, that draws together all the journeys undertaken by differing families and community groups throughout The Journey.

Excerpt from Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies, 1993
Scott MacDonald
The 14½ hours of The Journey are organized into an immense filmic weave that includes candid discussions with ‘ordinary people’ from many countries, community dramatizations, a variety of forms of deconstructive analysis of conventional media practices, presentations of art works by others, portraits of people and places, and a wealth of specific information about the knot of contemporary issues that includes the world arms race and military expenditures in general, world hunger, the environment, gender politics, the relationship of the violent past and the present, and, especially, the role of the media and of modern educational systems with regard to international issues.

The actual filming of the family discussions was extended and private, and I would guess that not one except Watkins understood the depth of his commitment to them. In conventional documentaries, and even more so in standard news coverage, interviews are rigorously edited: the amount of recorded interview that finds its way into a finished film or news item is determined by the director’s assumption about the usefulness or impact of what is said. This is especially the case when the interviewer is not an expert, the subject of the film, or a crucial witness to the actions of an ‘important’ person. Interviews with the so-called man-on-the-street are usually little more than decoration. The focus of The Journey, however is the thoughts and experiences of average people, and Watkins’ commitment to the people who agreed to talk with him was nearly absolute. He was determined to provide them with an opportunity to respond to his questions and to treat the responses with respect, not simply in a metaphoric sense, but literally, in the overall allocation of screen time and in his use of continuous, unedited shots.

Peter Watkins
As is true in a number of the films discussed earlier in this volume, the most fundamental and pervasive structural dimension of The Journey is the network of interconnections among layers of image and sound. To control the camera, for example, when Watkins is introducing the ‘false’ coverage of the Shamrock Summit, he juxtaposes a visual of a Canadian newsreader... doing a ‘topo’ (a news summary which is either an item in its own right, or which functions as an introduction or conclusion to the filmed and edited main news item - usually delivered while standing and facing the camera) with a voice-over translation of what [the newsreader] says. ‘Wrapped in a thick cloak of protocol and reception, the Mulroney-Reagan Summit has a full agenda.’ The image of the newsreader is framed so that, at first, she is seen surrounded by darkness (she was filmed standing in the street on a bleak winter evening in Quebec City) - her face is visible through the space between a technician’s arm and body (this scene was filmed by the Canadian Support Group for The Journey, who followed the Canadian coverage of the Summit!). She is surrounded by a ‘thick coat’ of media protocol and reception. In fact, the documentation of the topo reveals that the primary concern for [the newsreader] and those responsible for recording her is not the issues of the summit, but how she looks and sounds (she was very concerned not only about her speaking rhythm, but also about her makeup, and whether her hair was ‘missed-up by the wind’), the topo is redone several times, not to provide increased information, but to package the obvious more ‘professionally’. This concern with appearance, with ‘cloaking’ information in a specialized, elite language is not only parallel to the summit itself, it reveals how fully the commercial media is an arm to the government systems, functioning within the limited spaces and times determined by the government.

The more one fully attends to The Journey, the more the coherence of its vision becomes apparent. At first, the film seems to jump abruptly from one place and time to another, but by the end of the film, Watkins has made clear a belief that has been one of the foundations of all his work: that fundamentally, all places are simultaneously distinct and part of one place; all times are special and part of one time; all issues are important for themselves and as parts of a single, interlocking global issue. The Journey creates a cinematic space in which the viewer’s consciousness circles the earth continually, explores particular families and places, and discovers how each detail ultimately suggests the entire context in which it has meaning. Like the other films [described in Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies], but more fully than any of them, Watkins’ film develops in the direction not of narrative climax and resolution, but of an expanded consciousness of the world.
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Finally, we wish to thank all those who appear in this film, who have openly expressed their feelings and concerns
Thank you

Peter Watkins (born 1935)
Award-winning pioneer of the docudrama, typified by his combined use of fictional and documentary elements to dissect historical events. His work has been crucial to a critical understanding of mass media. For more info visit http://pwatkins.mnsi.net

The Otolith Collective
The name adopted by The Otolith Group for its public programme of curatorial projects, screenings, seminars, discussions and workshops. The public programme by The Otolith Collective includes the ongoing screening series The Militant Image from 2011 at the International Institute of Visual Arts; the exhibition On Vanishing Land by Mark Fisher and Justin Barton at The Showroom in 2013; Harun Farocki: 21 Films at Tate Modern in 2009; and The Ghosts of Songs: A Retrospective of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982–1998 at FACT, Liverpool and Arnolfini, Bristol in 2007. In July 2013, the first British Retrospective of the films of Anand Patwardhan will be curated by The Otolith Collective at Tate Modern.

The Otolith Group has featured in solo exhibitions at Redcat, Los Angeles, Project 88, Mumbai, MAXXI, Rome and MACBA, Barcelona and group exhibitions at Haus der Kunst, Munich, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, documenta 13, Kassel, 29th Sao Paolo Biennial and Manifesta 8, Murcia. In 2010, The Otolith Group was nominated for the Turner Prize.

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