

Film, TV and the nuclear apocalypse

Peter Watkins On Media



Earlier this year on the last leg of a world-wide fund-raising tour on behalf of his global A Film For Peace: The Nuclear War Film, British expatriate documentarian Peter Watkins was interviewed by Cinema Canada editor Connie Tadros. The interview, originally slated for the CBC, was never aired, possibly for reasons that the substance of the interview itself make clear.

Since the BBC banned Watkins' *The War Game* in the mid-60s, Watkins began to reflect upon the role of the communications media in contemporary society. The media, Watkins maintains, are the electronic equivalent of nuclear weapons, causing social fragmentation and linguistic terror on a scale as devastating to the human community as would be the actual use of nuclear weaponry. Indeed, Watkins sees a profound relationship between the development of television and the atomic bomb. Only a wide-ranging public debate and a deeply critical questioning of the role of media today can, he says, hope to begin to redress the mass depoliticization that the media have brought about. Watkins' critique of media, published here in a slightly edited form, is a contribution to that debate.

Its publication coincides with the seminar on filmmaking ethics that will be held during the Festival of Festivals. Related to that discussion of the ethical issues faced by filmmakers in the nuclear age, Toronto filmmakers Laura Sky and Cathy Gulkin raise some of the difficult questions they feel filmmakers should address. And Peter Wintonick explains the Canadian involvement in Watkins' *A Film For Peace* on which shooting begins this month. Watkins has already begun work on the European portions of the film, and is currently shooting in the U.S.S.R. The following interview is, he says, "historic" – it is the last interview he will give until *A Film For Peace: The Nuclear War Film* is completed, sometime next year.

From the many interviews that I've been doing, especially in this last year, with the radio and particularly with the press, there is so much that is left out or reduced. I've done so many interviews with newspapers, including newspapers in Scandinavia about four-fifths of the time, and I've noticed that they remove any comments on the media. I could talk about the nuclear arms race - that's permitted. But the moment you come to the role of the media, what you say is just removed.

There is, finally, rather late, but a growing public conscience, there's no doubt about it, that people are becoming aware that this extraordinary (media) process we have been taking part in has got a lot of problems attendant to it. And I really am dismayed that this debate - there isn't really a debate yet, more of a consciousness - wasn't really strong 10 years ago. I think it is because the structural systems that the media represent, and that it uses, are so reinforcing and perpetuating and are all part of a centralized social structure which is suppressing people now in all societies, especially Western society. And the media's structures are simply another overlay of grids on the consciousness of people: just another mesh over the top. And I think that why the debate is beginning very, very late is a sign of the efficacy of these systems that are simply fragmenting and alienating, confusing and disorientating. Our profession - let's make absolutely no mistake about it - our profession has become more and more defensive, self-defensive, - nobody could deny this, whatever other point there is controversy on - and it's probably the last profession on the face of this earth which absolutely refuses to allow any kind of interior dialogue or criticism or debate, let alone, God forbid, contact with the public that could open up this secretive masonic order with which we guard the dissemination of information...

I'm talking about everything which communicates with the public, especially the audio-visual form. I would never separate film from television - there's absolutely no way one can separate the Hollywood cinema of today, for example, from the trauma of the television for they are two slightly different ways of impounding upon the public. I think that the cinema is probably the most serious now because it remains this dark room of totally dogmatic experience. At least for television you could say there's a kind of break-up with domestic input and all that kind of stuff. But there are other problems with television. The structures of television are duplicated by and are re-duplicating the structures of newspapers and so on. Everything is involved here, all forms of media.

Society operates on so many levels now, you know; it's really very, very disturbing psychological thinking that's happening on massive levels now. How the media, how anyone, anyone who has worked with audio-visual communications so-called, can claim that this is just something which floats across to the public for them to do what they like with, as if there's not any kind of impact, as if there's no cause-and-effect, is such an ignorant, naive and stupid line of rea-

Award-winning documentarian Peter Watkins is the author of The War Game, Culloden, Punishment Park and other works. Interview conducted by Connie Tadros and edited by Michael Dorland.



soning. I mean, it's not even reasoning. Therefore one really has to say to oneself: is it being done deliberately now, this maintenance of the myth of objectivity? We could really go into this a bit.

The way I've been looking at this is all so personal and I've been greatly attacked for doing this. But it's useful, valid evidence. I'll give you an example. For instance; one of the reasons why my work has been continually attacked, very often attacked by the profession, is because it is supposed to be manipulative: the reason given for banning *The War Game* was that the film was subjective propaganda or that kind of thing. But our profession will never switch its case to itself; never, will never discuss the way it is manipulative. I mean, until we are prepared to understand that all communication, whatever the intention, good or bad, machiavellian or beneficent, is actually clinically manipulative, we haven't understood anything. It is manipulative in itself and especially when based in a society where there is a point-blank refusal to discuss the mode of manipulation, to inculcate a kind of sense of urgency and learning and awareness and de-construction into the social process, from education to community life, into the very process of being. How can we be when we are not in charge of the ways we are or we're not in some ways in charge of the way we receive information? How can we be in any total sense? Of course we can't be. But it's that kind of awareness that we have got to develop in the 20th century now.

If I speak often as if the media were one voice, one person, one intention, I do that deliberately because the resistance in our profession is so horrendous. We all know this. We are playing a kind of triple lie. We know something but we pretend it isn't there, then we go on doing it. And I think in order to draw attention to the impact of the media, I think it's necessary to clarify the monopoly hold that it has now, the monopoly hold that it has on the consciousness. Of course there is the individual journalist, there are individual filmmakers, there are occasionally individual newspapers but even that begs the second question: that most of us don't want to deal with the means that we are using. The media are manipulative, and will be manipulative until, as I keep trying to stress, we open society up to a broad-ranging challenge as to the entire role of the media and the structural means of manipulation used which we regard as our professional language.

One of the major problems that is happening in society now, is that so many people are expressing despair, for example. You know that. This is not news to you, it's not news to anyone listening to this, if any of this stuff goes out on the air, that millions of people are expressing frustration and hopelessness at the threat of nuclear war and what they believe to be the inevitability of nuclear war, and their lack of functioning, their lack of ability to respond to it. But what we are picking up is a broader sense of helplessness now. How can we believe the fact that people don't communicate with each other so much now? The fact that there is so much electronic intervention that people literally do not speak to each other so much anymore. When we receive information, so-called information, one should always put quotes around 'information' every time it's used on this tape; now every time we receive so-called information, we usually don't receive it in human communication with someone else we can look at. To check the person out, whether we trust the person or not at all, to check out the human credentials so that we can then look back at the person and say: 'Just a minute, you said just now that 235,000 people were suffering from this or that, I didn't quite catch that figure... what is your reference point, can you tell me more about it? Say it again etc. etc.' And this kind of mode of functioning which is basic to what we are, or at least we were, basic to the human species; I mean, we are not yet quite electronic neutrons although it's something becoming open for debate now... We seem to be very much by-passing the most fundamental way of communicating with one another.

The fact that we communicate with each other in all these somewhat questionable ways, does not automatically mean that they are necessary or good or that they should not be challenged. One of the most unfortunate things about society today is that we accept things which we are automatically used to doing. It's a kind of breakdown at the edges of criticism which is extremely

done it in bits and pieces here or there but unfortunately it has circulated around within an academic environment and has never fed out into the social process. Semiology, for example, seems to be a complete blind alley which has diverted enormous amounts of intellectual energy in the last two decades, unfortunately.

So, these are the things that need to be done but one of the great problems is that we, in the profession, continually make use of the stuff automatically assuming that it has to be there. Why should we make that assumption anymore? Then we should perhaps automatically assume that nuclear weapons have to be there because they are there. I mean you could say the same thing about children climbing chimneys to sweep them; you could use the same logic about cancer, or about any kind of phenomenon. This seems to me the height of despair; we are allowing ourselves to be impressed by technology, impressed by glitter, by fast-moving images; we are allowing ourselves to be dominated by visual overload. We are handing over so much of ourselves to the stuff that we work with, to the stuff that we use for ego-gratification, for creative self-fulfillment. We have crossed over a kind of invisible blurry line somewhere...

It's really very dangerous to put the problem in these simplified terms. But I see the media as being very much over us, dominating us like the kind of globe that Atlas is holding and what we need to do is to take it from over us and to take it down to a lateral position in which we can use it for the purposes of entertainment, for creative fulfillment, for communication, all those things, but with a totally different relationship than at present. The relationship we have at the moment with the mass media is one of total and absolute subservience, generally speaking. Be it as a producer, as a maker or creator, we are subservient to it when we allow ourselves to be, and certainly the people who receive it are subservient to it. Now we have to change that basic relationship, to have media as a



• Auteur at work: Watkins directing *The War Game* (1965)

alarming. All I'm talking about is to encourage the sense of challenge and criticism in the receiving of information so that we become aware of the manipulative, centralizing de-politicizing impact of the media on our lives, desensitizing impact particularly, and that we have to start dealing with that on the community level, on a people-to-people level, on a national level, on an educational level, by discussing, by analyzing, by de-structuring. There is so much work that can be done and it could be started today, or tomorrow. People have

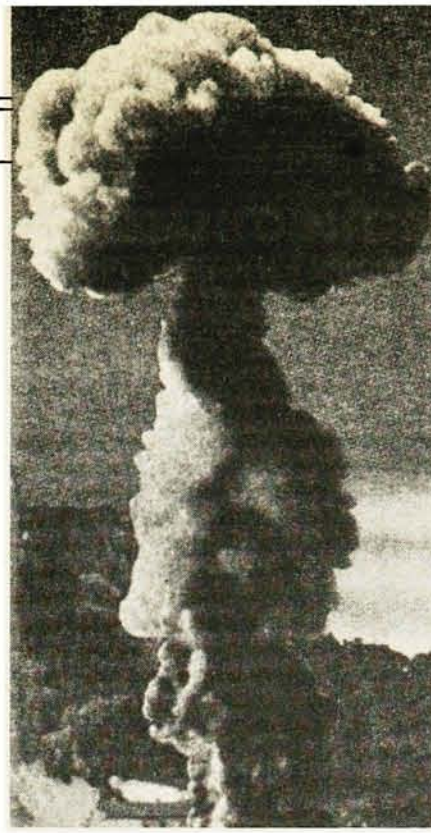
useful working tool but not to rely on it, not to have it totally dominate all modes of action, whole areas of politics, all areas of political thinking, as it does. It's to totally reverse that or change that relationship. You'd never get rid of it, and actually there is no real reason why one should, probably; but it's to allow it to go into the public court, into the court of inquiry, in the court of conscious realization and our profession is seriously betraying itself by refusing to do that. You know that, you know that as well as I and anybody who's listening in

the studio knows that as well. We have become like a species of surgeons; we rush into the operating theatre with garden shears and we start cutting up bits of the body and it's as though the person on the table is saying: 'One minute, now, what are you up to?', and we say: 'Sorry - to give the media response to the surgeon - sorry, I'm a professional, I know exactly what I'm doing, you just lie down; I don't need you to tell me what I have to do and so on.' Which is what the media say continually when these points are raised at all: there is such a thing as objectivity, we are just professionally serving the public, so shut up.

Now, what the hell is happening? I mean, honest to God, even Dr. Goebbels, you know, one could question his politics but certainly the guy was at least honest. He was honest. He said: 'You know, what I'm doing here is a very effective way of raising support for the Third Reich' and he had an incredible statement about going into the inner recesses of the mind and the heart and he understood quite well what he did. He understood it from day one and he did it. And my God, it worked. Now, the difference between Dr. Goebbels and those who run the CBC, the BBC or Radio Thailand or anywhere else you want, is that, because of all the so-called sophistication and complexity of modern life, political forces, economic interest, a whole mish-mash of stuff, we are not dealing with it with the same honesty, though the actual basic social phenomena are precisely the same. And I'd really love to hear from any professional, anyone who is listening to this broadcast who could write to me or telephone me or send me a tape and can clinically define for me the difference between their function and the function of Dr. Goebbels. I would really love to hear from them.

The point is that there are a lot of questions and I think this is the best way to put it. If I look back over the time that I've been trying to deal with this stuff, both the challenge towards the media that I've been developing particularly since 1974, when I started a lot of public speaking on this point, about 10 years ago, if I look at the resistance and at the outright hostility by my profession in dealing with this, which has undoubtedly played a very major role in the subsequent suppression of most of my work, there is absolutely no question about that. And also, parallel to that, there has been a fair, I would not like to say systematic, but there have been fairly concentrated attempts (again a difficult word) but a fairly concentrated series, I'm trying to put this delicately, series of moves which you could see quite clearly, to dismantle my, not my reputation because I don't think in those terms, but to dismantle any kind of credibility. And that's been absolutely consistent. Now I'm going to give you a couple of examples, and these are journalistic examples. And you could relate these directly to the audio-visual section of our curious profession. Now, an article appeared when I last came here which was a wire-service article and it went all over the country so this appeared in 40 papers across the country. And actually both of the articles that I'll quote from were, I think, of reasonably good intent. This is what makes it even more complex. Both these articles, one was a Canadian article and the other from a Portland, Oregon newspaper, were dealing with this new (nuclear) film. Now, neither of these articles nor, I think I can say without any exaggera-

tion, anything that's been written that I have seen in the last year (except for one or two articles which come from people who are directly quoting the film, one of the support group people who has written an article or something like that), that is, all the normal professional response to this film right across the board, to this nuclear war film, has mentioned that this is something that has never been done before. I don't say that in egotistical terms, but in political terms, in terms of clarifying the challenge to the system which this film, and particularly the people's process around it really represents. And not one single comment that I have heard, either on the audio-visual media or in written journalism, has talked about the meaning of the film in these terms. I am never cited as speaking - I mean, maybe I don't, but I'm just comparing two vocabulary lines, okay - I never speak forcefully, I never speak firmly, I never speak with courage; I think once I've spoken



with passion according to the press, a long, long time ago. I never speak clearly, I never speak vividly, and I don't say that I necessarily speak like this, I'm just going to two vocabulary lines. A couple of examples of how I speak from a Montreal paper: according to this, I'm middle-aged and somewhat embittered and I speak wearily and this is repeated 40 times across the country. There is no statement about the nature of the film, or that this is an extraordinary breakthrough for something like this.

Then we have another article from Portland, Oregon. This is interesting because again this is very representative: you may think this is unique, it isn't - and I could rustle up more clippings from the lavatory where I usually keep these things. This one is iconoclastic but the vocabulary is extraordinary. I'm always referred in this country either as dangerous or a maverick - all the time, I promise you, I'm not exaggerating. Now this article was about my comments on

Filmmaking in the nuclear age: an open letter to the community

Recently, it has come to our attention that a well-respected Toronto filmmaker has accepted a sponsored film for Litton Systems. He will be producing and directing a marketing film that will include the technology that Litton has used to create the Cruise Missile Guidance System. Although there are many in the film community who would attempt to convince him not to make this film, others would defend his freedom of speech and expression and explain this freedom in the name of diversity and pluralism in our society.

The issues that have been raised in our discussions with others working in the film industry have caused us to pose some very fundamental questions about our work.

The primary question for film and television producers, directors and technicians is: Why have we chosen to do the work that we do?

Each of us could identify with one or more of these possible answers:

- we need to make a living.
- we have something to communicate and we want to communicate effectively and creatively.
- we want to entertain.
- we want to make people think.
- we get satisfaction from being productive and feeling our work is valuable.

Among the criteria by which we choose the projects we want to work on and those we reject, one could state, on the positive side, that a project:

- provides us with an income and/or the project will be profitable.
- is something valuable to be communicated and the project challenges our creativity.
- will entertain its audience.
- will make people think.
- will provide valuable and productive work.

But at times our own economic necessity makes it difficult to make a decision based on the content or quality of a project. Whether we are freelance or work in staff positions, we all face the economic insecurity that is a part of our time. For some of us, this insecurity comes in direct conflict with our ethical values.

For example, let's look at the issue

of pornography in relation to the criteria outlined.

There are some people who have decided that they will not work on pornography. Why wouldn't we work on pornography?

- Even though we need to make a living, we would find it intolerable to derive an income from something that so contradicted our value systems.
- Because we think that there would be something destructive communicated. Destructiveness and creativity are incompatible.
- We don't want to support this as a form of entertainment.
- What pornography makes people think about women is unacceptable to us.
- This work is counter-productive to respectful sexual relationships in our society.

We began to ask ourselves the same questions in relation to the production of films that support the nuclear industry.

There seemed to be consensus that the production of those films made a number of us uncomfortable. Yet some people felt that, even though this was so, "they had to make a living." Others thought that "they'd rather sell shoes."

People from both of these groups agreed, "We live in a free world. Isn't it great that there's room for so many different opinions?"

We have the good fortune to live in a society where we all ostensibly have the freedom to say what we want to say and to choose what we wish to work on. The question that we have is:

Does this freedom support an abdication of responsibility? Are we free to make films that support, justify or rationalize nuclear destruction?

Using our original criteria, we might ask ourselves the following questions:

- 1) Can we tolerate making a living on a film that promotes a system of death and destruction?
- 2) Is the threatened destruction of the world as we know it a challenge to our creativity?
- 3) One of the questions raised by the

success of *The Day After*, is "Do we want to support a process whereby audiences learn to be entertained by the simulated deaths of most of the world's population and pre-enacted agony of the 'survivors'?"

4) Do pro-nuclear films make people think

- a) That it is acceptable and even commendable to derive profit from the production of nuclear weapons?
- b) That it is possible to survive an unsurvivable war?
- c) That nuclear weapons aren't that bad after all and have just become a normal part of our economic lives?
- 5) Can work that promotes the arms race and a reign of nuclear terror be assessed as a valuable contribution to the communities in which we live and work?

Where do each of us draw the line? What will or won't we do in order to achieve economic security and have creative opportunities? When does our freedom to earn a living become the freedom to be bought off?

At what point does our freedom to work and express ourselves creatively interfere with the quality of other peoples lives?

As our children develop, we can see that they often complain that they want the freedom to do whatever they want. It takes time to learn that this freedom is tied to accepting a degree of social responsibility - and this responsibility is a reasonable boundary to that freedom. In a society that sanctifies the individuality of the artist, it is often hard to remember that we are members of a community and that we have some responsibility and accountability within that society.

Those of us who work in the media have such incredible power over the hearts and minds of our audiences that we must take special care with the responsibility of our individual choices.

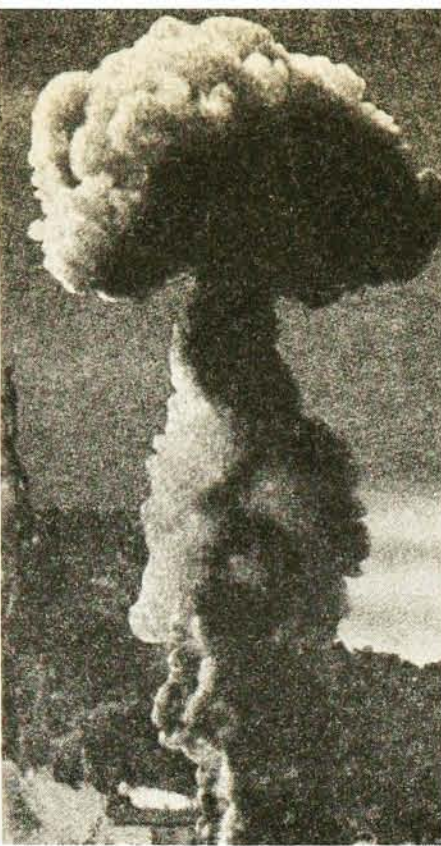
Just as we have the freedom to say 'yes' to such a project, sometimes we must take the responsibility to say 'no'.

Laura Sky
and Cathy Gulkin ●

the TV film *The Day After* by a journalist in Portland, Oregon. She began the article, which is quite serious in a way once you get into it, with: Does Peter Watkins ever laugh? That was the first line. "A man in his mid-forties seemingly possessed..." I want you to listen to this vocabulary because it's so representational. "He came to Salem, Oregon in a state of dejection, he has become increasingly pessimistic over the years... His emotions show through his polite reserve, his demeanor is intense, he's nervous and vulnerable. He has been described as suffering from a persecution complex and his struggles to launch his anti-nuclear film may well make any filmmaker of his talent and his stature far more paranoid than he appears..." Now, if anyone day one wanted to add all this stuff up which has been appearing since 1965, but has been hyped up in the last year, what is happening here? Is it actually a genuine attempt to dismantle, is it integrity or credibility? If I stick a pin in you, do you respond in a self-defensive way? We are so circumscribed in our profession by constant demands to compromise, we are constantly told how unhealthy it is to have passion and commitment, is the media a kind of reflexive counter-reaction against this; what is happening here? And when it happens systematically, which it does, it's very, very constant, not systematic, constant is a better term to use. And after it happens up to a number of years, and if it happened to you, you would be asking quite a range of questions about this stuff. If you had a number of films, every single film since *The War Game* dealing with nuclear accidents, the possibility of nuclear accidents, or nuclear war stopped by West German television, Canadian television, and recently by the Australian television, now, what would you say to yourself? Would you say to yourself: this is all a gloriously happy accident?

I am giving these examples as a kind of clinical example of the machinery at work, the machinery of dismantling credibility, for example, which is why I have basically decided to stop doing any further interviews now, so this is going to be an historic one, because this is the last one I'm going to do for a long, long time. Certainly 'till I finish this film. There is no point in doing any more. You simply end up repeating the same thing to a profession which is totally uninterested in listening, totally and absolutely... It's not just uninterested, it's *resisting* listening. This profession of ours is dying on its feet. It's causing social harm. Who can doubt the role of the mass media in depoliticizing the public? Who could doubt that when we are talking about the reactions of millions of people to the seeming inevitability of nuclear war, and that they feel they cannot do anything about it? What social commentator of any intelligence would doubt the impact of the mass media in that phenomenon?

Both media and nuclear weapons are interrelated and although in fact I get accused of overly concentrating on the nuclear arms race, which is an unfair accusation, I'm actually just as concerned about growing militarization in general and I think that this question of the media is paramount. If we have a social phenomenon, let's call it that, which is really impacting on our ways of thinking, of feeling and receiving, isn't that one of the more urgent things to be dealing with? And the more that you deal with this profession and find that they simply close ranks, that they don't



want to touch this stuff, obviously you feel, I feel it, it is even more urgent need to address the thing publicly. The media cannot close this off. They've managed relatively successfully to block this dialogue off from, not only from me, but from other people who have been working in this area. But basically, they block it off from the public. I think a film like *The Day After* has been partly responsible for focussing the attention of growing numbers of the public on the role of the media. I think it's going to change, I think there is going to be a public debate. I hope so because it's absolutely of paramount urgency now.

What is distressing for me all the time is this constant thing that somehow this has something to do with my obsession. This is where our profession has been really, really sinister; certainly in their attitude to me. This constant dismantling of credibility and it's all partly to build up their own credibility which is severely under attack now. This is not an obsession of mine. We are talking about a major social phenomenon, and the fact that our profession does not want to come to terms with it does not alter the fact that it's there. Would you use the words obsessive on Elizabeth Fry who brought prison reform to England in the 1860's? Florence Nightingale? Would you say middle-aged, weary, embittered, frustrated, obsessive, monomaniac, paranoid - would those be the words used there?

I am very sensitive about vocabulary now and I think we need to become even more sensitive to it. It's been very very interesting to note the uses of words. It's a fantastic kind of inverse McCarthyism that is being set up here now. I think actually I would have preferred to live in the 1950's than now because I think I could have handled a McCarthy tribunal so much more easily than my profession; at least it was honest. McCarthy was honest. These are extremely reactionary, dishonest people who are having high impact on the public, who are running our profession now. I'm very frightened of these people; they are dangerous, the white, liberal class, generally speaking dominantly but not exclusively male. They are having an enormously adverse political effect, certainly on Western society, and the sooner that we start to take courage and develop some humility in our profession... We don't have a god-like mandate to create and shape information from an elite, from an obscure minority addressing the majority. Where

does that mandate come from? Why do we reinforce it? Why is it that we talk about objectivity? If my work is subjective propaganda, which I would allow for, how could we not say that television is not *corporate*, subjective propaganda? Could we not allow for that? Could we not even make that step forward in honesty, in basic structural analysis?

The problem is, though, that the escalation of the nuclear arms race almost year by year parallels the development of television. There's been very strange synchronism or timing there actually. Nuclear development since the late '40s and '50s is almost parallel to the development of television, so, unfortunately these two traumas have developed and reinforced each other almost at parallel levels. And the nuclear war film that we are engaged in is not the be-all and sum total end of possible responses. Because the important thing, as I am constantly stressing, is the public process for, around and after the film. Film is a length of celluloid with holes punched down one side and certainly one of the attempts of this film is to demystify itself as much as I can and point out that the film will probably be contributing to some of the problems and to try and look at that, as kind of way of microcosm looking at the problem as a whole. But yes, the film is going to be working on a very very large level, why not? The film is going to be working with people around the world, the film will be making comments about these things, the film will be making structural analysis with the help of ordinary people about the impact of television and its shapes and forms.

I think we are entering an age of massive disillusion with television; certainly the public reaction to *The Day After* is a clear example of that. I don't know what was said in Canada about that film but the people I've spoken with in America, and this includes families who have seen the film, are fully prepared to discuss *The Day After*, not on the level of whether it's a good or a bad film which is to some degree irrelevant at the moment. It's how it has been perceived as an act of television and, at that level, people are starting to focus on it, I think, correctly, as a very, very worrying phenomenon in putting world War III and all that implies into the language of Hollywood television soap opera. People are quite clearly able to perceive the social and political problems of doing that and in terms of being totally anticlimatic, minimizing the impact of the nuclear war, depoliticizing... I mean, you can talk to people about this now and they are registering this directly. I think this awareness is breaking through despite television's massive efforts to present itself as more and more cosmetic. I think television is actually destroying itself. It's become so irrelevant to people's needs, to the needs of the community, the needs of individuals; it seems so fragmenting, an experience of the absurd.

Many people will discuss this but the problem is that the very methodology that television uses is almost a kind of kinetic, fragmenting energy, which undoubtedly has some very, very disturbing, attractive qualities to it. You see, here we're into something which is a very dangerous area, an area of great danger, as posed by the media through films such as *Flashdance*, *Officer and Gentleman*, films of this genre which are being spewed out from Hollywood recently. They contain very recognizable, modular forms of structure. You could

put the end before the middle and the beginning at the end. Indeed, one could suppose that this is what they've been doing with some films: modular playing with synthetic feelings structured all over the place; instant sex, instant violence, all this kind of stuff.

Television and cinemas are now into totally synthetic language form, which is totally fragmenting and has nothing to do with a gently undulating, curving development or understanding. It's totally the antithesis of this. It's totally anti-process and so one of the major things about film that we are doing with *The Nuclear War* film at the moment (which is just a working title for the film) is that we are emphasizing the limitations of the film, the limitations of something lasting one hour-and-a-half or whatever it will last. It's the process around it that matters. It's the fact that people will be doing all kinds of things which in a way are more important than the film. That is the major attempt of the film: to encourage the public to really challenge the medium to live outside its own frame.

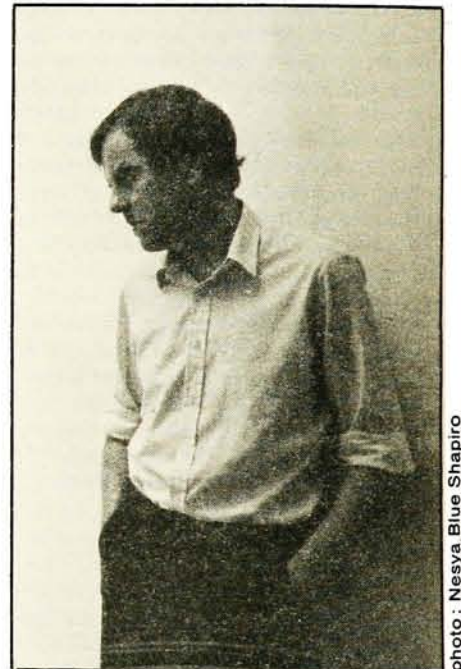


photo: Nesya Blue Shapiro

And one of the very interesting and disturbing questions revolves around the difficulties we have had raising money for the film. If you or I wanted to do an extremely corrupt piece of pornography, historical pornography or literal pornography; and you or I went to the major Hollywood studios, the CBC or if you went to the BBC or to French television, we would raise the money within two days. And raise an enormous amount; it would be possible to raise millions: I mean, *The Day After* cost seven million dollars... It's been very interesting that this film which is dealing with, I think, a fairly serious worldwide issue, whether the world disintegrates, has aroused such antipathy to dealing with the subject. With the exception of the National Film Board who are helping us, and may be helping us further, and the Mexican Film Institute, with the exception of those two organizations, every other television or cultural organization that we've approached has simply not wanted to help us at all.

But even if a Santa Claus figure came along and had some money, I would take that like a shot, without any inhibition, because we would be able to use that money to print the film in the end, to make the various multi-lingual versions of the film that are necessary. But that would in no way inhibit or discourage the public fund-raising that would continue and would need to

Cinematic Odyssey: the making of Watkins's *A Film For Peace*

by Peter Wintonick

A Film For Peace: The Nuclear War Film is a film unique to cinematic history. It is unique in that never before has such a film been created on such a scale in the decentralized way that it is being done. (No, we're not talking about *Heaven's Gate*.)

The film itself started out in Peter Watkins' mind essentially as an updated version of his Academy-Award winning and powerful nuclear document *The War Game* (1965). Two years ago, Watkins intended to re-model the factual, stylistic and thematic groundwork of his earlier film to portray the effects of a nuclear attack on England. With a little development money from Central TV, he began to investigate the civil defence measures of hundreds of towns and villages in England but met with much resistance from media and political authorities. At that time he decided to broaden the film's scope in order to make it more truly international and universal. He embarked on an odyssey which would take him around the world five times searching for the means of producing this newer vision — searching for support from groups and individuals.

The premise of this newer vision is that fictional recreations of the images of nuclear war have already eaten into the public psyche and debilitated our will to act; that a nuclear war has already been fought (Hiroshima and Nagasaki); that the time was fast approaching when images of empowerment, blueprints for positive action and life-enhancing examples should supplant the tired, tried and untrue images of films like *The Day After*. There was the necessity, then, to create useful films, useful art, useful media.

Watkins sent letters to 100 of the world's major television networks and film finance systems seeking support for the new film. Most ignored him, or rejected the idea outright. Their response tended to reinforce Watkins' belief that increasingly centralized, stratified, and bureaucratized media mirrored and, in many ways, supported the same tendencies in society as a whole, tendencies toward the fragmentation of information, toward the cutting off of truly democratic, personal, human impact on the systems which are surrounding and governing us.

The fusing of the basic philosophic premises of the film to a methodology (a process of creation) has become the most important aspect of *A Film For Peace*. Watkins has travelled the world meeting support groups in the countries where the film is now being shot. (These include Australia, Japan, Tahiti, Mexico, the U.S., Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Scotland, Norway, France, Germany, The U.S.S.R. and Africa.) These groups, consisting of activists, filmmakers and ordinary concerned citizens, have raised money, done much of the research, generated public support and discovered subject matter for the film which will give voice to the

thoughts and feelings of representative families in each country and point to examples of positive actions that people are taking around the world to disentangle themselves (and ourselves) from the nuclear morass into which we are sinking.

The support has grown slowly. It was once thought that peace groups would rush to support the film, given the incredible use they've made of *The War Game* in the last two decades, but most of these groups, with the exception of those of Sweden, Australia and the West German Green Party are "fighting" their own battles and have precious little capital to finance the production of the education tool that *A Film For Peace* will be. Although letters of support and words of encouragement have been received from many "visible" and famous people internationally, (such as Harry Belafonte, Dustin Hoffman, Bibi Anderson, and Ed Broadbent, among others) as well as labour and union leaders, bishops and other religious figures, mayors and other public officials as well as representatives of many development and social justice groups, the major force and energy which has had the greatest impact and will enable the film to actually get produced has come from the contribution of thousands of "invisible" people who've bought the buttons, who've made the charitable donations, who've attended and organized film screenings, retrospectives, art auctions, punk-rock concerts, peace-feasts, seminars, recitals, marathons, theatrical performances, and discussions and meetings in order that this film be made. These people, along with the more than 300 who are working on the various film crews, organizing groups and research teams, are the main reasons that this film can be differentiated from all others that have come before it.

The process is the film. Its decentralized, consultative, global nature, its self-initiated, auto-deterministic thrusts are all exemplary qualities which have, until this time, remained alien from the standard processes of corporate cinema, elitist filmmaking, and mass media in general. Learning about this collective group process has transformed a lot of the people working on the project, and broadened many horizons through an increase in personal and public knowledge gained through the research, through discussion, and through thoughtful and analytical investigation of the mechanisms of mass media, information and film production.

While conceptually this kind of working production system may seem diffuse it is, in fact, very practical and very personally rewarding (although not financially rewarding as it is all done on a volunteer basis). The work is shared by many, ideas flow across physical, psychological, international and even self-imposed boundaries. Everyone participates.

In Canada and elsewhere, research is being collected concerning the effects of a nuclear war on Canada (Nuclear Winter) on targets and fallout patterns and on nuclear emergency measures. The Canadian support group is also considering Canada's role in the nuclear weapons and fuel cycles, its connections internationally and ways in which Canada might responsibly take the lead in disarmament matters before the hawks, bears and other national animals take us down into the valley of nuclear mega-death.

In Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Halifax there are active support groups attempting to raise \$40,000. They are currently approaching peace groups, organizing benefits, and looking for sympathetic grant-making institutions, corporations, networks and foundations. They wish they were more successful — the major part of the money raised until now has come from all parts of Canada in small donations. Although the National Film Board of Canada, through the good graces of both its English and French production units, have offered to assist the Canadian production shoot and post-production services, the Canadian support group still needs funds to enable it to carry out its contribution to the film and to help support the shooting in other less affluent countries.

The major sections of the Canadian part of *A Film For Peace* will consist of approximately 8-10 minutes of simple animation to illustrate the conceptual planes of the film, to provide much-needed humour and to pose the central questions that the rest of the film will attempt to answer and clarify. Animators and graphic artists such as Jane and Joan Churchill, Richard Slye and Derek Lamb will help create these segments and a team is now being formed for others who may be interested, who will work with camera time being donated by the NFB and the CBC.

Beyond the statistical, global, factual, graphic and narrative information which will visualize and bring to light the Canadian aspect of the film, there will also be people-on-the-street interviews that will pose questions about what people know about what's going on in the world around them, and why they don't know what they should know. In keeping with the self-reflective and self-critical nature of *A Film For Peace* these person-on-the-street interviews will be exposed as being prime examples of what traditional networks think is *cinéma vérité* but what is really a kind of false cinema because of its manipulation of time and content into fragments of 27 world-bits of information.

One possible suggestion for the Canadian content of *A Film For Peace* has been brought forward by the Montreal Support Group. This involves working with a theatrical collective in Victoriaville, Québec, called

Théâtre Parminou, who have been creating quasi-improvisational, social action and progressive theatre for nearly a decade across Québec. Their system of working is much like that of *A Film For Peace*; it involves much collaboration, research, non-hierarchical decision-making, and public involvement in the creation of the works themselves on a continuous, self-renewing basis. This group has developed plays on feminism, disarmament, and many other subjects and are currently launching a work about Alternatives. It is the aim of the film to examine this group and their way of working as examples of how we, as creators of media, might be able to work in honest and responsibly ethical fashions.

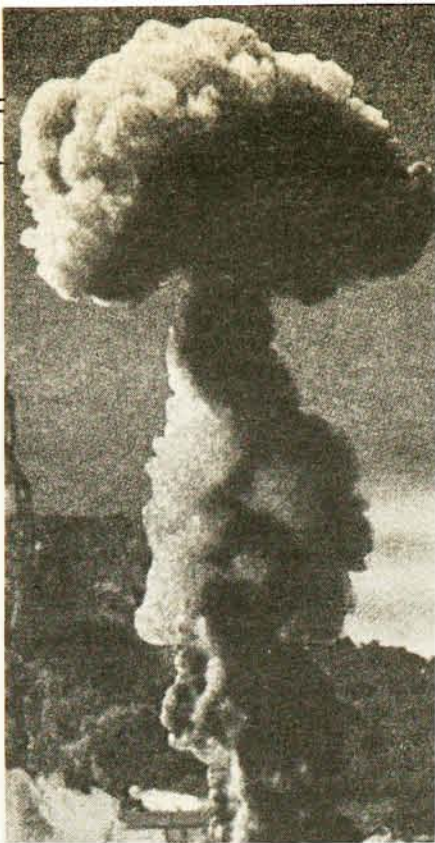
This and other ideas of military-economic conversion (where industries with military contracts convert to socially useful production), peace education programs, and groups working in international development are just a few examples of subject matter which has been investigated.

The response from the Canadian filmmaking community and the public at large has been encouraging. Benefits have been staged at the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa, The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Conservatoire d'art cinématographique and Cinéma-thèque québécoise in Montreal, and with the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op and Dalhousie University in Halifax. With much important support from various individuals, the Canadian support group is still looking for help from anyone and everyone interested in the project. The expression of support from Peter Katadotis, Daniel Pinard, François Macerola and, indeed, all of the technical and support staff at the National Film Board has been most heartening, and makes the NFB one of the few institutions to endorse the film, along with the Australian and Mexican Film Institutes.

Animators, graphic artists, those with fundraising and organizational abilities, those with funds to charitably donate, those with technical expertise, those with research skills, those progressive, far-sighted institutions and foundations in the community — you're all needed to help produce *A Film For Peace*.

So the next time someone comes up to you and tries to sell you a button that says "Support Peter Watkins: *A Film For Peace: The Nuclear War Film: Appuyons Peter Watkins*" reach deep down into that soul of a moth-eaten bill-fold or cheque book or write to: The Film
c/o C. Burt
Box 1195
Station La Cité
Montreal, Québec H2W 2P4

Peter Wintonick is Canadian coordinator and the editor of Watkins' *A Film For Peace: The Nuclear War Film*.



continue. If somebody came and gave us all the budget of the film, then the process of the film would continue anyway, but the process of the film is not just fund-raising. The process of the film is an enormous amount of discussion about the issues that are involved. Here in Montreal, for example, we should be looking at the arms race in Montreal and one of the things that the people who are supporting the film will be doing is a lot of research, which will mean that they will be confronting themselves and things happening in their own community – things many of them probably only perhaps vaguely know about – that is a process of growth, that's a process in itself. I mean the media should be encouraged in this kind of thing every day. Instead, the media takes upon itself to encapsulate this growth process or to reject it. That is how the media have become totally, absolutely anti-process, a totally hierarchical political machine. And this film is trying to combat that process and to declare it. When this film comes out next year, a synthesis of some of the things that we are discussing will be presented in the film and around the film, so fund-raising is, at the moment, a very necessary yet only a partial purpose of the process. But, as I must emphasize all the time, we must de-emphasize the film. We are very much hooked on the product in our profession, and that's what the film is dealing with.

Whether the television organizations will carry it or not, or cinema chains will show it or not, I honestly say it's futile for me to speculate on that. What I do think will happen is that it will be seen and discussed and we are going to try and structure the film quite deliberately so that any kind of ego representation by the film is down to a minimum. The people will be talking about what the various families are talking about. They are discussing the information from the film, not whether it's well-made or not, or that kind of nonsense. I hope it will have a positive effect, I think people will use the film to encourage various structural analyses of the way we are receiving information, for example. That's a role I hope the film will fulfill, in schools and public meetings and church halls and the kind of arena that *The War Game* has worked in for all these years. I'm quite certain that that will happen with this film and that a very, very wide debate will result – that's what I hope will happen.

Judging from the response of people helping us to organize the research and the activities, a lot of people are really anxious. When I talk about the media needing to break out of its frame, people want to break out of frames now and are becoming more conscious that the media are imposing those frames; that the media is, in a sense, structurally conditioning us by its language system to accept more and more rigid social structures. It is one structural process leading to another, reinforcing another, and I believe that people are beginning to realize that. There's one perverse benefit that the nuclear arms race has brought this poor battered planet, and that's clarifying the issue for people – there's no question about that. It's the great tragedy of our species that it's taken us to get to this pitch to start looking at these things, but people are looking at them now and I'm cautiously quite optimistic actually about the near future. But I think that we are going to go to another period which will make the '60s look very cosmetic because we are

going to need to really go into social and political struggle now because people are starting pick up the relationship between the arms-race and the Third World, for example. I think, in a perverse way, if we can get rid of nuclear weapons in time they will have adversely clarified the small size of this planet for the first time.

I did not invent the nuclear weapon, I did not invent pain, I did not invent the political repression of the '60s; I don't even have the imagination to deal with that stuff. We have an extraordinary cut-the-messenger's-head-off syndrome in our society, don't we really? Off with the head of the messenger who brings the news of the defeat because we don't want to hear the stuff. It's really depressing, when talking with journalists and people from television, that they seldom actually talk about the issue. It always comes back to personalizing, it's

as if, in our profession, we learnt a series of lessons, you know, in the first day of journalism – whatever you do, constantly personalize this; these examples I've read here are an indication of that. Somebody said to me the other day, that the (Cruise missile protest) women at Greenham Common have been quite astute actually, in never having a media spokesperson, never, never. And it must be quite frustrating and irritating for the media who like to select out someone as a spokesperson, to move them up in order to dismantle their credibility, the Green movement is a classic example of this. The women in Greenham Common have been quite astute, they have deliberately diffused it so that the media has to speak to whoever happens to be there and this has been rather effective because even the media have had to pay a certain amount of grudging respect; they've had to deal with a more diffuse, more genuine level that they have not been able to personalize.

Nuclear weapons or the repression of the '60s in *Punishment Park* which is obviously a metaphor for the violence in our society, these are not things of my obsession or my creation. They are actual clinical social phenomena just as the role of the media is a clinical social phenomenon. Now, the fact that we are having a lot of difficulties in dealing with them does not alter the fact that they are there.

And the issue of the nuclear arms race, and especially its relationship to the media, is something which is not to be deflected by seeking answers about my personality or what makes me work as an artist or not or whatever, because it takes us away from the issue. And if I can just use this example again, of the women at Greenham Common, how many articles have there been and they never, never talk about or they seldom ever talk about what it is the women are doing there, why they are there or the

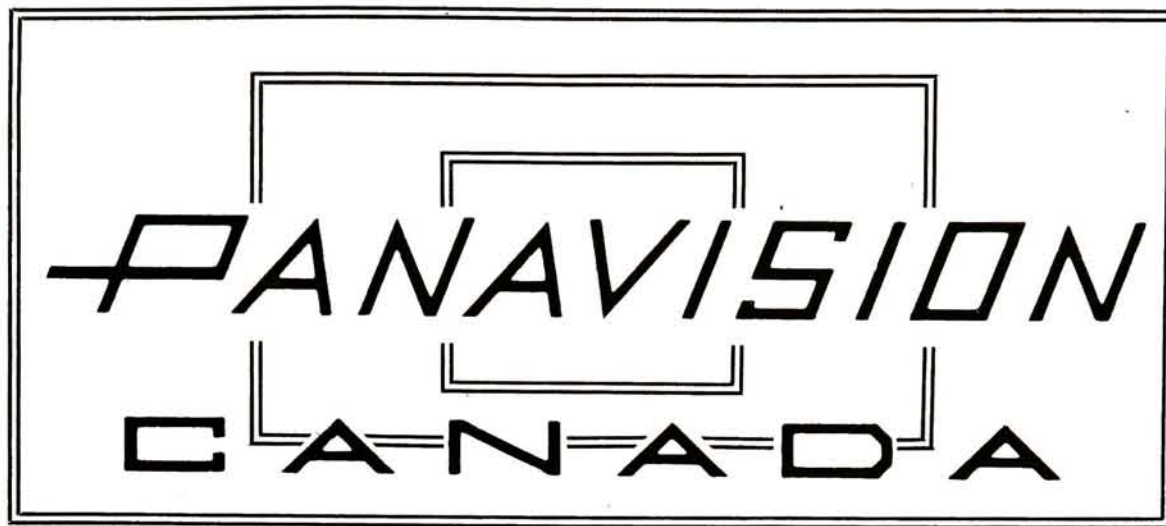
context of the nuclear weapons they are trying to protest. They always focus on the immediate thing and this is just a way at personalizing, it's a way of deflecting away from the issue. We are not very issue-oriented in our profession, we are very personality-oriented because it's seen as an escape mechanism somehow... it's control really. If you got the personal tapped, if you've got a central hook on their characteristics, you are ready to dismember them whenever you want and not deal with the issue. I think that these are examples of the many things we do unconsciously in our profession because we were taught that early, or they come with the territory, they come with the structures.

My feelings about the media have been developing since the mid-'60s and the fact that I use myself as an example should be seen on all kinds of levels as self-reflective self-criticism, as an irony of opposing contradictions, for those are the levels on which I approach that. There is not a simplified response to what I am trying really to get people to reflect about objectivity. I'll just give one example: when I do commentaries or when I did them in some earlier films, I would switch between the seemingly omnipresent, objective overview to a highly subjective statement with very, very slight changes in tone, if at all, but the same voice. Now, these things, the meaning of this, have never been discussed; I don't think there's been one discussion about the meaning of my work – one by an American historian came out once – about the meaning of my work in laying down a challenge to a whole concept of truth in documentary. The fact that there hasn't doesn't alter the fact that it's been there, there staring us in the face. And quite a few people have picked up on this but, in my profession, they've been very suppressive about dealing with this. Jean-Luc Godard, yes – there's been a complete acknowledgement of Godard's work, I'm not going to go into what – but in my case there hasn't been. Is Godard going to explain something which has been openly acknowledged in his work for two decades now? So, I just gave that commentary example in order to show how I've been trying to throw inquiry on all the authoritarian concepts of our form and the concept of what is a documentary. There is clinically no such thing as a documentary. This word 'documentary' is a totally artificial concept. Where it comes from, I don't know, from the days of John Grierson, but it's totally and absolutely artificial, it's very manipulative. Documentaries are a very manipulative form. The fact that you are giving something which appears to be objective to a certain authoritarian, well-regulated, clearly photographed stance which is the image of documentary, makes it extremely dangerous. Can we say that the documentary of the '30s is any less dangerous as a documentary than the work of Grierson or the television evening news on the CBC which is highly dangerous? I have been trying to question that process by, throwing confusion, if you see what I mean, by crossing over from activism to de-construction, by showing that you can simulate documentary. I can make a documentary look more real than a documentary.

And that's a complete coax, of course, but the meaning of that has never been properly taken up. And I think that, in the suppression of *The War Game*, the BBC spotted what this stuff was after – there's no question about that.

Peter Watkins : A Filmography

- The Web** (1956)
- The Field of Red** (1958)
- Diary of an Unknown Soldier** (1959)
- The Forgotten Faces** (1961)
- Dust Fever** (1962)
- Culloden** (1964)
British Writers' Guild Award.
- The War Game** (1965)
American Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.
British Film Academy Award.
American Council of Churches Award.
- Privilege** (1966)
Venice Film Festival Award.
Award at Cannes Film Festival shared with Antonioni's BLOW-UP.
- The Gladiators** (1968)
Trieste Science Fiction Award.
- Punishment Park** (1970)
New York Film Festival.
Best Director Award at Atlanta Film Festival.
- State of the Union** (Video, 1971)
- Edvard Munch** (1975)
- The Seventies People** (1975)
- The Trap** (1975)
Prix Futura Award in Bronze.
- Eveningland** (1980)
- August Strindberg** (1982-)
In preparation.
- A Film For Peace : The Nuclear War Film** (1982-1985)
Shooting.



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