

POWERS  
OF THE  
FALSE  
  
(NOTES  
FROM A  
JOURNAL)

*Museum of Ante-Memorials*

Kyoto, 13 April –

Tonight was the Sunday film club. A screening among friends and a chat over a drink. This week, without disclosing my selection in advance, I chose Peter Watkins's *The War Game* in which a cold, factual voiceover accompanies black and white footage of a mock BBC report describing the devastating consequences of a nuclear bombardment in Kent, England in 1965.



*The War Game*, Peter Watkins, 1965, 47 min.

The atmosphere in the screening-room is tense. The extraordinary violence of the statistics enumerated in the voiceover, and the relentless shots of children in agony, of mass graves, of burned flesh, send a chill through the audience that was probably expecting a more entertaining Sunday selection. When the film ends, the discomfort in our group is palpable, almost physiological. “Too raw, too brutal, no subtlety, nomercy”: forty years after being censored by the BBC,

Watkins's bolt out of the blue remains intact, to the point of noticeably flattening the critical dimension of our discussion—we find ourselves speaking less about “film” than a visual and cognitive blow that hits the gut as hard as the brain.

As for myself, I spent part of the screening feeling quite uncomfortable for a specific reason: one of the guests had invited a Japanese friend, and I didn't know how someone from a culture that has actually experienced the Bomb would stomach this raw depiction of an atomic event. The ensuing discussion defied my expectations. The French guests were the ones with the palest faces. The Japanese friend seemed much less disconcerted.

Hiroshima, 21 August –

On my way back to Kyoto, a chance to stop in Hiroshima and visit the *Peace Memorial Museum*. Two buildings packed with documents, artifacts and personal accounts of the first atomic bombardment, presented chronologically, along with scientific perspectives on the Manhattan Project and the making of “Little Boy” (the affectionately named Hiroshima-bound A-Bomb), of which a life-sized replica appears in one of the rooms.

What this memorial attempts is complex: to convey the *horror*, but avoid the pitfalls of an interpretation of history that tends towards the (American) argument that “it was unavoidable,” while circumventing the explicit (but perilous) demonstration that the Enola Gay's mission on 6 August 1945 was a largely political, and resolutely barbaric gesture. The museum's curatorial strategy for the memorial is anchored in a rationale of disordered, polymorphous accumulation: scientific and graphic documents on atomic science, lists of figures conveying the scale of the destruction, architectural models and samples documenting the power of the explosion, and accounts of survivors. I imagine that an overly ordered and directive presentation of this material would have raised vast ethical and historiographical problems that are somehow avoided by a strategy of volume, evocation and repetition. The museum leaves plenty of room for interpretation, and occasionally yields some surprising juxtapositions.

The cold, scientific displays about nuclear physics (reminiscent of an ordinary science museum) can seem misplaced when viewed a few steps away from the powerful pathos of a survivor's first-person account. The layout hints at the seductive powers of scientific research (what's more exhilarating than nuclear fission, in which the infinitely small yields the infinitely large?), the same hypnotic appeal that may have led a number of well-meaning civilians, like Dr Oppenheimer, to carry on regardless of the unthinkable human consequences of their work.<sup>1</sup> Empathy for the Los Alamos scientists is surely not the primary objective of the scenography, but the accumulation and proximity of data makes this interpretation possible, and it is precisely in this kind of open layout that the memorial's function takes shape.

Repetition also comes into play. In one of the first rooms of the tour, there are two monumental models of the Hiroshima city center, one before the explosion, one after. In another adjacent room, you find a second model of the "aftermath," almost identical to the first one, with the same red ball floating over the hypocenter. Repetition is more the stuff of cinema than museums; it leaves each person with the task of reinterpreting the same object, as if it were an editing effect—a loop or a repeated scene in a film.

The artifact rooms follow. Strips of burned clothing; images of irradiated, deformed bodies; a trace of a shadow projected on a brick wall by a man vaporized by the heat; and certainly the most macabre of all, that small pile of the human remains of Noriaki Teshima, fragments of fingernails and pieces of charred skin, as they were preserved by his mother so that she could save these traces of him and show them to his father when he returned from the front.

A succession of raw data, scientific information, and contextualized numbers that exceed our capacity for visual representation, alongside each concrete artifact that serves as a meiosis for the mental image

1 In a 1965 interview, Dr Oppenheimer did, however, have this to say about the first nuclear test in the Alamogordo Desert: "We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that, one way or another."

each visitor will form. What is striking about this visit to the Hiroshima museum is that the way it unfolds and operates, and the feeling it generates, are identical to Watkins's *The War Game*. Or perhaps I should say that Watkins's mock documentary (from 1965) is articulated according to the same rationale as the Hiroshima *Peace Memorial Museum* inaugurated in 1955. The same formal choice: the scale of the atomic horror justifies (even demands) a brutal, massive exposition of information and raw forms of visualization. The same statement of purpose: to say loud and clear "Hiroshima, never again." The experience of the film in April, and of the museum today, are becoming confused in my mind. Both combine an archival role with an activist objective, but with this difference: in Hiroshima, the facts are recounted; in Watkins's film, they are manufactured. The Hiroshima museum is presented as a peace memorial, while Watkins's film is essentially an *ante-memorial* elaborated in a preemptive spirit, in the hope that there will be no need to create a real one later.

Amid the Hiroshima museum's mass of data, visitors do their own visceral sorting and leave with a ghost that will haunt them. For me, two documents remain etched in memory. The first is an American memorandum addressed to the Secretary of War, in which a committee of scientists from the Manhattan Project recommend a public demonstration of an atomic bombardment on an unpopulated area of Japan, possibly a desert island, as a warning to the Japanese. If the Japanese did not capitulate, another target could still be chosen.<sup>2</sup> The memorandum's argument is more utilitarian than humanitarian: the point is to demonstrate that the strategic objectives of the bomb can be met without the negative consequences that a large-scale civilian massacre would have on the postwar occupation of Japan, on the United States' standing in the world, and on the inevitable nuclear arms race that would follow. The "warning" proposal was not adopted.

2 Report of the *Committee on Political and Social Problems, Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory,"* University of Chicago, June 11, 1945, also known as the "Franck Report" signed by J. Franck, D. Hughes, L. Szilard, T. Hogness, E. Rabinowitch, G. Seaborg and C. J Nickson.



**SECRET**

Metallurgical Laboratory  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

June 12, 1945

To: Secretary of War - Attention: Mr. George Harrison  
From: Arthur H. Compton

Re: Memorandum on "Political and Social Problems" from Members of the "Metallurgical Laboratory" of the University of Chicago.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I have submitted to you a memorandum which has been prepared on short notice by certain key members of the scientific staff of the Metallurgical Laboratory of the University of Chicago. It deals with the long-term consequences of use of the new weapons with which we are concerned. I am submitting this at the request of the Laboratory, for the attention of your Interim Advisory Committee. The memorandum has not yet been considered by other members of the "Scientific Panel." This will be done within a few days, and a report by the panel dealing with the matter in question will be submitted. In the meantime, however, because time is short for making the necessary decisions, I have personally taken the liberty of transmitting this memorandum to you for the consideration of your committee.

The main point of this memorandum is the predominating importance of considering the use of nuclear bombs as a problem of long-range policy rather than for its military advantage in this war. Their use should thus be directed primarily toward bringing about some international control of the means of nuclear warfare.

The proposal is to make a technical but not military demonstration, preparing the way for a recommendation by the United States that the military use of atomic explosives be outlawed by firm international agreement. It is contended that its military use by us now will prejudice the world against accepting any future recommendation by us that its use be not permitted.

I note that two important considerations have not been mentioned:

- (1) that failure to make a military demonstration of the new bombs may make the war longer and more expensive of human lives, and
- (2) that without a military demonstration it may be impossible to impress the world with the need for national sacrifices in order to gain lasting security.

The document contains information affecting the national defense of the United States within the meaning of the Espionage Act, U. S. C. 50, 77 and 92. Its transmission or the revelation of its contents in any manner to an unauthorized person is prohibited by law.

**SECRET**

7-2050

Facsimile of the "Franck Report" : Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems, Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory," University of Chicago, June 11, 1945, signed by J. Franck, D. Hughes, L. Szilard, T. Hogness, E. Rabinowitch, G. Seaborg and C. J. Nickson

The second document that haunts me recalls the fate of the city of Kokura, the planned target of the second atomic bombardment on 9 August. It is a film shot from an observation plane showing the B-29 bomber *Bockscar* make three circles over Kokura in search of a hole in the unexpected cloud cover that is making it impossible to visually identify the target. *Bockscar* eventually diverts to a secondary target: Nagasaki.

Two documents that present glimpses into disturbing imaginary scenarios. In the first, the arguments in favour of a warning are heeded, and the document opens the door to a painfully credible fiction in which the reasonable arguments of civilised people save hundreds of thousands of lives. The second document is a small window onto the

strange fate of a city saved from hell by a few clouds. In the factual, precise language of military communiqués on official letterhead, and in a 16mm film showing a silver plane navigating the beautiful blue sky, the horror of reality is juxtaposed with a possible alternative history, a vision of what was avoided, or could have been. A fictional world in the grammar of the conditional perfect: the *would have been*.

Watkins's film is the mirror image of this conditional perfect: by appropriating the format of a BBC documentary, it horrifically documents the future perfect, the *will have been*.



*Aircraft en route to Nagasaki; shots of "Bock's Car," 16mm transferred to video, color, from the Hoover Institute, Stanford University*

Paris, week of 13 October –

Concept notes on curating an exhibition named *Ante-Memorials*: The 20th century may be the century of the image, but its darkest hours are distinguished by gaping holes in the visual record. There are few photographs at the Hiroshima museum because no image is "enough" to represent Hiroshima. There is the iconic mushroom-cloud, but that is more of a generic graphic symbol than a photograph (who can tell the difference between the Hiroshima mushroom and those

of Alamogordo and Bikini?). There are no images of mass graves or of fields of corpses, only the ruins of an aftermath—the architectural void as a visual substitute for the pulverisation of bodies. As for human traces, the museum built a diorama, illuminated by a scarlet light, representing two children tottering in the ruins, mannequins with strips of burned flesh on their hands and faces. Why stage this theatrical gore? Probably as a substitute for the missing images—those that may have disappeared with the American occupation, those that never existed because there was no one to produce them, or those that are missing because the Bomb left very few human remains to photograph. There are no images of the atomic event, there could be no images of the atomic event. And even if there had been images, would they have been adequate?

The question of the “representability of the unimaginable” links Hiroshima to Auschwitz. Because in spite of the narcissistic systematization of the Nazis’ documentation of the camps, there are no images of the gas chambers other than the four famous photographs of the *Sonderkommando* that gave rise to controversy over whether or not they should be exhibited, and became the subject of George Didi-Huberman’s beautiful text *Images in Spite of All*. The absolute ban on photography in the gas chambers (SS included) did not stop anonymous prisoners from miraculously snatching these four blurred images from the Auschwitz hell, leaving us with the only known photographic documents representing the operation of the extermination camps’ principal apparatus. The symbolic value of *single* images of the systematic destruction of Europe’s Jewish population is at the epicenter of the debate about whether images can represent the unrepresentability of the Holocaust. Single images are necessarily *inadequate*, because they show very little in comparison to the magnitude of the Holocaust. They are necessarily *inaccurate*, because they are imprecise, they cannot be more than *fragmentary*, able to represent only an insignificant reality dwarfed by the “unthinkable” scale of Auschwitz. For this reason, if there cannot be a single, complete, *image of all* of the Holocaust, should not *all images* be dismissed? This is how Gérard Wajcman asserts the invisibility of genocide, alongside Claude



Lanzmann, who goes as far as saying: “if I had found an existing film [...] made by an SS that showed how three thousand Jews, men, women, children, died together in a gas chamber at crematorium II at Auschwitz, if I had found that, not only would I not have shown it, but I would have destroyed it. I am unable to say why. It is obvious.”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Lanzmann believes no image is capable of telling the story of the *Shoah*, Jean-Luc Godard, in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, works on a montage of existing images to proclaim that all images, since 1945, speak of nothing else. He even attributes a redemptive power to them when he writes that “even scratched to death / a simple rectangle / of thirty-five / millimeters / saves the honor / of all of reality.”<sup>4</sup> In this polarity which has grown into a polemic, the opposition between iconoclasts and iconophiles interests me mostly for the avenues it opens to artists confronting this question about the poverty of images—between those who, like Lanzmann, abandon images to dedicate themselves to words and testimony, and those who, like Godard, connect and confront them, incessantly reinventing them in light of history. A third way should be added to this dialectic, Watkins’s path: confronted with the incomplete nature of images, let us create images! Let us create a surplus of images, a barrage of images, an overdose of images. And using the mock documentary format, let us elevate these images to the status of a near-document.

In the sensitive realm of great human tragedies, fabricating images is obviously a hazardous undertaking... There is always the danger of cinematic mediocrity and well-meaning dullness. Spielberg’s Auschwitz re-enactment, *Schindler’s List*, is problematic for its use of black and white within an ordinary fiction film to create a false archive intended to “elevate” an entertainment project. With *Life is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni opted for a depiction of tragedy that bordered on slapstick. While a bit light-hearted for some people’s taste, his film nevertheless complies with the strategy of Imre Kertész (who defended it), and with the essence of Israeli theatre that deals with the subject. The question is not so much a matter of “false images,” but rather the choice of pure

3 Quoted in George Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, University Of Chicago Press, p. 95

4 Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Paris, Gallimard-Gaumont, 1998, I, p. 86.

theatricality as the only possible way of evoking the Holocaust.

So the question is where to place Watkins's great factographic work. His task as a filmmaker (I almost want to call it a mission since there is something intensely committed about his working method) entails two objectives: re-visualising historical episodes threatened by a dominant revisionism in order to reclaim them (*Culloden*, *La Commune*), and creating scenarios that are frightening in their realism out of political urgency (*The War Game*, *Punishment Park*). The two genres share a preventative determination. The historical epics are filmed using the same device: film-crews inside the film, media as both author and subject. This anachronism (in the case of *Culloden* and *La Commune*) makes it possible to develop a critical view of how the mass media writes history, and highlights the contemporary nature of the political issues underpinning centuries-old events. But the task is even more urgent in his pure fiction films; *The War Game* was released only three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought humanity to the brink of Armageddon, and the excesses in *Punishment Park* no longer seem all that fictional in the era of Guantanamo, water-boarding and weekly drone strikes.

For Maurice Blanchot, "there is a limit beyond which practicing an art, whatever it is, becomes an insult against misfortune." Watkins approaches the problem from the opposite angle: it would be an insult to misfortune not to practice art to push back its limits. Does talk of "the unspeakable" in relation to the horror of genocide not lead to what Giorgio Agamben describes as a "mystical adoration" that runs the risk of tending towards silence?<sup>5</sup> Silence is what Watkins cannot tolerate, so he works on weaving testimony-documents into image-documents: out of the mental pictures that arise from words and historical data, he fabricates images. He has faith in their ability to be effective as long as they are not allowed to sink to the neutralizing level of a trivializing cliché-image, where Spielberg and Benigni have gone astray. This is done in two ways: through volume (repetition, excess, and explicitness) and proximity (he brings them home, to Kent, instead of setting them

5 See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, MIT Press, 2002.

in distant, exotic Japan). The political point is to brutally drag the subject into our living rooms—*Bringing the War Home*, as Martha Rosler would soon advocate—by modernizing the shock tactics Orson Welles used in the radio drama *The War of the Worlds*.

The question of the fabrication, falsification, and decontextualization of documents leads to two essential questions: what makes an image, and what does an image make? For Watkins, images have an alarmist role (in the positive sense of the word), so he develops the document's fictional territory and mines its preventative resources. In this sense, his images are similar to the mental images generated by the documents in the Hiroshima memorial, those which gave me a glimpse of how the war might have ended without thousands of civilian victims of the atomic bombardments, or enabled me to visualize the harrowing hazard that spared Kokura and doomed Nagasaki. And perhaps this is what explains the more levelheaded reaction of the Japanese guest at our Sunday film club. Figuratively, she had already been to that place of dreadful possibles. Being more familiar with the matter, she was in a better position to understand Watkins's project for what it is, the *ante-memorial* of an imminent but avoidable cataclysm.

Juxtaposing fictions that have documentary tendencies with documents that open fictional spaces. Setting up a dialogue between them in a single exhibition. Such is the curatorial ambition of an *Ante-Memorials* show.

George Didi-Huberman expresses the importance of *images in spite of all* by stressing that "in each testimonial production, in each act of memory, language and image are absolutely bound to one another, never ceasing to exchange their reciprocal lacunae. An image often appears where a word seems to fail; a word often appears where the imagination seems to fail."<sup>6</sup> In the same way, *Ante-Memorials* is an exhibition that examines artistic practices that weld together document and fiction, each compensating for the other's shortcomings. And given that the Watkins / Hiroshima museum dialectic—the testimonial production of the *would have / will have been*—revolves around the



essential idea of *ante-memorials*, it is crucial that another piece be introduced into the project: *COMMEMOR* (*Commission Mixte d'Échange de Monuments aux Morts* / Joint Commission for an Exchange between Monuments to the Dead), 1970, in which Robert Filliou orchestrated, with the powerful lightness that makes him indispensable in this case, a fictional exchange of monuments to the dead between cities in Holland, Germany and Belgium, in place of real wars. *COMMEMOR* as a sculptural response to Watkins's cinematic gesture.



*Commemor*, Robert Filliou, Ed. Neue Galerie im Alten Kurhaus, Aix-la-Chapelle, 1970

Brussels, 18 October –

While out for a walk, I end up visiting Jan Mot gallery where the opening of Deimantas Narkevicius's exhibition is underway with a screening of his film *The Dud Effect*. It's a stroke of luck; I'm just about to finish selecting works for *Ante-Memorials* and I stumble upon this film, which is partly inspired by, or you might say it engages in a dialog with, Watkins's *The War Game*. Narkevicius presents the flipside of the fictional events of Kent in 1965: the launch of R-14 nuclear missiles from a Soviet base in Lithuania in the 1970s.



*The Dud Effect*, Deimantas Narkevicius, 2008, 16mm transferred to BluRay, 15 min 40

*The Dud Effect* is the inverse of *The War Game* from a narrative standpoint (depicting the launch instead of the impact) but also in terms of style: every effort is made to render the action ordinary, bureaucratic, methodical. No emotion in the shots, only a clinical description of an administrative routine. Narkevicius does not deal with the decision to launch the missiles, so moral questions are not explicitly raised, and their impact is suggested only in what we are capable of imagining in a distant off-screen space. Most of the film shows an anonymous officer on the telephone reciting orders of a technical nature to anonymous listeners ("position 101," "position 105"). It is documentary (being based on real procedures and enacted by a real former Red Army officer) more than cinematic (there is no red button, no electronic console, just a voice on the telephone and an impassive man). At the moment of the launch, the officer's face is simply overexposed by the light of the reactors outside the frame. The aftermath is suggested by shots of surrounding nature, the sound of strong wind, and a series of long takes of current Soviet-era nuclear installations in an advanced state of decay (empty silos, collapsed warehouses). Is it a post-apocalyptic world, or simply the spoils of



time, the reassuring evidence of the end of the Soviet empire? And if it's the second hypothesis, why are we not comforted by these images of a past that never was?

To the Hiroshima museum's *would have been*, to Watkins's *will have been*, and to Filliou's simple conditional, we must therefore add Narkevicius's *was not*. In this conjugation of works, among other constants linked to their "memorial" value, it is essentially a question of time and truth, or of how time puts the notion of truth in crisis.

These different ways of narrating the facts illustrate the paradox of "future contingents," a philosophical problem continually explored since antiquity, which Gilles Deleuze sums up in this way: "If it is *true* that a naval battle *may* take place tomorrow, how are we to avoid one of the true following consequences: either the impossible proceeds from the possible (since, if the battle takes place, it is no longer possible that it may not take place), or the past is not necessarily true (since the battle could not have taken place)."<sup>7</sup> Leibniz proposes a solution to this paradox that is very apt for our purposes: the naval battle (like the atomic bombardment) can take place or not take place, but not in the same world, it takes place in two worlds that are not mutually "compossible." By inventing the notion of "impossibility," he resolves the paradox while bringing a lull in the truth crisis, since it is the impossible (and not the impossible) that proceeds from the possible. "The past may be true without being necessarily true." Deleuze then goes on to evoke Borges' response to Leibniz (as I am similarly invoking Watkins and Narkevicius): "the straight line as a force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line which forks and keeps on forking, passing through *impossible presents*, returning to *not-necessarily true pasts*."<sup>8</sup>

The documents and works in *Ante-Memorials* converse in this simultaneity. The exhibition is in a sense built around this Deleuzian idea of the "powers of the false" that unseat and substitute for the figure of truth—artistic, creative or narrative power abandons the status of truth to become a falsifier. The artist becomes a falsifier,

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 126

8 Ibid., p. 127

but not simply in the name of an artististic subjectivity (“to each his reality”), but from a real need that can only be satisfied by filling the space between story and history.

Translated from the French by Matthew Cunningham.