

The Incredible Journey

The Film with a Mission

Fiona Montgomery

If you wanted to make the world's first global peace film, the chances are that you wouldn't start with the basic theme of families around the world sitting at their kitchen tables discussing photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Nor would you likely include long sequences of walking along a railroad track, even if it is the route of the famous White Train which carries nuclear warheads across America.

What about discussing which language is taught in schools in Tahiti, and how much material about the Army is in a school library in Lewis?

Surprisingly, all these and much much more make Peter Watkins' 14½-hour epic, *The Journey*, a stunning and moving production. For a film funded mainly by small private donations and shot by local film teams in thirteen different countries, it is a tremendous achievement. Members of the film's second Scottish audience (at the Glasgow Film Theatre last December) described it as: "a symphony"; "an extraordinarily moving experience"; and "like a conversation with friends". One man said it had "a hypnotic and rhythmic power".

In *The Journey*, Watkins — best known for his film *The War Game*, which was banned by the BBC for 20 years — wants to challenge the silence surrounding the issues of war, racism, economic exploitation, media manipulation, centralisation of power, and access to information. Watkins puts the negative reviews which the film has had in some quarters down to "the compromises being made by many journalists now, in their acceptance of the nuclearised state and their obvious need to discredit any forms of opposition".

Watkins encourages us to question the decision-making processes and the manner in which we are presented with much essential information. He says that we are assaulted with a barrage of fast-moving complex images which leave us with a fragmented view of the world. The average shot-length in a television news broadcast ranges from 3 to 7½ seconds. In *Casablanca* it is 6.7 seconds, and in *Rambo II* it's 3. The average in *The Journey* is 46 seconds, which shows just how different a film it is.

Watching *The Journey*, the viewer is compelled to think long and hard about the simple, appalling truth that we could feed, clothe, house and educate everyone in the world for a fraction of what we spend on arms. Yet how often do politicians or the media make the direct connection between poverty and the arms race?

Weaving from one country to another in a startling and amazing way, *The Journey* juxtaposes different times, places and circumstances. Watkins illustrates present and

past crimes against humanity and the possibility of future ones . . .

* Whilst the camera takes you through an underground shelter in Hamburg, there is a voice-over of a Japanese man talking about Hiroshima.

* We see pictures of demonstrators at the White Train, whilst someone compares it to trains in Nazi Germany taking people to the concentration camps.

* We are told that Britain is the world's second largest exporter of police and paramilitary equipment and offered shock-batons to representatives of the junta in Chile, as we witness a dramatisation of Strathclyde councillors being arrested under wartime emergency laws and being driven off in army trucks.

The film involves families in Scotland, Norway, Australia, the USA, West Germany, the USSR, Japan and Mexico. Families were recruited by advertising through peace groups and newspapers, and finally selected after an interview with Watkins. He deliberately chose families who, even if members of a peace group, had not been active, families whom viewers could identify with as 'ordinary people'. 'Extras' for the various dramatisations were recruited in the same way. He didn't want famous actors because he didn't want people to be able to enter 'fantasy land' at any point. There were no scripts; instead he spent a long time explaining to his 'extras' that they should react to the scenario he painted for them exactly as they thought they would if it was real . . . they were not to 'act out' some fictional character.

Tricia Benzie, a researcher on the film and a member of the Scottish support group, said that they had provided a lot of detailed facts and figures and had suggested filming in Stornoway, although there were a number of places they could have used. "Watkins was attracted because this was a community which was by and large united despite politics . . . it was the biggest focus of real community opposition."

Scotland features prominently, with the Keep NATO Out campaigners in Stornoway describing how in 1981 they forced a Public Inquiry into the expansion of the runway. It was supposedly needed for the defence of the country, "but whenever we argued a strategic point they said we had no idea what we were talking about." A KNO member supports Watkins' critique of the media: "the media plays such a major role in our world — more should be made of media studies in education. Children are not prepared by our education system to be able to analyse the media."

Another Scottish input comes from the Smillie family from Dumbarton. They take part in a video exchange with the Kolosovs in Leningrad, then travel there to meet them face to face. Sam Smillie was amazed when he saw the film at "how well you get to know the families", and he sees *The Journey* as perhaps more important than *The War Game*.

Penny Thompson, producer of the Scottish section of the film, expects that people will react very differently to it: some will take quite a while to adjust to the leisurely pace of the film, though she was "delighted with the long interviews" where Watkins gives the families all the time they need to think about his questions. Although she had worried that some of it was clichéd, the strength of feeling



Protesters in police custody in the film.

compensated for that, she felt.

Nancy Dangerfield, Chairperson of Scottish CND, believes that it moves on from what *The War Game* did — simply presenting us with what would happen in a nuclear war. *The Journey's* not there just to give you aolt; it extends the problem to an international dimension which we've got to see as the world gets smaller. What you need to do with this film is be prepared to sit for hours and work your way through and think about it and identify with the people."

Distribution and use

Nancy Dangerfield doesn't see it being used in quite the same way as *The War Game* which, when shown in town halls around the country in the early 1980s, brought many many people into the peace movement. "I would see it more as an educational facility for District and Regional Councils to be using... part of a peace studies programme with education authorities using it." With exactly this in mind, Watkins constructed the film in 45-minute segments which can be taken separately for teaching or discussion purposes. He is also producing a teaching guide.

Distribution of the film is largely through the support groups in each country, and it has already been screened by local support groups in Utica, Hamburg and Auckland. It has been shown at Film Festivals in West Berlin, Vienna, Sydney, Melbourne, Toronto, Lisbon and Leipzig, as well as in Edinburgh last September. In Sweden and Canada the groups are working with both commercial and non-commercial distributors, while in the US the film has been bought by WNET, one of the principal American broadcasting stations. Television stations in several countries who cannot fit the 14½-hour version into their schedules have asked for the film to be reduced in length. Watkins is reluctantly considering a 9-hour version (though only for television), because that might be the only way it will be shown in countries like Hungary, Greece and Poland. In Britain, Channel 4 are considering screening the film.

All the support groups were involved in planning and organising filming in their respective countries, as well as raising funds. The Scottish group raised over £15,000, receiving donations and support from local authorities throughout Britain, from individuals, from local branches of political parties, and from the STUC. The Scottish Film Production Fund provided a further £15,000.

The group is now in the initial stages of promoting the film here. Its Secretary, Billy Wolfe, believes it is very important to get the film into educational and film circles, and he hopes to set up separate groups in each of these areas. "The film should be of great professional interest in the film industry and the film societies," he says, "because of its unique structure and form."

"And every time we show the film we'll get groups as a result of it." He envisages a network of geographical groups (Strathclyde, Lothian, etc) plus a group consisting of "people who are interested in prom-



Peter Watkins

oting the film in the educational world, both in the authorities and the teaching profession."

The Scottish group has its own 16mm copy of the film, plus a video version, and expects to sell video copies to educational institutions. Trustees of the film include Campbell Christie of the STUC, Nancy Dangerfield of Scottish CND, Canon Kenyon Wright of the Scottish Churches Peace Group, Lord Carmichael and Bill Taylor. The film is due to be shown at the forthcoming Peace Festival in Edinburgh.

Anyway, see the film: despite its subject, *The Journey* is truly inspiring. As Billy Wolfe says, "Watkins is a poet and *The Journey* is a work of art." ■

FIONA MONTGOMERY was Scottish CND's organiser in 1983-85 and is now taking the Journalism course at Napier College, Edinburgh.

The next full showing of The Journey is at the Edinburgh Filmhouse on Saturdays 5, 19 and 26 March, from 11.30 am-5 pm approximately.

It will also be screened continuously on video at the Edinburgh Peace Festival from February 19-28 in the Assembly Rooms, whenever the video equipment is not being used for something else.

Further details about The Journey can be obtained from Billy Wolfe, 35 Royal Park Terrace, Edinburgh EH8 8JA. Tel: 031 661 3049.

GOLGOTHA

We accepted the gifts
from the wise men in winter.

We ingested the flocks
from off the green hills;
the lamb slid easily
across our tongues.

We feasted with the darkest wine
as the babes grew strange.

We kissed beneath the elder trees
as the sunsets grew redder than poppies.

And when God's silver missiles
hiss across this planet of skulls,
we will have betrayed ourselves,
have nailed ourselves
bloodlessly to the world.
And there will be no crosses.

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