

“THE MAKING OF AN ‘ANTI’ NUCLEAR DOCUMENTARY: TOTEM & ORE, 2014 – 2019”

Director: **John Mandelberg**

My name is John Mandelberg. I'm an Australian documentary filmmaker and Moving Image tutor in an undergraduate and post graduate Media Arts degree programme at the Waikato Institute of Technology in Hamilton, New Zealand.

TOTEM & ORE is a film about the past, the present and the future. It's a human story, about the frailty of human lives, human experiences and human tragedy. It is not an untold story, but a story to be repeated again and again, until the world eliminates the possibility of the destruction of humankind by nuclear weapons.

The first time I can remember hearing about the atomic bomb was in the early 1960's, when I was 9-years-old. It was at the time of the Cuban missile crisis and there was world-wide fear of a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. Lying in my bed one evening, I heard my Mum and Dad talking in the kitchen about the need to apply for 'atomic bomb' damage insurance! I was suddenly scared and couldn't sleep, until I had a nightmare, about falling down the front stairs of my family's house and as I looked up I saw billowing dark clouds with menacing faces shouting down at me. This was about those fears, and the nightmare recurred into my teenage years.

Growing up in Australia I became aware of the British atomic testing in 1950's outback Australia and the long-term effects of those tests, so I've had a long-term relationship with nuclear issues. At the centre of my documentary film are the many nuclear issues through the eyes of activists, artists, academics, hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors), global indigenous communities and aboriginal people affected by the Outback atomic tests. So where did the idea to make this film come from?

In early 1990, I read a novel by a Serbian/Australian immigrant author B. Wongar:

“The Trackers”, published in 1979 was ‘...set in contemporary Australia & Asia, the experiences of a young Asian architect, who, when he turns black overnight, becomes a fugitive and flees to Australia and the safety of the Aboriginal population.’ I was intrigued with the way he told the man’s extraordinary story, and his ability to tell stories about Aboriginal culture in what appeared to be an authentic and entertaining way.

Sreten Bozic or B. Wongar, a Serbian immigrant came to Australia in the early 1960’s, and instead of living in cities and towns, he lived amongst aboriginal communities in South Australia and in the Northern Territory. He wrote critical stories and novels about the plight of the Australian aborigine: the clash between the whites and the blacks, the tragic effects of uranium exploration, mining, and the effects of the British atomic testing on their land. These novels became known as Wongar’s ‘Nuclear cycle’ books.

in 1994, I made a documentary film about Wongar’s life and work, *A Double Life*, which won several awards at the Sydney and New York Film Festivals and was well received on the Australian multicultural television network SBS. In this film, I first visualised Wongar’s writing about the British atomic tests in Australia, in a sequence with newsreel footage of a British bomb test at Maralinga, in South Australia. Accompanying this was an extract from Wongar’s 1994 book *Raki*. *[here’s the sequence from the film.]* [Now show sequence]

“Lighting struck and shook the ranges. A few loose boulders tumbled down to the ceremonial ground. Down on the plain a tall column of cloud was seen stretching from the ground to the sky. It mushroomed out at the top end with a constant roar which echoed against the ranges.

*Wati thought that the huge flying silver bird must have struck Sun who was coming to nest behind the sand dunes. A cloud of steam gushed out of the Sun's wound and spread fast in the air. 'Sun might never rise again'."*¹

In 2006, Wongar published *Totem & Ore*, a non-fiction book about the tragedies of uranium exploration, the mining of uranium, and the British atomic tests, that affected many Australian aboriginal communities. The text was accompanied by Wongar's photographs taken in the early 1960's on his travels through outback Australia, revealing the poor living conditions in Aboriginal communities. I wanted to try and make a film on this topic. So, I made a promotional trailer for the documentary, *Totem & Ore* which focussed on depleted uranium weapons that were used in the Bosnian war, Wongar's aboriginal photographs and an Aboriginal dot painting called 'Wild Plum Dreaming' from the Papunya region of Western Australia. This area was also affected by radioactive fallout from the British tests.

At that time however, there was no real interest in supporting this topic.

Leap forward to July 2014, B. Wongar let me know that finally there would be funds available to make the *Totem & Ore* documentary, and he assured me that 'it would be my film' and that he would be glad that I could soon start making it. In late 2015, the funds did become available, and I started planning to start filming in early 2016.

I wished to make a film that was both interesting and compelling but wasn't an illustrated lecture. Wongar's fiction works were beautifully crafted, and he had effectively connected the aboriginal and nuclear narratives in his works. However, Wongar is not a filmmaker and in developing a film version inspired by his book, I had to use filmic ways to interpret it.

¹ Wongar, B. (1994). *Raki*. Pg. 225. HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, Australia

I also wanted to widen the story to include Japanese survivor experiences of the 1945 Hiroshima atomic bombing and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown. These powerful events that took place 66 years apart would become bookends for the film and be a perfect parallel to the Aboriginal atomic experience.

My first filmic idea was to reference the opening sequence from the 1959 film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which is like a documentary film about post-atomic bombing Hiroshima, intercut with the film's two lovers embracing in bed with glistening atomic fallout on their bodies. I was to film similar imagery in a contemporary setting for Totem & Ore's opening sequence, but without the two lovers.

To get an Australian aboriginal perspective on this story, it was agreed that aboriginal actress Ursula Yovich would be a worthy contributor to the film, particularly as a witness to the Hiroshima atomic bomb story. Ursula is not necessarily the film's narrator, but as Professor Tomoko Ichitani said in her recent public lecture at the Asia Institute in Melbourne that Ursula *'...acts as a sort of guide to Hiroshima and we follow her as she reflects on her experiences visiting the city for the first time and learning more about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.'*ⁱ

After 6 months research, planning and preparation, we began filming in Hiroshima in April 2016, a logical place to start. We had excellent support from Professor Tomoko Ichitani, who is an English literature expert specialising in Australian literature. She is also a friend and admirer of B. Wongar's writing.

Through her, I met many of my interviewees, all atomic bomb survivors and activists – Emiko Okada, Sadae Kasaoka and Haruko Moritaki; Dr. Aoki, a senior doctor who treats atomic bomb survivors and those affected by fallout from the Fukushima meltdown; Professor Robert Jacobs, an expert on American nuclear weapon's history; and staff at the Hiroshima Radiation Effects Research Foundation.

All these contributed to the film's storyline and told much of the human Japanese stories and experiences.

In collecting these interviews it became clear that they would play an important role in the overall structure of the film. The direct experiences of Hibaksha of the atomic bombing, their subsequent illnesses which came from the radioactive fallout, the 'black rain' effect... their ongoing health issues and treatment. Similar stories of experiences relate also to all indigenous communities who live or lived near to nuclear test sites all over the world, with lack of medical support and treatment by those military and scientific leaders who need constant testing of nuclear grade materials and weapons.

My able production crew included long-time friend and cinematographer Nikolai Sherman ASC, who worked so successfully on my film '*A Double Life*'; a post-graduate film student, Paige Larianova was Nikolai's camera assistant; my partner Janice Abo Ganis, was the production photographer, and Annamaria Mustonen, Janice's niece, who worked as a Radiation Safety officer, in the Finnish nuclear Industry, joined us in Hiroshima as production assistant.

She no longer works in that industry.

Tomoko Ichitani helped with interpreting the Japanese interviews, and with production organisation. She eventually translated the Japanese interviews into English for subtitling the film. I was most impressed with the Hibakusha testimonies, these electrifying stories of their experiences were mesmerising, as they seemed to perform the stories, reliving them as they spoke. These stories need to be heard outside of Japan!

Last but not least Tomoko Ichitani from the Hiroshima Film Commission helped to clear the way for our filming in the Peace Park, the Atomic Dome and introduced us to some interesting interviewees. She also helped us hire camera equipment for the Hiroshima shoot.

After Hiroshima, in a small town on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, we interviewed Dr Helen Caldecott, an Australian physician, author, and anti-nuclear advocate who wrote in her biography that she “has devoted the last forty-two years to an international campaign to educate the public about the medical hazards of the nuclear age and the necessary changes in human behaviour to stop environmental destruction.” (2019, Cadiccott.com).

She spoke about the effects of the British atomic testing in outback Australia on Aboriginal communities and the wider Australian population including herself and her brother; the effects of the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear meltdowns. It was an extremely chilling interview and as she finished, we just sat and stared at each other shocked by what she had said.

To further explain the timeline of the Australian atomic story, I interviewed Melbourne-based Dr Jim Green, national anti-nuclear campaigner with Friends of the Earth - Australia. He gave an informed commentary and context to the British atomic testing, the 1984-85 Australian Royal Commission into British atomic tests, along with subsequent Australian uranium mining debacles and proposed nuclear waste dump community battles.

We also filmed in Sydney at the “Black Mist Burnt Country” Australian Art exhibition commemorating the 60th anniversary of the first atomic tests at Maralinga, in South Australia. JD Mittman, curator of the exhibition, was also art curator at the Burrinja Cultural Centre, in Melbourne, spoke of the exhibition’s Aboriginal origins and also contextualised the Australian art responses to the Nuclear tragedies. The same day, we filmed Victoria-based multi-media artist Jessie Boylan who was at that time Burrinja artist-in-residence collaborating with friend Linda Diment on a new video work for the ‘Black Mist Burnt Country’ exhibition and she talked about her own nuclear-based media practice.

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Also in Melbourne, we filmed an interview with B. Wongar at his Melbourne home, where he talked mostly about the history of his Nuclear Cycle books, and about the writing of the final book in that cycle, 'Didjeridu Charmer'. In wanting to illustrate excerpts from this book, I developed the idea of using animation for the six dingo pup's journey through the Northern Territory landscape, as it was slowly being destroyed by uranium mining. Ursula Yovich read the text and the animation was created by New Zealand animator, Dawn Tuffery.

In mid-September, 2016, we filmed the beautiful Australian outback landscapes that surround Alice Springs in the Northern Territory to use as backgrounds for the animated dingo sequences from Wongar's book.

At the end of three major filming trips in 2016, I applied to the Maralinga-Tjarutja Aboriginal council to film at the Maralinga atomic test site and interviews at the Yalata community.

By late 2018, after many negotiations for filming permission, there was still no agreement to access the aboriginal lands, which meant after all this time, we were unable to film those important interviews. Luckily, I was able to gain access to interviews with aboriginal community members about their atomic test experiences, and Maralinga test site material from photographer and filmmaker Jessie Boylan. And to add to this, I was given a statement from Northern territory aboriginal leader Yvonne Margarula, who spoke about how the Ranger Uranium mine was built on Mirrar people's land and apologised for the uranium sent from Ranger was used to fire the Fukushima reactor. These important interviews and footage saved the film from collapse.

In early 2017, I slowly started to edit the film but had only edited 27 mins by mid-year.

I then decided to take six months off work to focus completely on editing the film to a complete first draft.

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Before completing the film, I was to make at least 15 or more versions of the film before the final version was ready. As there was no written script for the film, the editing process was organically and intuitively driven. I worked my way through all the interviews & location footage: Hiroshima, Alice Springs, Melbourne and Sydney creating linked sequences: the Maralinga Art exhibition; atomic survivor drawings from the Hiroshima Memorial Peace Museum; outback Australian landscapes for the dingo animation sequences; and some excerpts from my previous film, *A Double Life*. I carefully refined the film's structure through the edit over 5 months, intercutting completed sequences with interviews, archival news footage of the Hiroshima bombing and aftermath, the British atomic tests at Maralinga, also the extraordinary A-bomb drawings by survivors, efficiently provided by the Peace Museum's curatorial division's (Ms) Rie Nakanishi. By the end of 2017, I had completed the first full edit of the film, and to help in the refinement process, I sent video links of the edit to trusted friends and colleagues for feedback, it was also to see if my approach was working. A respected colleague responded by saying that '*the doco was engaging, poetic and coherent*'.

Back in NZ in early 2018, I continued the editing throughout that year, waiting to receive the last of the animated dingo sequences, extra Japanese music and finally it was completed in May 2019, with the final sound mix of all the interviews, location sound, added ambient sounds and effects, Ursula's narration and the haunting score by composer and colleague, David Sidwell. This was also an homage to Georges Delerue's music for *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

Having viewed the final mixed version, Professor Ichitani, was to say in her 2019 Public lecture at the Asia Institute in Melbourne, that *Totem & Ore* '*...gives context to the effects of the atomic bomb on the population of Hiroshima up until today, comparing the atomic bomb survivors with indigenous communities in Australia that were affected by nuclear testing on their land.*

This film also tries to show the connection of Australian uranium mining and Fukushima.'

(Ichitani, 2019). And this, I believe as the film developed, is what I wanted an audience to understand with the nuclear connections between Japan, and the Australian aboriginal people's experiences and beyond.

I was also pleased when Professor Robert Jacobs wrote an email that contained an incisive analysis of the film: *'What a beautiful film. I was really moved. The film moved so easily between worlds and tones. Expansive and contemplative at points, focused and information filled at others. I really think it is a great work. As you know, so many films on nuclear issues have the quality of hitting the viewer over the head with the imperatives and brutalities of the history. Your work really does a great job of presenting everyone as human beings living lives of integrity, and also exploring the history and legacy of these events. The movement between the Hiroshima start and the focus on Australia is really natural, and allows one to see the continuity between these different histories and experiences.....'*

I am so very pleased that *Totem & Ore* was chosen for this year's Hiroshima IFF and that this was to be its World Premiere. Although it did take 2-3 months of at times stress, to get a complete Japanese translation made by Mio Sekiguchi and for me to do the subtitled version in time.

I hope that the film will be seen by like-minded audiences to agree with what Ursula Yovich says at the very end of the film: *'...There's nothing in the foreseeable future that will reduce: nuclear waste but it seems that we're still continuing on with the funding of nuclear weapons and I feel that because they exist, because there are these few powerful countries that are in possession of these weapons, there will be a time when they will be used.*

So that's a terrifying thought and it's terrifying because I've had the opportunity of coming here and walking through the (Peace) museum and seeing exactly what the atomic bomb achieved, you know...it would've been a living nightmare for people, and continues to be so,

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*especially for the Hibakusha, who I think 'Bo' had mentioned that 'to live with that anxiety all your life, not knowing whether you're going to live a full life or you're going to die prematurely because of the radiation effects...So for me, I think there's no place in this world for the atomic bomb.'*²

I also hope that Atomic bomb survivor Mrs. Emiko Okada was happy with the message in this film.

Thank you all for listening to my lecture, and now there's some time for your questions.

² Ichitani, Tomoko (2019). *Transpacific Imagination: Nuclear Representation in Australia and Japan*. Public Lecture, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne.

