

To Those Born After



A film by Christopher Pavsek

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Synopsis

"Truly, I live in dark times!" Bertolt Brecht

"This world He created is of moral design." George W. Bush

We have created a world from which we imagine only a god can save us.

"To Those Born After" presents an image of a world fallen into darkness but populated by prophets who declare that the world is full of light, that it is possessed of a moral design bestowed upon it by a divine creator. It is a film about a world possessed, however, of no real moral design other than that of rapacious greed and indifference toward the future. It is about a time which has produced a crisis so great that it seems only a god can save us. "To Those Born After" reveals a present torn by a fundamental conflict between a vision of history in which human beings stand firmly at the center as its creators and a vision of the world in which humans are the mere products of a divine hand. "To Those Born After" is a secular film that challenges contemporary attempts to resacralize the world. It is a film which believes beauty, grace and hope can be found in the infinite richness which dwells within the power of humanity. It is a film which believes that our salvation as a species and as a civilization lies in our own hands -- and only in our hands.

"To Those Born After" takes its inspiration from a poem by the same title by the German writer Bertolt Brecht. Brecht wrote his poem in the late 1930s, a period he referred to repeatedly as "the dark times." From the perspective of this time of desperation and despair Brecht imagined in his poem a different future, a time when "man would be a helper to man" and therewith he imagined a future public -- and purpose -- for his writings.



This film is also made in dark times--of global war, environmental collapse, the unchallenged reign of capitalism, absolute decadence in public politics, and more--and also attempts to imagine a better future and with it a transformed audience to whom the film is directed. It is a film about times so dark that only a very attentive observer can detect traces of hope.

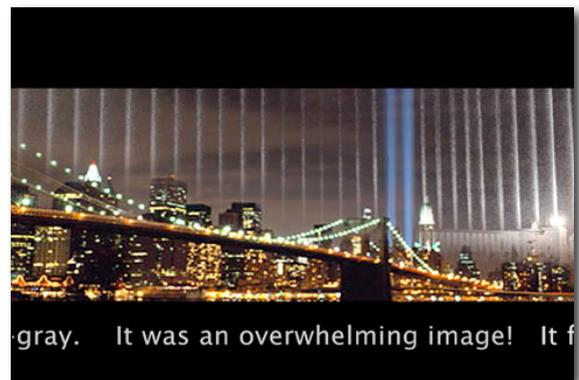
Despite the somber times in which "To Those Born After" is made, the film is still a stunningly beautiful montage of a wide array of documentary images, sounds and texts. Deceptively simple in its construction, "To Those Born After" presents a complex portrait of our contemporary moment. The film transports us across the globe several times with minimal means.

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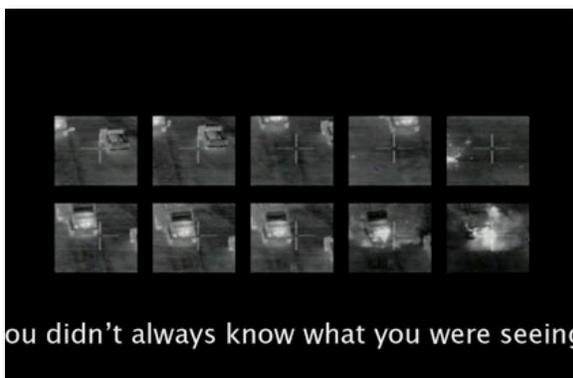
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"To Those Born After" begins with the image of a ghost which haunts the contemporary night of the world -- a highly processed image taken from a gun-camera on an Apache helicopter as it slaughters defenseless Iraqis during the current war in Iraq. The ghostly figure slowly moves across the screen as the narrator recites a text composed by the art historian John Berger. It begins: "I write in a night of shame." As the image continues, one hears Haydn's "Missa in tempore belli" ("Mass in a time of war"), which was written in protest against nationalist fervor in Austria after the Napoleonic invasions. The soloist pleads: "who shall take away the sins of the world?"

From here the film poses the simple question: just when did things change? The question is posed through a subtle and graceful decomposition of a famous image by Rene Magritte, "The Empire of Lights." The theme of night is continued in a sequence that examines briefly uncanny parallels between our current moment and the moment at which Brecht was writing. Here George W. Bush figures prominently and this sequence ushers in a complex montage of texts and speeches by the American president which presents the political program of the current U.S. regime as nothing short of a cultural revolution in which a "culture of life" figures prominently.



The film continues with the question of temporality: not only is it hard to say "when this all began", but the question of how one might imagine the future is raised. The unrestrained power of American might is based on two contradictory commands: on the one hand, the absolute power to take life, as seen in the images from the Apache helicopter which now play over the screen, again in highly processed form. On the other hand, the regime claims for itself the right to demand that we live, as was shown in the prominent right-to-die case of Terri Schiavo, whose images play across the screen, as well as in the repeated attempts to ban abortion. The power of the regime oscillates between two seemingly contradictory commands: Thou shalt die! and Thou shalt live!



The final section of the film turns toward the future with the appearance of a gorgeous sunrise, caught at the moment when the sun breaks the horizon over the sea. Some of the final lines of

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Brecht's poem appear in intertitles: "You who will emerge from this flood, think of the dark times. You, however, when it has come to pass that humankind has saved itself, think of us with forbearance." These lines are juxtaposed with the images of a small child who turns to the camera to answer this appeal and then turns away in a highly ambiguous gesture of muted refusal.

The art historian Paul Jaskot (Chair, Dept. of Art and Art History, Depaul University) has described the film as "shocking in its beauty" and "remarkable for its ability to function powerfully at conceptual and emotional levels, a rare feat in cinema and video art. Despite its apparent pessimism, the sheer grace of its imagery and editing, as well as the overwhelming and lateintentionally ambiguous ending, lend the film a utopian element that suggests that there may still be some hope for the future after all."

To Those Born After is the second part of a trilogy of short films by the same title. The first film, "The One and All" (2002; rt: 6 mins) explored the terrain of American ideology in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11. It screened at numerous international festivals including the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, and the Festival nouveau cinéma Montreal, amongst others. The third installment, currently in production, is entitled "Joy." It will counter the apparent pessimism of the first two sections with an exploration of the possibility of happiness in our current world.

Director's Statement

I firmly believe that film can be intellectually engaging and emotionally moving at the same time. Films which demand serious effort on the part of their viewers can also be enjoyable. Brecht taught us that to think and learn does not of necessity exclude the possibility of pleasure. That



is, I believe, a utopian element of my film. You have to work at it when you watch, but hopefully the work provides joy and is worthwhile. Not all work, after all, has to be toil done merely to earn a wage.

It is also utopian that something beautiful can be cobbled together from so much that is ugly. It proves that there is hope. This is important to remember for people like me who are constitutionally bleak-minded; it is also good to

recall for my friends who tell me that my film depresses them. I think it is the world that is depressing them and my film makes them realize this a little.

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If that were all that my film did I would not consider it a success. It also seems to offer a bit of an experience of beauty. That experience is disconcerting because you do not generally expect something like beauty to emerge in an artwork where you see human beings murdered and blown to pieces. But it is also intellectually reassuring in that it shows a way forward.

A well-known art historian wrote something about my film that I cherish. He said the film "shows us how to cross the world several times with the minimum of means -- with no more than a pilgrim's staff." I take this to mean a couple things. "To Those Born After" is a piece of what is called "appropriate" or "sustainable technology" in the arid language of economics. The only difference is that it so far has profited no one. But it is also a comment on the possibilities of minimalism, a minimalism whose goal is not to reduce art to pure aesthetic gestures but to propel art outward into the world and to allow the world into art. The simple signs and symbols have always been the best. My favorites: a camera and an eye; a hammer and a sickle.

There are two images that I believe should be shown on film or video only with the greatest care or perhaps not at all. One is the image of the World Trade Center burning and collapsing. It turns your mind off to see that; the response is Pavlovian. The other is any image of George W. Bush speaking with synchronous sound. The ban on graven images that Adorno and Benjamin so cherished was misplaced. Images of god or utopia are not the problem. It is images of people like Bush that are dangerous because the images grant a particular substance to him when he literally has none, aside from his crude corporal materiality. Godard once said that the original mission of cinema was to show us that the world was there. But then it



became the mission of cinema to make us believe in the world on the screen. The last thing we should do is believe in a human being who has no thoughts of his own and who says nothing that is true.

My eldest daughter is the child in the images at the end of the film. She is a remarkable human being worth believing in. From very early on she disliked having her picture taken and that's why so many pictures of her that we do have are stolen images. Not quite "life caught unawares" but more like "life caught with its guard down." I don't bother her much with the video camera now. The few video bits we do have of Sophie often end with her snarling at the camera or turning away as she realizes she's been caught, as she does at the end of this film. It is a good reminder that we should be careful of what we demand from those born after. We don't, after all, want them to turn away as well.

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Cast and Credits

To Those Born After is an artisanal film. Every aspect of the film's production, including script, camera, picture editing, music and sound editing, publicity and design, was done by the director, Christopher Pavsek. The images of the girl in the final scene are of the director's daughter, Sophie Zoe Lesjak.

Camera, Editor, Sound, Sound Mix,
Music, Script, Director, Producer: Christopher Pavsek

Texts, including titles and voiceover:

Theodor Adorno (*Negative Dialectics/Negative Dialektik*)
John Berger ("Where are we?", Harper's, March 2003)
Bertolt Brecht ("To Those Born After"/ "An die Nachgeborenen")
George W. Bush
Joseph Goebbels (Speech, September 11, 1937)
Michael Herr (*Dispatches*)
Rosa Luxemburg (*Speeches*)
Christopher Pavsek
George Steiner (*Language and Silence*)

Cast: Christopher Pavsek (voiceover)
Sophie Zoe Lesjak (girl)

Director's Biography

Christopher Pavsek is an independent filmmaker and film scholar who lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is an Assistant Professor of German at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania.

He has a doctorate in Literature from Duke University where he wrote a dissertation about the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge, about whom he is currently completing a book entitled "The Utopia of Film." He has published articles about Alexander Kluge, Jean-Luc Godard, Walter Benjamin and other topics in international cinema. He has translated Alexander Kluge's novel "Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome" (Duke University Press, 1996) and is currently translating Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt's "History and Obstinacy". He is fluent in German.

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His films include the feature-length documentary "Welcome to the New World Order, AIDS in Vietnam (2000) and "The One and All (2002), which showed at numerous international film festivals including the International Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Festival nouveau cinema, nouveaux medias Montreal, and the Aspen Shortsfest amongst others. His next projects include "Joy," about the possibility of happiness in the world today, "The Demise of Others," a film about the ongoing mass extinction of species on Earth, and "Liquid Empire," an experimental hi-definition film about the Hudson River in New York that will film the entire length of the river from source to finish and back again in the course of a year.