

BLOWING UP THE MERIDIAN / PETER GALISON & WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

WK: You talked about the explosion of the meridian. Maybe you should remind me of the actual story.

PG: Back in 1894, a series of attacks were launched by French anarchists. In fact, there were anarchists all over Europe. There was an assault on the Café Terminus and an attack on the Chambre des Députés in Paris. In early 1894, Martial Bourdin, a refugee anarchist who was living in London and associated with an anarchist group in London, decided to blast the Greenwich Observatory. He built a bomb and had started to carry it up towards the Observatory when it exploded and killed him, or mortally wounded him. This became a story that Joseph Conrad wrote, not many years later, in *The Secret Agent*—his most popular work—in which an unnamed foreign embassy decided that the way to wreak havoc on society was not to attack something in the arts, but to go after the heart of something scientific, and what could be better and more central to the beating heart of modern society than the Greenwich Observatory? Then, just to add a twist to this, when the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, launched his attack, one of the things he had in his background was a deep familiarity with Joseph Conrad. His parents had kept the complete works of Conrad and he was apparently very interested in this. So there's a back and forth between fiction and non-fiction that takes place in the world.

WK: 1905 became the key date of the work, the year of Einstein's special theory of relativity. The films we were making, and one of the components of the melodrama, were set and made to feel like a silent film made in that period, the early era of the cinema. Not long after Bourdin bombed the meridian (1894), George Méliès started making films (1896). We set our work within that world, which meant constructing painted sets: one of our great pleasures was inventing the five different sets or props that would provide the elements of the story. These included the clock room at Greenwich; an observatory in which watches are coordinated with celestial events; the room in which the anarchists built the bomb, which in our case we set in Dakar, Senegal, since it refers to the resistance to colonial rule; a large inflated man to map the world and mark the Greenwich meridian; and a machine room, which represents both the machine room of the Empire, but also literally the pumping station of a huge set of bellows that keeps our inflated man pumped up—although we are actually using a reversed vacuum cleaner to keep him inflated—so we maintain the illusion that it is the bellows that are keeping him inflated.

PG: Another place where pneumatics and pumping became important.

WK: Making this inflated globe of the person in the suit was like pumping up the world itself, and it was also a strange spaceman-cum-experimental object, with a person trapped inside the suit. The story was of interest in itself, but it was also a way

of invoking an imaginary world of science, with the clock room, the machine room, and the observatory. But this world is very palpably a kind of drawing: people interact with paper clocks, with strings that turn paper clocks, making a time-bomb out of sawn up broomsticks and the drawn face of a clock. Balls attached to the end of sticks are turned mechanically to represent the universe that's under surveillance from the observatory.

PG: So many of the things that we chose there, the time-bomb for instance, was itself a clock leading to the end of the world, the end of time. We thought about using film, the paradigmatic record-in-time of events, as the appropriate medium for this. Then we would make these events simultaneous, so that you would see these five screens not sequentially but all at once.

WK: But since each of them ends with an explosion and with the collapse of order, with sheets of paper blown through the rooms, these explosions were reversed in the editing room, with the sheets of paper being thrown in from all corners of the studio, with Dada Masilo dancing around them. In a strange way, maybe what we remember most are these wonderful and bizarre backwards dances and the paper going up into the air, and the dislocation of how one expects a rather ordinary world to run. Even if you know that it must be paper or a film being played backwards, you still have the sense that her dance is pushing the paper up into the air. That's an arrival point—these five strange dances that happen in the room, and these particular sets, which developed out of the story, through the history, the shift between fiction and non-fiction, into the films, into Dada dancing in the film with the paper. They were not called for immediately by relating the story, but unleashed by the possibilities of the set and everything that had been brought together. In a way they become the extra element of life, the energy that comes from the refusal itself.

PG: In the struggle between imposed time and anarchy, these two infinitely opposing forces, there was a moment in real life, in the clock room when the explosion occurred, when one of the astronomers turned to the other and said "Mr Hollis, spot the time!"

WK: "That's dynamite!"

PG: "That's dynamite!" There is an anarchist, out to blow them up and destroy the observatory, and here come the astronomers, ordering that a careful note be taken of the time—even during their own assassination.

WK: And the anarchist's slogan was "propaganda in deed"?

PG: "Propaganda in deed."

WK: And what was Conrad's comment on it—"gratuitous blasphemy"?

PG: When Conrad wanted to evoke what it meant to attack this cathedral of learning represented by the observatory, he said that this was an act of "gratuitous blasphemy": a blasphemy against science and the order of reason.■