

DARK CIRCLE

A film by Judy Irving, Christopher Beaver & Ruth Landy

82 minutes, color, 1982



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Short Synopsis

A film portrait of the nuclear age, told by those directly affected by it. *Dark Circle* interweaves dramatic personal stories with rare, recently declassified footage of reactor meltdowns, bomb assembly lines, and a sales convention for nuclear weapons. The film reveals the ironic and complex human costs of a nuclear economy.

Long Synopsis

When Judy Irving traveled to Denver in the mid-70s as part of a documentary film crew, she happened to read in a local magazine that the water supply was contaminated with plutonium from the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant, located nearby. Shocked into action, she started research that led to her first nonfiction feature, *Dark Circle*, about the links between nuclear weapons and power, and their impact on ordinary citizens.

Filmed at Rocky Flats, which produced plutonium triggers for atomic weapons; at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant in central California, then under construction on an active earthquake fault; and in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Dark Circle* interweaves dramatic personal stories with rare, recently declassified footage of the secret world in which the hydrogen bomb is manufactured, tested, and sold. Four years in the making, the film reveals the ironic and complex human costs of a nuclear economy.

Irving (The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill) co-wrote and narrates *Dark Circle*, and shares producing/directing credits with Christopher Beaver and Ruth Landy. The film is a nonprofit project of the Independent Documentary Group, now known as Pelican Media, produced with donations from foundations, individuals, government grants, and organizations.

The film's strongest contribution to the on-going nuclear debate is its clear exposition of the unbreakable links between nuclear weapons and nuclear power, links which are studiously downplayed by the nuclear industry: from the creation of plutonium as an inevitable byproduct of nu-

clear power for electricity, to plutonium's use as a fuel for bombs; and from the export of nuclear power technology to the unintended proliferation of nuclear weapons abroad. *Dark Circle* continues to contribute to the nuclear debate post-Fukushima, providing needed historical context for nuclear power and weapons proliferation in "rogue states" like Iran and North Korea as well as in the U.S.

Filmmaker's Statement

When I set out to make a personal film about the impact of nuclear weapons and power on ordinary people, I had no idea that the movie would create such a ruckus, or that it would still be so relevant 37 years after its release. My aim was to point the camera away from experts and politicians, and find stories about how plutonium is affecting us, even in the absence of a nuclear war. Those effects are not only physical, but psychological and spiritual as well. Having grown up under this nuclear cloud, I wanted to show how nuclear power and weapons are in fact the same industry, despite government propaganda that urges us to see them as separate.

Part of understanding this industry required that we travel to Japan to film interviews with survivors of the atomic bombings. We were astonished to discover that we were the first American film crew to do so. American writers and still photographers had been to Hiroshima and Nagasaki before us, but no documentary film crew until we arrived in 1979. To me, this spoke volumes about how much guilt and denial we bring to the issue.

After its theatrical release, *Dark Circle* was accepted for a national broadcast on public television, but then PBS gatekeepers broke the contract. Claiming we were not objective, they insisted that we cut a sequence in which we name the corporations that build the hydrogen bomb, such as General Electric, whose slogan is, ironically, "We bring good things to life." Many of these corporations are PBS underwriters. We refused to cut the Arms Convention sequence and fought the obvious censorship. It took seven years before PBS finally created a new series, "POV," to

showcase films with a strong point of view, and when *Dark Circle* was broadcast it won a National News & Documentary Emmy – for PBS!

Flash forward three decades: with nonproliferation treaties going up in smoke, nuclear stockpiles growing, missile accidents in the news, and our President taunting “rogue” nuclear states like North Korea, *Dark Circle* is suddenly relevant again. My hope is that younger audiences wake up to the issue they thought we older folks had solved.

Praise for *Dark Circle*

“COMPLETELY RIVETING” – Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times

“THE BEST OF THE RECENT FILMS ABOUT THE ATOMIC AGE”
– Valerie Ellis, In These Times

“UNCOMPROMISING POWER” – Denver Post

“THE MOST ELOQUENT, FAR RANGING, AND CONVINCING FILM ON
THE SUBJECT TO DATE” – John Hartl, Seattle Times

“AN URGENT HORROR STORY” – Vincent Canby, New York Times

“LEAVES YOU WITH A DESIRE TO TAKE ACTION”
– Charles Sugnet, The Nation

“IMPRESSIVE RESEARCH AND DETECTIVE WORK...SCRUPULOUSLY
RESPONSIBLE” – Ted Mahr, Portland Oregonian

“AN IMPORTANT FILM FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY TO SEE AND TALK
ABOUT” – McCall’s Magazine

“AN EXCELLENT INDICATION OF THE MATURITY OF AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING” – Pat Aufderheide, The Chicago Reader

“COMPASSIONATE AND PERSUASIVE” – Christian Science Monitor

“EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD SHOULD SEE DARK CIRCLE, A SHATTERING DOCUMENTARY” – John Hanrahan, The Melbourne Sun

“THE FILM’S STRENGTH LIES IN ITS CONSIDERATION OF THE NUCLEAR QUESTION AS A SEAMLESS CONTINUUM OF MILITARY, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS”
– Fenton Johnson, San Francisco Chronicle

“EXCEPTIONAL IN THE CLARITY OF ITS INFORMATION, THE SCOPE OF ITS MATERIAL...AND THE PERSONAL APPROACH OF THE FILMMAKERS” – Marita Sturken, Afterimage

“CANCEL THE BOWLING GAME IF YOU HAVE TO. YOU OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO SEE THIS CHILLING DOCUMENTARY. GRADE: A.”
– People Magazine

Awards & Festivals

Major Awards:

1983 Sundance Grand Prize, Nonfiction Feature

1983 Oscar Shortlist, Best Documentary Feature

1989 National Emmy Award, “Outstanding Individual Achievement in News and Documentary”

Additional 1983 festivals and awards:

U.S. Premiere: New York Film Festival

U.K. Premiere: London Film Festival (followed by regional tour sponsored by the British Film Institute)

Santa Fe Winter Film Expo First Prize, Nonfiction

Houston International Film Festival Gold Medal

Audubon Environmental Film Festival First Prize, Global Issues

American Film Festival Blue Ribbon

Filmmaker Biographies

Judy Irving

Pelican Media Executive Director Judy Irving is a Sundance-and-Emmy-Award-winning filmmaker whose credits in addition to *Dark Circle* include *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, a feature documentary about the relationship between a homeless street musician and a flock of wild parrots in San Francisco, and *Pelican Dreams*, a film about wildness at the urban edge: getting to know a flying dinosaur. *Wild Parrots* was a “Top Ten Film of the Year” (National Film Critics’ Poll), was the highest-rated program on the 2007 national PBS series “Independent Lens,” screened theatrically in over 500 venues grossing over 3 million dollars, and is now in international distribution. Her in-progress documentary, *Cold Refuge*, explores the psychological and spiritual aspects of full immersion in nature: year-round open-water swimming in San Francisco Bay.

Judy spent childhood summers on the North Fork of Long Island, and came to love birds thanks to her grandfather. She graduated from Connecticut College with a degree in Psychology and worked as a freelance journalist in Montreal before hitchhiking across the continent and living on a handmade raft-hut in British Columbia. Later, she received an M.A. in Film & Broadcasting from Stanford University,

and a Guggenheim Fellowship in Film. Her documentary film career has taken her to Alaska, Japan, Russia, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, with peace and the environment as her main areas of interest. Somehow, birds seem to show up in every movie, including *Dark Circle*. Judy's six-film series about the San Francisco Bay Area's wildlife and open space led to her interest in the wild parrot flock flying the city's north waterfront, and her open-water swimming habit led to a 2008 documentary, *19 Arrests, No Convictions* (about a bartender with a fishy nightlife who "escapes" from Alcatraz), as well as her in-progress film, *Cold Refuge*.

Christopher Beaver

Christopher Beaver continues to work as an independent producer and director. Recent projects include the Independent Documentary Association, Pare Lorentz Award-nominee *Tales of the San Joaquin – A River Journey*, about California's Central Valley; and a companion film, *Tulare, The Phantom Lake*. In addition to his award-winning films, Christopher executive-produced and curated *Nagasaki Journey, the Photographs of Yosuke Yamahata, August 10, 1945*, an international multi-media traveling exhibition that included a companion book and film. He also curated two exhibitions at the Oakland Museum of California exploring the life and times of photographer Bob Walker, who used his photographs to protect open space in the San Francisco Bay Area. Christopher's book about Walker, *After the Storm – Bob Walker and the East Bay Regional Park District*, was nominated as the Best Regional Photography Book by the Northern California Association of Independent Booksellers.

Working with producer Diana Fuller, Christopher directed *Racing to Zero*, a solutions-oriented, feature documentary about San Francisco's efforts to reduce the city's landfill waste to zero by the year 2020, and *Once Was Water*, about how Las Vegas conserves its water supply.

Ruth Landy

Ruth Landy is a filmmaker and communication professional with a longstanding commitment to global development and human rights. In addition to her work on *Dark Circle*, she also wrote and directed *Places for the Soul*, a film portrait of architect Christopher Alexander and his quest to build “living places” in California and Japan.

Ruth’s international career includes media and communication assignments on five continents for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and other global organizations. She recently returned to San Francisco, working as a principal consultant for her firm, Strategic Communication for Social Impact.

Full Credits

Head:

Written by CHRIS BEAVER, JUDY IRVING

Narrated by JUDY IRVING

Produced and Directed by CHRIS BEAVER, JUDY IRVING, RUTH LANDY

filmed on location in Alaska, Colorado, California, and Japan

Tail:

Made by CHRIS BEAVER, DEBORAH HOFFMANN, JUDY IRVING,
RUTH LANDY, MICHAEL LEVIN, JUDITH LIT, KAREN SPANGEN-
BERG, VICTORIA WILEY

Filmed and Edited by JUDY IRVING, CHRIS BEAVER

First Assistant Editor MICHAEL LEVIN

Supervising Sound Editor KAREN SPANGENBERG

Associate Producer JUDITH LIT

Sound Effects Editor DEBORAH HOFFMANN

Assistant Editor VICTORIA WILEY

Original Music GARY S. REMAL, BERNARD L. KRAUSE

Recorded at MOBIUS MUSIC, SAN FRANCISCO

OLIVER DI CICCIO, ENGINEER

Additional Music EBERHARD WEBER, “Moana I”

PAT METHENY & LYLE MAYS, “As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls”

RAINER BRUNINGHAUS, “Bali”

(courtesy ECM Records/Warner Brothers)

Consulting Editors SUSAN CRUTCHER, PETER ADAIR, STEPHEN
STEPT

Sound Mix LEE DICHTER

Sound Services WILL HARVEY, STUDIO C

Film & Photo Sources ARCHIVES PROJECT, CENTER FOR DEFENSE
INFORMATION, CHUGOKU NEWSPAPER COMPANY, COLORADO
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, DEFENSE NUCLEAR AGENCY – DASIAC,
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY, JON ELSE, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA,
HIROSHIMA/NAGASAKI PUBLISHING COMMITTEE, HOOVER

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Negative Cutting GREG CHAPNICK

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Additional Sound Effects Editing MICHAEL LEVIN

Assistant Editors SUSANNA BLAUSTEIN, EMILY CRAIG, BLAIR DICKINSON, MARSHA EMERMAN, ESTE GARDNER, AMY ROBERTS, DEBORAH SLATER, WENDY ZHEUTLIN

Opticals CINEMATTE

Animation STOP-FRAME

Film Labs DUART, MONACO, W.A. PALMER

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