

Great American Desert - Notes

Stephen Connolly 16mm 16' 2007

Synopsis

The camera observes a scrubby Arizona desert, seasonally occupied by recreational vehicle dwellers. Other elements emerge in juxtaposition, including contemporary recordings of military procedures and an account of the men who carried out the Hiroshima bombing.

An examination of civil liberties in the West in relation to war, spectacle and consumerism.

Great American Desert is the second of a trilogy of experimental films, called 'Afflicted States', made in response to the changed social and political environment in the West since 2001.

Contextual notes/documents

'Primitive accumulation is to be carried out in conditions of spectacle: that is the new reality in a nutshell.'

Retort Collective. (2005). *Afflicted Powers*. London: Verso

'Great American Desert' as a term for the US West was first applied to a map by the explorer Stephen Harriman Long after an official expedition in 1823. Edwin James, a geographer on this mission, remarked in the report : "I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country".

Meinig, D.W. (1993). *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, Volume 2: Continental America, 1800-1867*. New Haven: Yale University Press - also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_American_Desert

With the advent of the railroad and as the area was settled, the name fell into disuse. Arizona was incorporated as a state in 1912 and today has the fastest growing population in the US.

Quartzsite, the town featured in the film, is located in western Arizona, twelve miles from the Californian border on Interstate 10 (Houston - Los Angeles) and approximately eighty miles from the Mexican border. For most of the year, Quartzsite's population is under 5,000. In January and early February, up to a million recreational vehicle owners converge on the area to camp.

A chance encounter in North London with a friend and former colleague of Jack Shelley led to the narration which forms the opening sequence of the film. Mr Shelley, responding to general questions, recorded it by himself at his home near Des Moines, Iowa, in January 2007. As he explains, he interviewed the crew of the aircraft shortly after they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6th August 1945.

The Los Angeles Times pages featured in the film, report on Navy Day, 27 October 1945. This was an annual event between 1923 and 1949 (this tradition continues with Fleet Week, now celebrated in San Diego). In 1945, a capacity crowd in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum witnessed a programme narrated by Edward G Robinson, a Hollywood star noted for the title role in 'Little Caesar' (Mervyn Le Roy, 1931). The programme highlight was a re-enactment, in light and sound, of the bombing of Hiroshima.

Climax of the day's activities will be the gigantic production - free to the public - at the memorial coliseum, where the gates will open at 6pm.

Organised through co-operation of the mayors office, the military and the motion picture industry, this show promises to be the most lavish in the city's history.

Painstaking effort has gone into preparation of a rapid-fire program including depiction by fireworks, explosions, sound devices and lights of the war's progress from pearl harbor to final victory.

(Los Angeles Times October 27 1945)

The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was built in 1923 and used for the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932 and 2004. It is currently the home of the University of South California Trojans football team. Lighting for spectacles at the Coliseum was provided by Searchlight Battalions with fifty 800,000,000 (foot) candlepower searchlights.

see <http://www.skylighters.org/>

The Cold War in the 1950's saw proposals by Norbert Weiner (amongst others) for dispersing US cities.

'The particular vulnerability of big American cities to atomic weapons stems from a combination of two factors : the intense congestion of the cities and the and the immense destructive power of the bomb. First would come the immediate and total destruction of a large area, with casualties running into the hundreds of thousands. Within hours, local stocks of gasoline would be exhausted and every road would be blocked solidly with stalled cars. The refugees would set off on foot, pouring through suburban communities too small to feed or shelter them.

The decentralisation of our cities on the spots on which they stand, plus the release of our communication system from the threat of a disastrous tie up are reforms which are long overdue, war or no war. For a city is primarily a communications centre, serving the same purpose as a nerve centre in the body.

We believe that the measures we have suggested have an intrinsic tendency to make the city a better organised and safer place to live. They would also serve to thwart the extreme and unhealthy internal growth that is taking place in most of our big municipalities. And they would presumably lead to a greater spread of healthy semi-rural life on the urban periphery.' (5)

Weiner, N. et al. (1950). How US Cities can prepare for Atomic War. Chicago: LIFE 19.10.50

They took their seats near the peristyle around a huge built- up purple heart which shone under the light like a grim valentine of war.

As two aerial bombs burst in midair, the searchlights poised outside the coliseum snapped on through color wheels and formed a breath-taking rainbow which converged in a cone above the big bowl.

(Los Angeles Times October 28 1945)

'In a context in which images seemed to recovered a potential to shock and awe - we were all witnesses to 9/11 and the torture images of Abu Ghraib - these were images that ruptured the spectacle of our culture, whereas most art today re-inforces that spectacle..... What al Qaida understood, better than any critic, was that those images would not then be attentively analysed, understood critically - because the culture of spectacle precludes such a response - but responded to emotionally in the manner of those Hollywood movies that are the apotheosis of spectacle.'

Chris Townsend. (2007). Protest Art. London: Art Monthly, 02.07

One of the most impressive effects of the program was a demonstration of the atomic bomb.

At a signal, a low flying B29 skimmed over the bowl, the multicoloured searchlight beams tinting it's gleaming silver with pastels. As the big bomber roared over the peristyle, a terrific detonation shook the ground, a burst of flame flashed on the field and great billows of smoke mushroomed upwards in an almost too real depiction of devastation. As the smoke snaked skywards, red and blue lights played over the white column with magic effectiveness.

(Los Angeles Times October 28 1945)

'As the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima approached, the (Smithsonian Air and Space Museum's) new director Martin Harwit announced that a memorial exhibit with its premiere in May of 1995.... The idea was also to put the bombing of Hiroshima into it's historical context, describe the situation at the end of the Pacific War, give the arguments for and against the bombing, and show the effects of the bombing, the human tragedies and the inheritance that the bombing left to the Cold War and the armaments race..... Before the exhibit project had even taken shape on paper, the museum was bombarded with protests from veterans' organisations.

Martin Harwit was wrong when he thought that in 1995, fifty years after the fact, it would finally be possible to bring the historical discussion to the public and give a critical and comprehensive image of the decision to drop the bomb. He had underestimated the power of denial. The veterans had good connections in the Senate, and they were able to push through a unanimous resolution that declared the as-yet-nonexistent exhibit was "revisionist, unbalanced and offensive."

In January of 1995, the exhibit was cancelled.'

Lindqvist, S. (2001). A history of bombing. London: Granta. (selected quotes from longer review of this dispute.)

"It's very difficult, even in a democracy, to come to terms with history. Our role in this [post-Cold War] world is not at all clear, and I think, unless we understand our past properly [and] that history is different from mythology . . . we are going into the future with an enormous handicap." Martin Harwit - former director of Smithsonian Air and Space Museum

<http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oampast/oamfall97/Features/dreamjob.html>

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