



**GEORGE BARBER
AKULA DREAM**





DREAM MYSELF OUTSIDE: ON GEORGE BARBER



One could be forgiven for thinking that there are, in fact, several video artists named George Barber. Is the maker of **Absence of Satan** (1985), which arranges sampled fragments of trashy American TV and cinema into an illogical but ominous montage underpinned by guitar-heavy electro, really the same G. Barber who filmed **I Was Once Involved in a Shit Show** (2003), a comically lachrymose, very English, first-person account of a dismal exhibition experience sponsored by a cement-works owner? Can the Barber who made the wordless **Automotive Action Painting** (2007), a single-take aerial view of cars slaloming creatively through bucketfuls of coloured paint poured on an airstrip, also be the creator of the intricately edited, CGI-laden, fully scripted **Akula Dream** (2015)? Well, yes, and the heterodox attitude is surely no accident, given that Barber's art itself has, underneath the variation, regularly taken aim at deleterious orthodoxies. Those exist in the ostensible freedom of the artworld too, determining that artists play to comprehensible type. Barber is a moving target firing at targets of his own; and yet his art won't even be compassed by the notion of critique.



Akula Dream, for example, feels formally as distant from the Scratch Video approach that Barber pioneered in the 1980s — if no less leavened by wit — as its characters are from dry land or a happy ending. At the bottom of the ocean, in 1988, in a Soviet nuclear submarine, in an unlikely mix of **Heart of Darkness** and **Yellow Submarine**, one Captain Pavel has gone rogue, preoccupied with shamanic drumming and astral travels in which he proceeds to ‘dream myself outside the hull’. The crew are mostly mutinous, and unwilling to join him in thinking outside their metal box. There are clear suggestions meanwhile that this story has dark metaphorical contours: the crew, ‘300 metres under the sea in a tube of hate’, are informed by their commander that ‘humankind is the real nuclear weapon’, and that ‘the world is calling us. Like a child, it is crying’. One might not subsequently expect a vintage garage number to erupt amid strafing lights, the first of several miniature pop videos within the film, signalling a crewmember’s burgeoning ecological awareness. But that’s what happens.

Yet if you’re expecting this to end well rather than with the likely destruction of this submarine by the Soviets themselves — following several further glisteningly digitised psychedelic episodes sound-tracked by rapturous music — then you don’t know Barber. The countercultural mind-expanding elements here, playing against the reference point of the 1980s (which saw the conservative rollback of 60s ideals, including burgeoning ecological consciousness, and Capitalism’s effective defeat of Communism) serve as part of a what-if scenario, one that still accepts a likely disastrous outcome. Within the comedic carapace of the story — ‘A mad captain in a crap boat; just our luck’ is a not-atypical line from a lugubrious crewmember — is a molten melancholy core. The submarine, surely, denotes the false consciousness in which most of humanity, being so easily distracted and turned inward, is trapped while the planet heads to hell. Barber, meanwhile, in making video art that embraces pop aesthetics, proper acting, a mix of reality and computer graphics, humour and sadness, has symbolically escaped one box already.



Most of us, though, can't seem to get out of our own. In **The Very Very End** (2013), Barber again points to his medium's plastic possibility by somehow travelling into the future and the past, nodding to Neville Shute's apocalyptic 1957 novel **On the Beach** (and, again, historical paranoia about nuclear war) while setting an end-of-days story in a 21st-century holiday resort. At least thirty-seven nuclear strikes have gone off and it's the end of the world, but glassy club music is playing and everyone is still watching TV – watching images, we're told, of the beginning of the universe — while they wait for 'the radiation' to make them 'vomit and grow weak'. Barber's voiceover has him sounding calm, accepting. This is perhaps — intentionally, obviously — part of the problem. 'People keep believing that it's going to be OK,' Barber says, 'but it's not.' Stirring classical music intercedes, tugging the emotions, and, as in the artist's scratch videos, science-programme and blockbuster-style imagery intended for very different purposes is upended, recontextualised. You recognise that, in an ideal world, such moves might snap a populace out of torpor. This isn't an ideal world, though.

Still, nuclear war is not the most likely threat to our future. It serves here, as with **Akula Dream**, as an analogue for a realer menace: probably environmental collapse, although there is always the possibility of a madman with nuclear weapons. The aim, apparently, is not to send audiences rushing to the nearest barricade. Barber's way around art's potential political inefficacy, always a speculative possibility, is to redefine the terms: art is a response to and reflection of the world as it is — seeing it as it is, without veils, might be achievement enough — and it leaves open the possibility of altering consciousness at another time through being talked about, through focusing concerns, suggesting alternative neural pathways. Still, Barber is far from naïve or Pollyanna-ish. The end is, almost certainly, coming somehow, whatever artists might want. And it may even be surprisingly continuous with the present: accompanied by passivity, stunned inertia, careless leisure, plenty of television, not too much thinking.





The *Freestone Drone* (2013), the companion piece to *The Very Very End* (and using the same sweeping classical music), substitutes a historical anxiety for a contemporary one concerning remote warfare. Here, again, Barber aims to think past a reflex response while analysing a problematic, not entirely rational hive-mind reaction: drones engender fear today because they represent a mindless, futuristic mode of warfare. Barber, emphasising this, reverses the terms and humanises the drone. He compares it to *Thomas the Tank Engine* (complete with burst of theme tune), gives it a personality, a silly sped-up voice, some mordantly humorous lines about how the drone 'just happened to blow you up'. Drones, Barber suggests, may not constitute worse weaponry than older examples but they somehow frighten us more, which deserves thinking about. Here, as in *Akula Dream*, there's a model of awakening into independent thought that points to a widespread stupor. And yet, once again, Barber won't aim straight for a target. *The Freestone Drone* flies along several courses, including an unofficial homage to Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* — a reminder that images don't have fixed meaning and are ripe for hijacking; snippets of nature documentaries serving as summaries of the contemporary mood ('the climate at the time was freakishly cold'); a narrative in which, playing on deep fears, the drone causes havoc in New York; and — strangest of all — the gestation of feelings of tenderness towards the faceless animist drone, who is something of a poet and seemingly saddened by the unease he produces in others.

If one target here is oversimplification, another is generational amnesia. We live in fear now in egocentric fashion, as if previous generations had never lived in fear. (Those previous generations, of course, may have felt the same way; this may merely be human nature, endless exceptionalism.) 'We already have the footage of our future. It's the footage of our past,' the *Freestone Drone* quavers. Perhaps only the details will change; certainly not the trajectory. The current refugee crisis is comparable to that at the end of the Second World War (Barber makes the comparison himself), a narrative that history has simplified too. In *Fences Make Senses* (2014), the artist invites empathy with refugees in an astringent way, at once diagnosing and analysing what art might achieve. Here he lays out the blunt realities of migration — being held up lengthily in camps, 'swimming to a place where you're not wanted', buying a vehicle to escape in sight unseen and discovering that it has no wheels — while doubling down on the meaning of images. Clear aquamarine water, the sensuous

stuff of holiday ads, is reframed in voiceover as what the refugee must swim through. There's an ironic, blokeish sales pitch for a dinghy, the parlance of consumerism again redeployed to create empathy, in which Barber's intent once more bifurcates. This, the work suggests, is what passes for common speech, the most democratic voice one might use in order to convey the urgency of the point. Later, a century-hence, futuristic scenario taps into mainstream audiences' desire to project themselves around in time, while also serving as a way to compress time so that patterns can be seen. 'Human time,' as Captain Pavel says, 'is tiny.'

Understanding, even using blunt tools, is a goal of **Fences Make Senses**, even as it flaunts its own mechanisms for reaching the viewer. Pointed comparisons are made between beans in a lorry (well cared for, because they are consumer products) and people in a lorry (not well cared for at all), and the fact that biscuits are packed so as not to be smashed whereas emigrants, as we know, often die in transit. The reality principle that divides affluent citizens in the West from their sense of responsibility to the poor — on which their affluence rests — is exposed, as are the easy get-out clauses, voiced by Barber's actors: 'Nobody can solve a fifty-million people problem.' 'Are we meant to stop for every boat we see? We'd be stopping all day.' 'It's not our problem, this is the problem of countries.' The film becomes a complex amalgam of exposed problems, arguments for their insolubility, and then renewed efforts, the tide coming in and going out again, perpetually. 'To imagine is at least a beginning,' Barber says, registering the point at which art must locate itself to be realistic, to neither disregard responsibility nor hide its head in idealist clouds.

And once again Barber is resistant to stylistic demarcation, appositely so in a film that concerns itself with borders. Here are reused advertisements, documentary images, bits of verité camcorder footage, acted sequences. The sum, though, might be characterised as a complex medley of filmic forms, bubbling with speech. It's a renegade form, a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk approach to video art in which one sees the early influence on Barber of Jean-Luc Godard — who similarly stretched definitions of what one might include in cinema. Barber, though, reserves the right even to be oppositional to his own aesthetics. In the four **Shouting Match** films shot in London, Bangalore, Tel Aviv and New Orleans, he sets up a situation whose simplicity recalls the pure products of early video art.

Two people sit on chairs, on tracks, and yell at each other: assistants assess which one is shouting loudest, and accordingly push them forward or pull them back, in or out of the camera frame. Each locale produces a different kind of preverbal joust (witness the theatricality of the Indian segment), implicitly suggesting that not only are human beings in perpetual conflict that looks ridiculous from a distance; but also, scaling up, nations produce their own kind of aggression. People have been disagreeing since time immemorial, of course. But Barber seems, here, particularly interested in how this might function as allegorical for a consumerist era, a marketplace of attention. Nobody, here, is listening to each other: what's important is that you shout the loudest, lest you be pushed out of frame. Communication is reduced to its simplest form, just as Barber here compresses video art to the question of who is in frame. Of course, we're aware that he is also offering alternatives to this model in the form of his other, richly tessellated films, with their fluent and inclusive conflation of registers. He's also offering alternatives to a po-faced reading of this work as lamenting human conflict, since **Shouting Match** is, inescapably, darkly comic. The shouting will go on, as Barber's extending of this project over several years and milieus already suggests. We'll shout until we have no voices left, until the end of the world, when we'll settle in to watch television. Or maybe art will redeem us along the way. Barber, you suspect, doesn't bank on that. But to imagine so is, at least, a beginning.

Martin Herbert





IMAGE CAPTIONS

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The Very, Very End, 2013, video, 9 minutes

All images courtesy the artist and waterside contemporary, London

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