

FILM

Adam Chodzko: Deep Above

Harnessing art to global issues such as climate change is not new, but it continues to send a tremor down any purist's spine. Surely art here would end up being illustrational at best, propagandist at worst? Film has always had a more immediately proximate relation to these literalisms. Its documentary capacity renders it illustrational of 'reality' and its editing processes open it to ideological manipulation. Adam Chodzko's *Deep Above*, 2015, a film funded by a Wellcome Trust Arts Award and commissioned by Invisible Dust (an organisation founded in 2009 to bring art to bear on the environment), knowingly plays with the power of film as a tool of propaganda, even as it toys with the idea of a not-too-distant future in which art as we know it is over.

There are similarities here with Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (Sunless), 1983, which begins its meditation on blindness, memory and technology with a number of syncopated cuts to black leader film strip. In Chodzko's film, blindness is also inferred. The film opens with shots of alphabetical letters that appear white on black as they are read aloud from an eye test chart, superseded by a 'cut' to white and a female voice-over that says 'this is art'. Later in the film this phrase is recapitulated as 'this was art'; that art needs to die in order to do a type of work for us. The work that needs doing could be interpreted as preventing more damage to the earth's resources, but *Deep Above* is not an instructional film at the level of political action. The work that the film incites us to do is to physically incorporate the toxicity we have created on the planet.

It does this, initially, at the level of the soundtrack, on which two hypnotically dulcet voices – a woman's and a man's – intermittently cajole us into states of relaxation so that the images of carbon emissions from China's factories seep into our bodies rather than being held at a distance. Near the end of the 30 minutes we are instructed not to look any more, as if the eye has been supplanted by the epidermis and the epiglottis in ingesting toxic and thermal emissions (these latter are from Japan). Although the idea of film as a form of hypnosis is implied rather than actual, I would suggest that we have a very different relation to the image by the end of the film than the one we start out with, where split-second shots of natural and chemical disasters are intercut with black. These images move too fast to make much narrative sense. In the rapid displacement of one image after another,

there is both too little information and too much to contend with. But by the end of the film we are breathing and choking in relation to images of vapour and water towards which we have little resistance.

Deep Above is in part inspired by George Marshall's 2014 book *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Marshall's thesis is that while most people understand that climate change is a major threat, we cannot comprehend our daily contribution to it, preferring either to blame gas and oil corporations or to deny it altogether as a conspiracy of the left. He says we need new narratives to enable us to act on the scientific facts. That art can help here is the remit of Invisible Dust. Certainly *Deep Above* received an enthusiastic response from the audience of mostly activists at the film's premier at the Watershed, which was followed by a panel discussion between Chodzko, the director of Invisible Dust, Alice Sharp, and psychoanalyst and editor of *Engaging With Climate Change*, Sally Weintrobe. Other screenings were to be followed by discussions with other advisers to the project – UCL experimental psychologist Adam Harris and Paul Wilkinson, professor of environmental epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Marshall's pragmatic approach to denial can be linked to Weintrobe's psychoanalytic work on the structure of disavowal in relation to climate change: I know climate change is happening but, all the same, I shall act as if it is not and continue to drive everywhere, use central heating and buy food that has travelled thousands of miles to get to me. The cloying male voice-over alludes to the ensuing guilt and anxiety of these everyday behaviours as we watch one of the few specially shot moments in the film of a family in a kitchen with all the latest appliances. (Much of the imagery is culled from the internet and includes all classes of image, from documentary to digital renditions of synaptic activity and binary code.)

The film does not offer any solution, but using all the cinematic tricks of visceral and haptic imagery, as well as invasive instruction, *Deep Above* makes us feel the inchoate nature of the toxic atmosphere through our eyes, skin and throats. Does this enable us to confront the reality of our disavowal? Maybe for a moment, but not in terms of how we might behave in the light of this acknowledgement. If it did, then it would not be art. Art, as Sigmund Freud so presciently said, is one of the narcotics that help us to cope with 'reality', ie ultimately the fact that we will die. Much as we find it impossible to conceive of our own death, so we find it even more impossible to imagine the deaths of those born centuries removed



Adam Chodzko *Deep Above* 2015 film

from a human lifespan, the generations for whom it is said climate change will be a death sentence. Recently, the philosopher Bernard Stiegler has been trying to marry psychoanalytic therapeutics to prosthetic memory technics, of which film would be one, in an effort to generate long-term thinking about future generations and the legacy we are leaving them. I am not saying that *Deep Above* is in any way overtly engaged in that discourse, but towards the end of the film, if we disregard the instructions of the hypnotist and continue looking, which of course we are bound to do at a cinema screening, we see slow-motion 'documentary' footage of young teenage boys, their backs to us, creeping through woodland as if being guided to a secret zone reminiscent of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Are they scavengers? Survivors? Or merely exploring the outdoors? *Deep Above* continually alludes to childlike seeing as being more conducive to receiving the film's message, which to an adult brain is not very clear. What is clear is that the neurological interface between screen as projection, screen as earth, screen as body and screen as image is so intimately looped that we cannot afford to ignore what we as adults might perceive of as being out there, ie nature, the planet etc. As art, then, *Deep Above* brings this knowledge to science, a motif that is also alluded to in the dialogue between the two voices which facilitate our journey into the depths. What we do now goes beyond the question of art. ■

Adam Chodzko's *Deep Above* was screened at Watershed, Bristol 20 November 2015 and can be viewed on Invisible Dust's website. www.invisibledust.com

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