

One sequence in Arnaud des Pallières' *American Journal* tells us about a NASA study which concluded that ancient civilisations once existed in the far reaches of our galaxy. While the film's captions muse on the infinite, the images we see are of the recent past: a drive-in diner somewhere in America, presumably in the 1950s. But we might also imagine alien viewers, millennia from now, looking at Des Pallières' sampled footage as itself evidence of a vanished civilisation – and *American Journal*, with its images of the H-bomb and modern warfare, does paint a picture of a world intent on wiping itself out.

*American Journal* is assembled from archive footage, amateur images shot at various points in the 20th century. Images recur: family outings, train and car journeys, fishing afternoons and, increasingly, scenes of warfare. These are conventional images, standing for the collective imagination of a – predominantly, if not totally – white American bourgeoisie. There are also images of childhood: a long series of portraits of children looking warily at the camera, for instance, as if experimentally trying out their future adult personas. One of the great clichés of American modernity is the idea of a nation fated constantly to lose its innocence. The images Des Pallières samples suggest that once filmed, an image loses if not its innocence then at least its newness, becoming an image of something lost, never to be repeated.

Like Bill Morrison's archival montages, or like Pietro Marcello's insertion of found footage within a narrative in *Martin Eden*, *American Journal* represents a summoning of ghosts – cultural, political, of the imagination – that continue to haunt the present; like the past Americas of Roosevelt and Eisenhower, ever visible here. Meanwhile, between the images, Des Pallières threads – caption by caption, phrase by phrase – a series of commentaries, including texts culled from Russell Banks, Walter Benjamin, Jorge Luis Borges, Bertolt Brecht (a parable on sharks and fishes) et al. A story about Mark Twain and his apocryphal twin brother introduces the theme of mirroring and doubling, over scenes of family life made abstract by double exposure.

The texts mirror, and comment ironically on, the images, and vice versa. What emerges is a dream-like assemblage of associations and connections (dreams also play a significant part in the text) – at once fluid, abstract and yet, at the same time, having the solidity and tangibility of 'an old movie from the 20th century'.

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