Peter Watkins’ The Journey

The Journey, by the British director of The War Game, Peter Watkins, is an epic global film about nuclear weapons, defence spending and information to the public. Watkins is a determined, uncompromising director and he has created a 14-hour work.

The film weaves together several narratives, going back and forth, with a cyclical rhythm, between the news coverage of the 1984 Reagan-Maleny summit, the construction of a NATO base in Scotland, film footage of the White Train in the U.S. that carries nuclear warheads to Trident submarines, photos about the uranium/nuclear weapons conversion cycle by Robert Del Tredici, Hiroshima Memorial Park, farming cooperative in Mozambique, and so on. Watkins’ concern about the use of the media is expressed in these fragments, and he draws attention to the structure of his own film. For example, he introduces all the voices we will be hearing as narrators or translators throughout the film.

Rather than simply presenting the graphic images of the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he presents these through interviews with families, to whom he shows these photos. These interviews evolve as the film progresses and provide the bulwark for Watkins’ message of global unity. About 14 countries are represented and almost all of the families are shown videotapes of the other families, whereupon they express their feelings that people are all the same and that it is governments who are bringing us to the brink of world war, not the people.

Watkins is careful to make the film accessible to a global audience and, therefore, brings up many other issues besides nuclear war. Our relationship with the earth is called into question and, given his global perspective, it is inevitable that the resources poured into the military are seen as absurd, even pathetic, particularly in the face of extreme poverty. The Afri cans we see working the land together demonstrate another way of living, one that makes our industrial way of life, full of posturing and propaganda, war and pollution, seem disconnected to reality, unresponsive to the daily needs of our people for food and shelter. What is it that we are really protecting with our nuclear weapons?

Watkins is especially good at revealing the dream-life, fantasy world-view of the media. He uses coverage of the Shamrock Summit with Reagan and Mulroney in Quebec City, adding an audio beep every time there is a cut or any information is added to the image, thereby revealing every editorial decision made for the newcast. Watkins demonstrates that the summit is a carefully orchestrated media event, allowing politicians to seem like they are doing something (shut up rain, for example). The media dutifully play their role, ultimately keeping the public from being informed and leading it to believe that the politicians are concerned about the issues when, in fact, they are the source of the problem in most cases (nuclear weapons and government-subsidized industrial pollution, to cite two examples).

What is the media’s responsibility towards the public? Certainl y in Canada, the airwaves are supposed to belong to the public, according to the Broadcast Act. Will we see The Journey broadcast on CBC? We certainly should.

The film presents a lot of little-discussed information: The fact that South Africa supports rebels carrying out bombings in Mozambique, or that the French government’s atomic bomb tests near Polynesia have had a direct effect on the weather in the area, or info about the Allied bombing of Hamburg, or the Nazi occupation of parts of the Soviet Union. It deals with enactments of crisis relocation plans in the event of a nuclear war, with participants commenting on the exercise after. Along with photos of the White Train, these represent the hidden facts, the hidden images, the underworld of the military-industrial complex that the public is not supposed to see, the reality behind all the rhetoric behind the political charade. Seeing the people whose work contributes to the construction of bombs, but who don’t realize that they work for the eventual destruction of the world and hearing the commotions of Tahitians living near French nuclear test sites, draws the audience into identification with people who experience nuclear weapons as part of their daily life.

I was shocked by Jay Scott’s review of the film in the Globe and Mail. To criticize the film by saying that it is too long is to insist that the film conform to the commodity requirements of the mainstream media industry. It is a sign that we take for granted the restrictions imposed by the current economic structures in the media biz.

There is effectively no place for short or very long works. The resulting conformity is part of the problem, according to Watkins. News as entertainment serves to obfuscate the issues. Watkins takes 14 hours, but he says some very intelligent things. That the film has to be so long is in itself a comment on the shortcomings of the medium. While it’s nearly impossible to say something intelligent in a four-minute newsflash, TV is ideal for selling products. As Jerry Mander points out in his book, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, “Products are inherently communicable on television because of their static quality, sharp, clear, highly visible lines, and because they carry no informational meaning beyond what they themselves are. They contain no life at all and are therefore not capable of dimension. Nothing works better as telecommunication than images of products. Might television itself have no higher purpose?”

Broadcasting such a valuable film as The Journey may help redeem TV somewhat, but it would be just a start. Peter Sandmark

The Journey

The Journey, by Peter Watkins, is an epic film about nuclear weapons, defence spending and information to the public.

The film was shot in 1984 and released in 1985. It features footage of the aftermath of nuclear bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as interviews with families affected by the bombings. The film also includes footage of the White Train, which was carrying nuclear warheads to Trident submarines in the U.S.

The film was not shown on television in Canada because of its length and the restriction of broadcast time. As a result, the film was not widely seen in Canada.

The Journey was critically acclaimed and won several awards, including the Grand Prix at the Geneva International Film Festival and the Grand Prix at the British Film Institute's London International Film Festival.

Peter Watkins

Peter Watkins is a British film director, producer, and screenwriter. He is best known for his documentary film The War Game, which was released in 1965 and is considered one of the most influential documentaries ever made. Watkins has also directed several other documentaries and films, including The War Game 2 (1980) and The War Game 3 (1985). He is known for his radical and uncompromising approach to filmmaking, often using shock tactics to draw attention to social and political issues.