



Ghosts of the Future

Kelvin Mason

Independent researcher
kelvin.john.mason@gmail.com

Abstract

This film (<https://vimeo.com/182695880>) explores the UK's decision to replace its Trident nuclear weapons system. Due to the 'alternative format'ⁱ, the script and a response to reviewers is printed below. The film's narration draws upon an existentialist ethics to critique a politics and culture of nuclear weapons, Mutually Assured Destruction and deterrence. The film was made at an academic seminar intervention at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Burghfield in Berkshire in June 2016. Thematically linking 'war' and (global) 'warming', the seminar explored nuclear weapons and energy as, literally, signature technologies of the Anthropocene. A particular phenomenological approach employs close observation and social participation in place as an 'incandescence' to illuminate wider geographies and diverse temporalities. Physically inhabiting the AWE space made visible these 'ghosts' and highlighted the inextricability of emotion and reason. The film argues that deterrence is antithetic to the key existentialist tenet of transcendence. Deterrence is immoral not (only) because it is defined by abominable revenge rather than justice, but because it shapes an oppressive politics and culture that preclude the attainment of freedom and the acceptance of a concomitant personal responsibility. Owning one's radical freedom and responsibility is Sartre's definition of 'authenticity', living the truth about ourselves.

Keywords

Trident; deterrence; existentialism; ethics; place



Narrator's Script

Robert Macfarlane observes that, 'We mostly respond to mass extinction with 'stuplimity': the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is united with boredom, such that we overload on anxiety to the point of outrage-outrage'. He asks: 'How might a novel or poem possibly account for our authorship of global scale environmental changes across millennia – let alone shape the nature of that change?'

What is the perfect text for the Anthropocene?

I prepare for participation in an academic intervention (here) at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Burghfield near Reading in Berkshire by reading about existentialist ethics and phenomenological research methods. The intervention follows the 'no war, no warming' theme of a month of direct action at AWE and we issued a call for participation to people interested in issues around nuclear weapons and climate change.

AWE is responsible for the assembly and maintenance of nuclear warheads for the Trident missile system: four nuclear powered Vanguard submarines, Trident D-5 ballistic missiles, and the nuclear warheads.

The Anthropocene is the geological age in which human influence on planet Earth is the most significant impact and 'will leave a long-term signature in the strata record'. The Anthropocene and the nuclear age start simultaneously, and part of this signature will be the global dispersal of artificial radionuclides from the testing and, perhaps, use of nuclear weapons.

We are without excuse.

In an existentialist view, at least, our identities are partly constituted by how we live the 'already' and the 'not yet' in our everyday life. Heidegger dubs this our 'ekstatic temporality'. Facticity and transcendence stand as, respectively, our ekstatic past and future. While we live in the present, we are animated by both the past and, most significantly for who we can come to know ourselves to be, the possibility of the future; this is Heidegger's 'ek-sistence'.

Encountering, a grizzly bear feasting on a caribou carcass, Barry Lopez suggests that, rather than concentrate on the bear, his indigenous travelling companions 'would focus on that part of the world of which, at this moment, the bear was only a fragment. The bear here might be compared with a bonfire, a kind of incandescence that throws light on everything around it'. Experiencing the event in this way 'extended the moment of encounter with the bear backwards *and* forwards in time'.

Simone de Beauvoir outlined an existentialist morality: 'Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into 'in-itself', of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and

oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil.' We can – *we should* - transform the way we live every moment, seek freedom from oppression.

Angie Zelter, who organised the month of direct action at Burghfield with the network Trident ploughshares, refuses to be confined by facticity. Her every action at AWE is an attempted step into a different future right now. The more the police try to impose the order of the moment on her, immanence, the social order determined by nuclear deterrence and the coercive security which adherence to that doctrine dictates, the more she steps out of line: she tries to push through the police cordon into AWE; she sits down in the road to block it, constantly shuffling into a more obstructive position; she never stops talking to the police explaining the moral fault of Trident, the future it defines, the alternatives it constrains...

Jean Paul Sartre defined 'authenticity' as owning one's radical freedom and responsibility: it is a matter of living the truth about ourselves.

We are without excuse.

I am filming a wild rose, trying not to mind whether or not a bee lands on it to feed. I am focussed on holding my own attention, resisting the temptation to flit, to film something else; something 'happening'. I am acutely aware of my own breathing; aware how impossible it is to hold the camcorder steady, trying to 'go with' that. Looking intently through the viewfinder at this one speck of the landscape, I am more aware than I otherwise would be of the soundscape. The rush of cars passing on the road behind me is inescapable; from white noise to cacophonous intrusion. There is birdsong too. Behind me a policeman. I am again contravening bye-laws, filming Ministry of Defence property. I must stop.

A bee is feeding on the rose.

Each Vanguard submarine is armed with up to 16 missiles each of which can carry at least three warheads. And each warhead has an explosive power eight times that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. That bomb, 'Little Boy', devastated an area of five square miles and killed at least 135,000 people. Many others suffered long-term sickness and disability.

The U.S. dropped a second nuclear bomb, 'Fat Man', on the city of Nagasaki, killing at least another 50,000 people.

We are without excuse.

One morning, in the impromptu peace camp set up across from the construction gate at AWE, my friend and colleague Kye tells me she awoke in her tent to the sound of birdsong, which filled her with a life-affirming joy. Then, she realised that she was lying so very close to a place that could obliterate all birdsong forever.

I am still taking that in.

For a moment, when I am filming, I mistake the distant beep-beep warning of a lorry reversing inside AWE *for* birdsong. Perhaps some birds imitate lorries in their calls? Perhaps, on some level, the design engineer based the lorry's alarming sound on the call of birds?

Each warhead on a Trident missile could kill more than a million people. And the '*payload*' of one Vanguard submarine has the potential to kill some fifty-three million people: the entire population of South Africa.

The UK *always* has one armed Vanguard submarine at sea.

(*Lotte Reimer sings*) All that we have created with our hands
 And our minds, for the glory of the world we live in,
 Now it can be *smashed*, in a moment destroyed,
 Deadly the harvest of two atom bombs.
 Then, people of the world, we must watch and take care
 That the third atom bomb never comes.

Exponents of the Trident system claim it is a deterrent. The military theory of deterrence runs that the threat of using powerful weapons against an enemy deters that enemy from attacking you with similar weapons. Applied to nuclear weapons, deterrence translates into a security policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. Exponents of the policy seem to have no problem living with the darkest of ironies, that the acronym for this system is MAD.

Professor Rebecca Kay sees MAD as the ultimate 'othering', and questions the moral logic of deterrence. She asks how, if 'we' were subject to a nuclear attack, 'it would better to die knowing that 'our' bombs were killing those people too'? *How?*

The moral philosopher Mary Midgely pinpoints the indiscriminate nature of nuclear weapons, likening them to landmines on a vastly greater scale. 'This feature cannot be sanitised by claiming that their owners are never going to use them. To say nothing of the fact that they have actually once already been used in combat, *the mere act of threatening others with an abomination is itself already abominable.*'

Ratified by one hundred and sixty two states, the Ottawa Treaty prohibits the production, transfer or use of landmines, committing signatories to their destruction. The UK signed the Ottawa Treaty in 1997.

We are without excuse.

People are striking the peace camp that has been my home for the past two nights. There is a fire with an ash-clogged and smoke-blackened kettle upon it, tarpaulins strung overhead between trees, a few pop-up tents... I resist the urge to go and help my comrades, as I feel I should. I keep filming. I keep my back to the construction gate of AWE: a wide, heavy-duty, heavy-metal structure with black

painted bars and close steel mesh. Behind the gate, MoD police with guns and a German Shepherd dog on a leash keep a close watch.

In 'The Castle' Kafka wrote: 'All [the authorities] did was to guard the distant and invisible interests of distant and invisible masters.'

We are without excuse.

Twenty yards down the road, civilian police are parked, also observing. A police car drives by, perhaps just to make sure all their other colleagues aren't missing anything sinister. I do not turn the camera on any of them. Across the road, a handful of people, thrown together in their opposition to nuclear weapons or their academic interest in nuclear weapons or in climate or protest or place, continue packing away food, taking down tents, tipping rain water carefully off tarpaulins not to drench the packed-away kit, themselves or each other. Nothing happens.

So much is happening.

On 14th March 2016, the House of Commons voted by 409 to 161 to retain a strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current system. A vote on renewing the Trident weapons programme specifically is scheduled for 18th July 2016. If that vote carries, as seems certain, Vanguard submarines will be replaced and the life of Trident missiles extended. AWE is poised to play a major role when the warheads themselves need to be refurbished or replaced.

According to the government's estimate, Vanguard replacement will cost £31 billion. This figure does not include an extra £10bn that the MoD has put aside as contingency for an anticipated overspend. Trident's opponents estimate the cost very significantly higher. Updating a 2014 estimate by the independent Trident Commission, in 2015 international news agency Reuters put the cost at £167bn. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) calculates the cost as high as £205bn. This sum could, CND claim, 'improve the NHS by building 120 state of the art hospitals and employing 150,000 new nurses, build 3 million affordable homes, install solar panels in every home in the UK or pay the tuition fees for 8 million students.'

The UK is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament.

On 19th July, the House of Commons parliament in Westminster voted to replace Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system by 472 votes to 117. In the debate, George Kerevan, Scottish National Party Member of Parliament for East Lothian, asked Theresa May, the Prime Minister, 'Is she personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that could kill one hundred thousand men, women and children?' Previous Prime Ministers have avoided answering this question. With no hesitation, though, Theresa May answered, 'Yes.' She then added, 'The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it.'

We are without excuse.

In the peace camp a woman from Scotland, Cat, paints a series of watercolour landscapes of AWE. I ask, and she kindly gives me one of the paintings. It shows the heavy, dark metal construction gate, the No Trident signs that protesters have installed. And a bird.

To our academic seminar, held in front of the construction gate to AWE, Kye brings red paper-chain people. They are an audience to represent absence: the ghosts of the future that the use of Trident might create, particularly our academic colleagues from the past and especially those from the future who are not here, or who may not be able to be here; and our colleagues in the present who are also absent, also ghosts.

We weave the paper-chain people between the mesh of the construction gate. With their dog and their guns, the two MoD police officers come to warn us that this action infringes a by-law and that we must take the figures down immediately or face arrest. *They are paper figures four inches tall.* We argue. And - after a stand-off - one of the police officer concedes that the figures can stay in the fence for five minutes. The quality of that short time is immense. Seminar participants are suffused by emotion. The police decision seems at once rational and compassionate. We note that these are not separate mechanisms.

Existentialism acknowledges time as binding: it cannot be escaped. However, it further holds, that time is lived and should be measured qualitatively. So, if we can't change time, we can transform the way we live every moment.

Because Kye's paper-chain people are prohibited from staying on the real construction gate, I rescue some of them and add them into Cat's picture of the gate. The ghosts have a home. But they are not at peace.

.... you and your
children matter. I hope your love will teach the nations
that emit the most carbon and violence that they should,
instead, remit the most compassion. I hope, soon

Presenting in the seminar, Phil stresses how nuclear deterrence is compelled to go hand in glove with secrecy and security; how it is incommensurable with transparency and freedom; how it is undemocratic. Inherent in deterrence is a pessimistic view of human nature that restricts us from developing a future of nobler virtue: of trust and empathy not suspicion; of justice rather revenge; of non-violence, of openness in place of threat; welcome and inclusion instead of othering, of care and compassion beyond fear.

A community policeman, Matt, is on duty to observe our seminar. We invite him in to the circle, to participate. When the seminar concludes, he exchanges hugs as all participants do. Afterwards, he helps to pack up the peace camp.

Deterrence is antithetic to transcendence.

We are without excuse.

The beep-beep warning of lorries reversing.

Fade to grey (shadows picture from Hiroshima)

[N.B. These final two moments did not make the ‘final cut’ of the film.]

Acknowledgments

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ⁱ As dubbed by Reviewer E.