**Documentary film and our restless nuclear present**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the contribution of documentary film to conceptions of our nuclear present. Starting in the 1980s, the article mainly focuses on the work of Peter Watkins, considers the evolution of nuclear documentary up to the present day, and offers particular focus on the ways in which nuclear danger is articulated in distinct and politicised forms.

Our nuclear present is restless, yet we rarely conceptualise nuclear reality in this way. It can only ever be restless, as nuclear technologies shape our world, their relentless and dangerous forms remaining largely permanent and unseen, deliberately kept from our gaze. The ‘nuclear fuel cycle’ is a hyper-long term phenomenon and, at any split second, globally, there are hundreds of thousands of human controlled moments within unique nuclear fuel cycles. Radiation is used deliberately every day in controlled medical settings, to treat cancer. Nuclear fission occurs in power stations or submarine reactors every day, fuelled by uranium and plutonium that is first mined from the ground, then processed and enriched. Sometimes, artificial radioactive isotopes are created. Nuclear waste from reactors slowly decays over thousands of years, sometimes in giant concrete catacombs under our oceans, or in huge underground storage facilities, such as Yucca Mountain, or crumbling storage ponds at Sellafield.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Some nuclear material is lost, unaccounted for, also decaying, and emitting radiation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Of course, sometimes there are reactor accidents, and the world slowly learns about the toxic legacies from Chernobyl, Fukushima, Hanford and Osersk, among others.[[3]](#footnote-3) Then, the language of the ‘nuclear fuel cycle’ is rendered absurd, as radiation breaks away from the confines of an imposed cycle, spreading or falling, silently contaminating stretches of land, water, people and wildlife. The *Hibakusha* of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the many sites affected by the fallout from hundreds of nuclear weapons tests carried out in the twentieth century, are, along with those affected by the Chernobyl disaster, the severest reminder that our global nuclear present is, for some, the reality of living with an irradiated body.[[4]](#footnote-4) At a cellular level, radiation does its damage to humans.

Nuclear weapons are kept in silos or submarines or sit decommissioned but restless.[[5]](#footnote-5) The thousands of nuclear warheads still in existence are the reminders of the failure of international law in the decades after 1945.[[6]](#footnote-6) As fissile materials await, contained and enshrouded by the missile casings that would serve to create deadly metallic fallout, they are restless and ever-present in our lives, poised as they join us in the ‘Age of Fallout’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nuclear knowledge is restricted, censored and caged. We are the missile silo, housing and protecting fissile potential, soothing away thoughts of radioactive contamination, turning away from the threat of nuclear war, while all the time enabling its possibility.

In many ways, thinking about our nuclear future means staring hard at our nuclear present, and thinking about our nuclear past. How might we regain critical control of the nuclear realities that surround us? How might we challenge the nuclear representations that serve to depoliticise the nuclear state?[[8]](#footnote-8) How might we better understand our nuclear present? Ascribing restlessness to our nuclear present is not to essentialise nuclear science and technology.[[9]](#footnote-9) Rather, it is intended to describe our own perception of the nuclear now: our own silent nuclearisation, with no obvious beginning or end. The movement that became known as nuclear criticism in the 1980s was preoccupied with such questions in relation to nuclear weapons, and looked to the operation of language and discourse for explanation. Derrida argued that the ‘terrifying reality of the nuclear referent can only be the *signified* referent, never the *real* referent (present or past) of the discourse or a text’[[10]](#footnote-10) [my italics]. Can the work of documentary filmmakers offer us access to the ‘real’ nuclear referent, shining light on our nuclear present?

Documentary film often disrupts and energizes the stagnation that might define our nuclear predicament. Most people think of docudramas such as *The War Game* – banned in 1965 – or *Threads* (1984) when thinking about realistic depictions of nuclear war and its aftermath. These films were searing attacks on nuclear civil defence, one of the mechanisms by which the nuclear state attempts to maintain a stable nuclear order. During the 1980s documentaries such as the British films *QED: A Guide to Armageddon* (1982) and John Pilger’s *The Truth Game* (1983), the American production *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) and the Australian picture *Half Life: A Parable for the Nuclear Age* (1983) all attempted to dismantle carefully crafted impressions of the nuclear status quo, or highlight the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is perhaps the unique power of documentary film in relation to our shared nuclear present: it can negotiate or destabilise truth and reality.[[12]](#footnote-12)

One example of the restless nature of our nuclear present, the contaminated human body, is explored through the photo-essay provided by Carole Gallagher in her book *American Ground Zero* (1993).[[13]](#footnote-13) For the individuals contaminated by radioactive fallout from above-ground nuclear testing in North America, the nuclear present was defined by illness, operation scars, and government misinformation. Documentary film has articulated the voices of *Hibakusha*, also charting the progress of nuclear veterans groups in their quest for recognition and financial compensation.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Windscale: Britain’s Biggest Nuclear Disaster* (2007) offered insights into the official attempts to keep the reactor fire a secret. On realising he would receive no recognition for his role in putting out the reactor fire in 1957, the former Deputy Manager at Windscale, Tom Tuohy, described senior management as a ‘shower of bastards’ during an interview. Documentaries are sometimes the only places that we hear dissenting or passionate voices, or are reminded of the human stories at the heart of the nuclear century. *The Man Who Saved the World* (2014) focused on the potential danger of accidental nuclear war, telling the story of Stanislav Petrov who, as a Soviet duty officer in 1983, correctly deduced that an early-warning system was malfunctioning when it showed an apparent American nuclear attack. Documentary film can dismantle the assumption that our nuclear present is stable. Of course, many documentaries are polemic in nature, leaving us to judge how representative particular interviews, stories or interpretations might be.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*The Journey* (1987) by Peter Watkins was proudly polemic. At fourteen and a half hours long, this hugely ambitious film attempted to map the complex story of the global nuclear arms race, and the ways in which government and the mass media shaped and controlled, sometimes unwittingly, its progress. Quite self-consciously the film, in the words of Watkins the narrator, examines ‘the systems under which we all live, and the mechanisms they use to deprive us of information and participation’. An excellent guide to the documentary provided by The Tate argues that the film was at once an attempt to point out the near-impossibility of deciphering nuclear realities (including atomic victimhood), a painstaking critique of the controlling operations of the mass media, and an ‘epic directed against forgetting’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The film was an intricate and sustained transnational journey into the experiences of local families and communities, woven into a broader commentary on the logics of nuclear weapons culture and a critique of the mass media. From the beginning, Watkins charts the reality of atomic victimhood at Hiroshima. We are slowly led into the Atomic Bomb Memorial Mound, where the ashes of tens of thousands of unidentified atomic victims lie in urns. We are then taken to the outskirts of the RAF base on Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, and to the Naval Submarine Base in Bangor, Washington state. We also hear Tahitian, Canadian, Norwegian and Russian voices. Watkins talks to local residents, allowing time and space for the voices of individuals, in stark contrast to the polished and time-conscious editorial processes carried out by the mass media: something Watkins continually highlights.

The film can be seen as an attempt to ‘cognitively map’ the nuclear present through identifying the existence of an infrastructural and ideological ‘totality’, while also acknowledging the difficulty individual subjects have in situating themselves within its physical, emotional and cultural underpinnings.[[17]](#footnote-17) Scott MacDonald argued that in *The Journey*, ‘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 within which it has meaning.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Descriptions of the affective regime that the global nuclear complex represents run like a thread through *The Journey*. We are given access into the emotional lives of nuclear citizens, reminded at once of the varieties of nuclear resistance that exist beyond formal anti-nuclear groups, and the powerful shaping role the nuclear complex plays in the lives of many people. For instance, in one interview with the Crippen family, the teenage son described a nightmare he had about the nuclear weapons factory nearby. Around the family dining table, he said, ‘I saw these missiles flying over the hill. I woke up then’. Time and again, the film speaks of the psychological impact of the nuclear weapons state, as well as the localisation of nuclear anxiety or preoccupations.

Through its length and transnational focus, the film impresses on the viewer the breadth of this affective regime. The unthinkable scale of the nuclear present is articulated for us, as we contemplate the different ways in which nuclear weapons have sunk into us ‘like meat hooks’.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is not hard to find parallels between *The Journey* and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), a film that ran over nine hours in total. Both films illuminated the reality and tensions within our retelling of history. Both films were united in their focus on the dark heart of modernity, turning their gaze on death and aftermath, focusing on brutal tradition or prejudice that hinted at the base motivations and structural violence at the heart of the twentieth century. These films still speak to us about how history shapes our present-centeredness, and they are unafraid to lay ‘claim to (parts of) truth and reality’ where the ‘arrangements of perceptibility’, amongst other things, can destabilise the subject matter.[[20]](#footnote-20)

These films rearrange our perceptions, and our expectations, towards film. Because of the sheer length of *The Journey*, viewers need to think and engage in a different way. Watkins is unafraid of silence, which offers a novel experience for the viewer: time to think. Similar to the act of reading, the experience of viewing *The Journey* invites and rewards intellectual engagement, prolonged attention, and sustained reflection. The viewing experience is open-ended, yet the viewer is invited into the self-conscious operation of Watkins the director: his political stance is clear. We are involved in a different mode of thinking about the meaning and purpose of film itself. This adds to the novelty of a film that has as its subject matter the modes of thinking and action that serve to mobilise the nuclear weapons complex.

In *The Journey* we see politics and society in a different form, characterised by people in various modes of acquiescence or oppression towards their own versions of the nuclear present. The individual subject is central to the nuclear story, but powerless to intervene, shape or inhabit a world of their choosing. We are shown examples of a nuclear workforce alienated and dehumanised by the contradictions at the heart of nuclear agendas. Like *Shoah*, *The Journey* has a recurring focus on train tracks: the steady, certain, movement of trains toward their destination. With the global nuclear train in motion, are we powerless to alter our nuclear present and future?

Watching the film in 2016, much of Watkins’ overall thesis still holds true, although the pessimistic and polemic tone now seems consigned to the 1980s. Perhaps we need a revival of such passionate and critical engagement with our nuclear condition. The nuclear present will continue to be an entangled mesh of imaginaries, technologies, permanence, secrecies, human stories, victimhood, infrastructure, nukespeak and instabilities presented as stabilities. This is what Watkins described, and it is clear that *The Journey* has an enduring message. The film stands as a piece of work unconstrained by time and place, flowing as it does between countries, lives, memories, memorials, ideas, politics and infrastructure. It reminds us that the unrestrained reach of the nuclear complex creates broad, hidden and powerful legacies that reach into the land, the mind, and body, far beyond the limited epistemological horizons constructed by text-obsessed nuclear critics. Our nuclear present is defined by the constant creation of real, physical nuclear legacies, or by the creation of a nuclear future over which we have little say, but which always has the capacity to alter the lives of living, breathing people.

*The Journey* stands as an educational and polemic monument to the restless and permanent logic of our global nuclear predicament and, although cold war tensions eased soon after Watkins completed his documentary, many of the dangers, contradictions and legacies covered in the film still shape our nuclear age. Indeed, many nuclear nation-states have strengthened their nuclear weapons capability since 1989.[[21]](#footnote-21) In this sense, *The Journey* is a classic nuclear narrative: it still resists closure, aware as we are of the reality of our problematic nuclear present. *The Journey* offers us a tapestry of possible experiences in the nuclear age, reconceptualises the intricacies of life in the nuclear now, and suggests that an affective regime still shapes our present nuclear situation. Like many documentaries, it has the power to hold the gaze, and to humanize. Perhaps more forms of cultural expression that highlight the social and cultural impact of the nuclear weapons complex would allow us to recognise our nuclear present as restless, where referents are real, problematic, unfiltered, and something to talk about again.

1. Michael Madsen’s film *Into Eternity* (2010) explores the difficulties surrounding the disposal of nuclear waste. Concentrating on the creation of Onkalo waste depository under Finland, the film poses philosophical questions about how we might conceptualise nuclear waste to ensure the safety of future generations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William Langewiesche, *The Atomic Bazaar: dispatches from the underground world of nuclear trafficking* (London: Penguin, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kate Brown, *Plutopia: nuclear families, atomic cities, and the great Soviet and American plutonium disasters* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Global Hibakusha Project: http://nuclearfutures.org/tag/global-hibakusha-project/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a sense of the scale of nuclear mobilisation in one national context see Stephen I. Schwartz (ed.), *Atomic Audit: the costs and consequences of U.S. nuclear weapons since 1940* (Washington D.C.: Brooking Institute Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion of the tension between nuclear weapons ownership and international law, see Eileen Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy: choosing between democracy and doom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p.8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Joseph Masco, ‘Age of Fallout’, *History of the Present* 5, 2 (Fall 2015), pp.137-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jonathan Hogg, ‘The Silence of Nuclear Culture’ in Andrew Futter (ed.), *The United Kingdom and the Future of Nuclear Weapons* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jeff Hughes, ‘What is British Nuclear Culture?: Understanding Uranium 235’, *The British Journal for the History of Science* 45, 4 (December 2012), pp.495–519. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jacques Derrida. ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)’, Diacritics, 14, 2 (Summer 1984), p.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Half-Life* focused on the American nuclear tests that were carried out at the Marshall Islands in 1954, focusing especially on the local residents of Rongelep and Utirik Atolls who were adversely affected by radioactive fallout. The documentary challenged the American use of testing grounds away from home territory, highlighting the human impact of nuclear weapons culture. One key quote from an islander said of the Americans, ‘they are smart at doing stupid things’ 1:16:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, ‘Documenting International Relations: Documentary Film and the Creative Arrangement of Perceptibility’, *International Studies Perspectives* 16 (2015), p.243. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also Brian C. Taylor, ‘Nuclear Pictures and Metapictures’, *American Literary History* 9, 3 (Autumn 1997), pp.567–597. Taylor argued that Carole Gallagher’s work represents a powerful counter-narrative that offers us a glimpse of diverse and hidden ‘nuclear subjectivities’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For documentaries focusing on the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, see Dir. David Rothauser *Hibakusha, Our Life To Live* (2010), accessible at <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/12771/Hibakusha--Our-Life-to-Live> ; On veterans see a short documentary ‘Atomic Vets’, accessible at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/30/us/veterans-of-atomic-test-blasts-no-warning-and-late-amends.html?\_r=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Pandora’s Promise* (2013), directed by Robert Stone, was a prime example of a documentary that offered a strong case for pursuing nuclear power generation. On the nuclear energy debate and climate change see Dir. Justin Pemberton, *The Nuclear Comeback* (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kodwo Eshun, ‘On the Point of Irrational Detonation: Peter Watkins’ *The Journey*, 1987’, *Tate Film: Peter Watkins:* The Journey(2013): http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/28723 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Frederic Jameson, ‘Cognitive Mapping’ in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), quoted in *Tate Film: Peter Watkins:* The Journey(2013), unpaginated. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1998), p.9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, ‘Documenting International Relations: Documentary Film and the Creative Arrangement of Perceptibility’, *International Studies Perspectives* 16 (2015), p.229 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the American context see Elaine Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy*: *choosing between democracy and doom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)