

**IF: people and places
in recent film and video**

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Great American Desert

Stephen Connolly 16mm 16' 2007

Stephen Connolly's *Great American Desert*, 2007 dwells both in the past and the present, geographically as well as temporally. The people within its structure seem to be looking for something elusive to them; it is as if they are trying to sustain a sense of limbo for as long as they can. The idea of transit is central to this work. Travelers across the U.S.A. come and go, seeking, resting and moving on. The place is caught between its history and its present state and the entire 'place' feels like a crossroads - a crossroads as big as a desert. Richard Ford speaks about journey and movement in his great novel *Independence Day*, suggesting that it is within the journey where location 'happens', that place is only found through movement. This is very much the subject of Connolly's film, the people within it only inhabiting the spaces through transition.

As we watch through a windscreen, we listen to a group of travelers talking as they rationalise their desire to be a little lost, a little in tune with the ephemeral nature of their surroundings. Wrecked war machines and aircraft litter the landscape in a place where millions of people gather every year seeking escape and a sense of community. Yet, ironically, this is a wilderness which was invisibly changed forever during the period of atomic experimentation during and just after the Second World War.

The film is ultimately about a relationship to place which seems defined through notions of spectacle and leisure. The spectacle lies in the re-creation of the 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic explosions (staged in Los Angeles only three months after the actual events) which haunt the landscape, leaving it emptier than it ever was, and the leisure lies in the idle killing of time undertaken by its transient population.

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