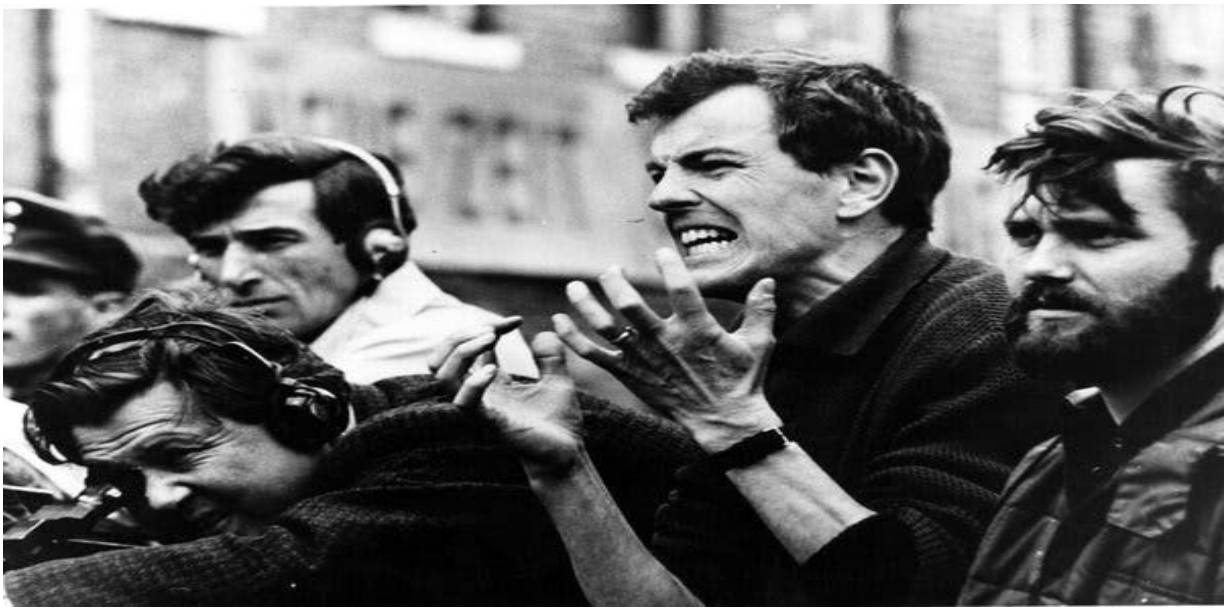
Peter Watkins, Provocateur With a Movie Camera, Dies at 90

His Oscar-winning 1965 film “The War Game” depicted a post-nuclear-attack England, one of his many fictionalized docudramas against war and repression.



Peter Watkins directing “The War Game.” Considered “too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting,” the film was shelved by the BBC for 20 years, though it was shown elsewhere.

By J. Hoberman
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Peter Watkins, a British filmmaker and artistic provocateur whose movies blurred the line between documentary and fiction, most powerfully in “The War Game,” his Oscar-winning 1965 evocation of a nuclear attack that the BBC deemed “too horrifying” to air, died on Oct. 30 in Bourganeuf, France. He was 90.

His death, in a hospital, was announced on his website by his wife, Vida Urbonavicius. He had spent much of the last quarter-century in central France.

In Mr. Watkins's sprawling output of movies — including stories about a pop star used by the government to manipulate political opinion, the bloody French uprising of 1871 and, in a 14-hour epic, the Cold War arms race — the unifying principals were an utmost distrust of authority and the threat of civic annihilation, a legacy of a London childhood forged in the face of wartime Blitzkrieg.

Mr. Watkins had shown early promise as an amateur filmmaker before the BBC hired him in 1962. Two years later, he delighted producers with a short feature on the Battle of Culloden, the decisive engagement of the 18th-century Jacobite uprising in Scotland in which the Scottish army was routed by the Duke of Cumberland. Shot with nonprofessional actors as though by a TV news crew, "Culloden" was widely acclaimed and led the BBC to commission Mr. Watkins to make a movie dramatizing the effects of a nuclear strike.

The film was more than the state-funded BBC had bargained for. Factual yet apocalyptic over 48 minutes, "The War Game" imagined a one-megaton Soviet warhead exploding above the city of Canterbury in a blinding flash, unleashing a flesh-melting firestorm, widespread radiation sickness and a complete breakdown of law and order.

Considered "too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting," a BBC news release said at the time, "The War Game" was shelved for 20 years, although it was shown elsewhere, winning a special award at the 1966 Venice Film Festival and collecting the Academy Award for best documentary feature.

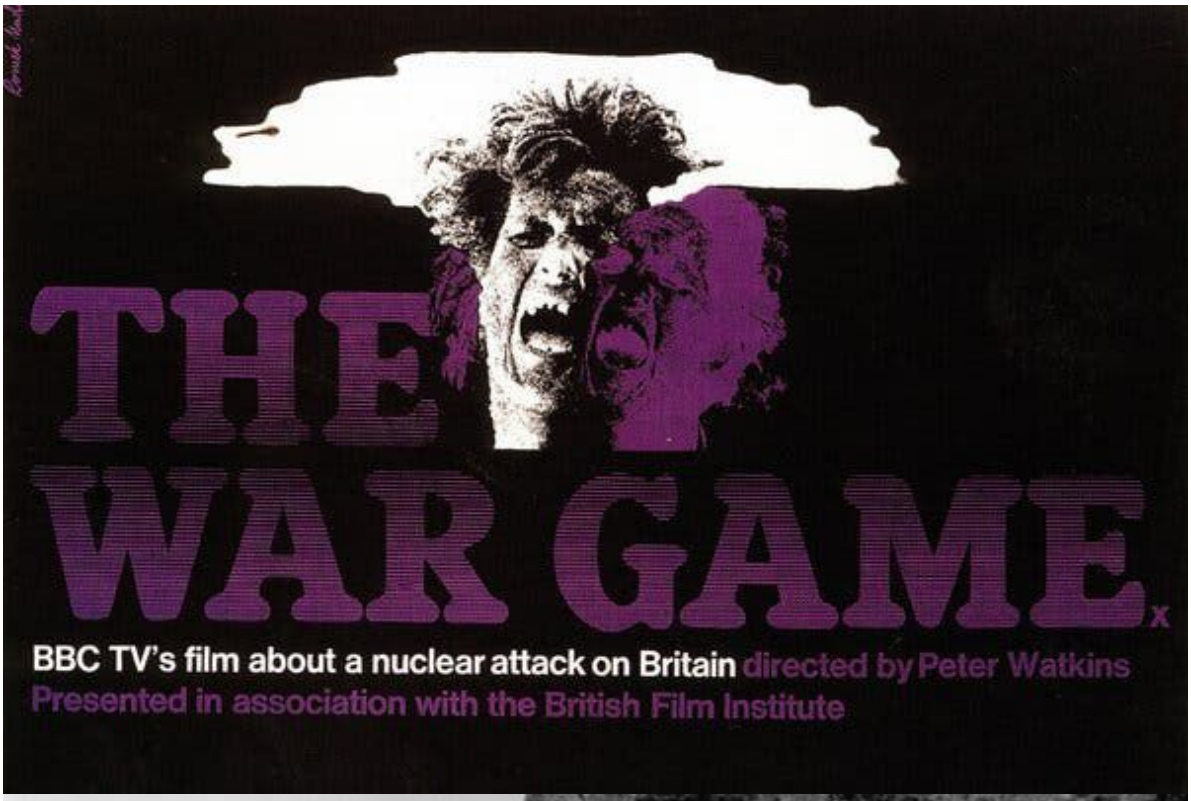
The New York Times reported that many in British government were opposed to showing the film not so much because it was "too horrible" but because it was viewed as "political propaganda that served the interests of those opposed to Britain's having a nuclear deterrent."

The experience left Mr. Watkins deeply mistrustful of a broadcast system that he called mass audiovisual media, or MAVM.

"What the film is," he told The Guardian, "is depressing. It rams home the possibility of a thermonuclear war within 20 years. The BBC are denying the existence of this possibility."

He took strong exception to the word horrifying, noting that a program that the BBC had

broadcast about the Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Warsaw “was far, far more horrifying.” Mr. Watkins resigned from the BBC and never forgave it for acceding to what he considered political censorship.



A scene from “The War Game.” The film depicted a complete breakdown of law and order after a nuclear attack.Getty Images

In addition to his stark subject matter, Mr. Watkins’s work was distinguished by two innovations: the use of television documentary techniques in depicting a historical event and the recruitment of nonactors with divergent viewpoints, disagreements that would become a spontaneous element of a film.

Mr. Watkins’s lone American production was a mock documentary, “Punishment Park” (1971). Based on the most extreme interpretation of actual internal security legislation passed by Congress during the Red Scare, the film envisioned a desert detention center where political prisoners had the option of running from their captors as a kind of televised blood sport, all of it intercut with a televised political trial.

For the film, Mr. Watkins used pro- and antiwar Americans, assigned them roles and had the camera operator, Joan Churchill, document the result. Writing in The Village Voice in 2005, the critic Michael Atkinson called “Punishment Park” “the most radioactive portrait of American divisiveness and oppression ever made.”

Similarly, in casting “La Commune (Paris 1871),” released in 2000, Mr. Watkins cast nonactors — both sympathetic leftists and antipathic conservatives — to dramatize the rebellion that left tens of thousands of Parisians dead. He gave the history lesson a powerful immediacy by filming it as if rendered by rival news crews — one for a government newscast and the other for a Communard guerrilla newsreel.

The film was described by Dave Kehr in his Times review as “at once a provocative account of a neglected episode in social history, a call to arms against the contemporary injustices of capitalism, a critique of the mass media and an experiment in collective filmmaking that recalls the heady days after France’s last mass rebellion in May 1968.”

In his later years, Mr. Watkins wrote and lectured about the state of the media, the inherent biases and distortions in television news and the universal dominance of Hollywood film

language that he termed “the monoform,” elaborating his career-long critique of cinema and television as inherently authoritarian mediums.

Peter Ralph Watkins, the older of two sons, was born on Oct. 29, 1935, in Norbiton, on the outskirts of London, to George and Peggy (Nibbs) Watkins. His father was a bank teller, and his mother was a secretary.

On completing his national service in the British Army, Mr. Watkins studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London before settling in Canterbury. There, while working in advertising, he directed an amateur theater group and cast its members in his early short films. Some of these, notably one concerning the American Civil War, received national distribution, and he was recruited by the BBC, just as two older amateur filmmakers, Ken Russell and John Schlesinger, had been before going on to distinguished directorial careers.

After leaving the BBC over the “The War Game” episode, Mr. Watkins turned to satire and “swinging London” with his first commercial film, “Privilege” (1967). A faux documentary starring Paul Jones, the lead singer for the rock band Manfred Mann, it told the story of a pop star who is used by the government to exert social control. Time magazine deemed the spectacle of a “society still outwardly human, groveling in stupor before a cheap messiah,” as bleak as the world portrayed in “The War Game.”

However far-fetched the premise, Mr. Watkins did understand the power of celebrity. Two years after making “Privilege,” he wrote to the Beatle John Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, telling them that “people in your position have a responsibility to use the media for world peace.”

His letter, by Mr. Lennon’s account, helped inspire the couple’s 1969 antiwar campaign, which began with their celebrated Bed-In for Peace.

By then, Mr. Watkins had left England. Beginning with “The Gladiators” (1969), a Swedish production that imagined a world order based on televised war games, his subsequent films were all made abroad.

His second Scandinavian production, “Edvard Munch” (1974), made for television but

released theatrically, was his most personal and, after “Culloden,” most highly regarded film. An essay with actors that uses the tropes of a documentary film — including direct-to-camera interviews, contrapuntal voice-over and cinéma vérité zooms — “Edvard Munch” was as concerned with Munch’s condition as a misunderstood artist as much as his art.

The Times movie critic Vincent Canby wrote of “Edvard Munch” that none of Mr. Watkins’s previous works “quite prepares us for the moving, complex, beautifully felt portrait of the great Norwegian artist.”

In 1987, Mr. Watkins made his most ambitious film, the 14-hour documentary “Resan” (1987), known in English as “The Journey.” Shot in 10 different countries, the movie used conversations with families and peace activists to warn against the arms buildup of the Reagan era and a renewed nuclear threat. It was intended to be a tool for consciousness raising, shown by and discussed in groups.

In addition to his wife Vida, whom he married in 1992, Mr. Watkins is survived by two sons, Patrick and Gérard, from his first marriage, to Françoise Letourneur, which ended in divorce; his brother, Paul; and two grandchildren.

In a film course Mr. Watkins taught at Columbia University in the late 1970s, he screened D.W. Griffith’s racist epic “The Birth of a Nation” (1915), Sergei Eisenstein’s celebratory socialist docudrama “October: Ten Days That Shook the World” (1928) and Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-glorifying “Triumph of the Will” (1935), all of which he considered propaganda.

He then asked students to consider those films alongside documentaries, news reports and Hollywood westerns, as well as his own “Culloden.”

“Is not the serious filmmaker in a double-bind situation, given the inevitable indoctrinating effect of his or her work?” Mr. Watkins asked in his class syllabus. “Does the filmmaker have the *right* to subject a captive audience to his or her vision, especially if there is no potential for a return dialogue? Is there a difference between propaganda for the ‘good’ and for the ‘bad’?”

Addressed in theory as well as practice, those questions were raised throughout Mr. Watkins’s singular career.