

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION

**Apocalypse.** A disquieting feature of this annual exhibition - to which the patients themselves were not invited - was the marked preoccupation of the paintings with the theme of world cataclysm, as if these long-incarcerated patients had sensed some seismic upheaval within the minds of their doctors and nurses. As Catherine Austin walked around the converted gymnasium these bizarre images, with their fusion of Eniwetok and Luna Park, Freud and Elizabeth Taylor, reminded her of the slides of exposed spinal levels in Travis's office. They hung on the enamelled walls like the codes of insoluble dreams, the keys to a nightmare in which she had begun to play a more willing and calculated role. Primly she buttoned her white coat as Dr Nathan approached, holding his gold-tipped cigarette to one nostril. "Ah, Dr Austin . . . What do you think of them? I see there's War in Hell."

**Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown.** The noise from the cine-films of induced psychoses rose from the lecture theatre below Travis's office. Keeping his back to the window behind his desk, he assembled the terminal documents he had collected with so much effort during the previous months: (1) Spectro-heliogram of the sun; (2) Front elevation of balcony units, Hilton Hotel, London; (3) Transverse section through a pre-Cambrian trilobite;

(4) 'Chronograms,' by E.J. Marey; (5) Photograph taken at noon, August 7th, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression, Egypt; (6) Reproduction of Max Ernst's 'Garden Airplane Traps'; (7) Fusing sequences for 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Boy', Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-Bombs. When he had finished Travis turned to the window. As usual, the white Pontiac had found a place in the crowded parking lot directly below him. The two occupants watched him through the tinted windshield.

**Internal Landscapes.** Controlling the tremor in his left hand, Travis studied the thin-shouldered man sitting opposite him. Through the transom the light from the empty corridor shone into the darkened office. His face was partly hidden by the peak of his flying cap, but Travis recognized the bruised features of the bomber pilot whose photographs, torn from the pages of *Newsweek* and *Paris-Match*, had been strewn around the bedroom of the shabby hotel in Earls Court. His eyes stared at Travis, their focus sustained only by a continuous effort. For some reason the planes of his face failed to intersect, as if their true resolution took place in some as yet invisible dimension, or required elements other than those provided by his own character and musculature. Why had he come to the hospital, seeking out Travis among the thirty physicians? Travis had tried to speak to him, but the tall man made no reply, standing by the instrument cabinet like a tattered mannequin. His immature but at the same time aged face seemed as rigid as a plaster mask. For months Travis had seen his solitary figure, shoulders hunched inside the flying jacket, in more and more newsreels, as an extra in war films, and then as a patient in an elegant ophthalmic film on nystagmus — the series of giant geometric models,

like sections of abstract landscapes, had made him uneasily aware that their long-delayed confrontation would soon take place.

**The Weapons Range.** Travis stopped the car at the end of the lane. In the sunlight he could see the remains of the outer perimeter fence, and beyond this a rusting quonset and the iron-stained roofs of the bunkers. He crossed the ditch and walked towards the fence, within five minutes found an opening. A disused runway moved through the grass. Partly concealed by the sunlight, the camouflage patterns across the complex of towers and bunkers four hundred yards away revealed half-familiar contours - the model of a face, a posture, a neural interval. A unique event would take place here. Without thinking, Travis murmured, 'Elizabeth Taylor.' Abruptly there was a blare of sound above the trees.

**Dissociation: Who Laughed at Nagasaki?** Travis ran across the broken concrete to the perimeter fence. The helicopter plunged towards him, engine roaring through the trees, its fans churning up a storm of leaves and paper. Twenty yards from the fence Travis stumbled among the coils of barbed wire. The helicopter was banking sharply, the pilot crouched over the controls. As Travis ran forward the shadows of the diving machine flickered around him like cryptic ideograms. Then the craft pulled away and flew off across the bunkers. When Travis reached the car, holding the torn knee of his trousers, he saw the young woman in the white dress walking down the lane. Her disfigured face looked back at him with indulgent eyes. Travis started to call to her, but stopped himself. Exhausted, he vomited across the roof of the car.

**Serial Deaths.** During this period, as he sat in the rear seat of the Pontiac, Travis was preoccupied by his separation from the normal tokens of life he had accepted for so long. His wife, the patients at the hospital (resistance agents in the 'world war' he hoped to launch), his undecided affair with Catherine Austin - these became as fragmentary as the faces of Elizabeth Taylor and Sigmund Freud on the advertising billboards, as unreal as the war the film companies had restarted in Vietnam. As he moved deeper into his own psychosis, whose onset he had recognized during his year at the hospital, he welcomed this journey into a familiar land, zones of twilight! *At dawn, after driving all night, they reached the suburbs of Hell. The pale flares from the petrochemical plants illuminated the wet cobbles. No one would meet them there.* His two companions, the bomber pilot at the wheel in the faded flying suit and the beautiful young woman with radiation burns, never spoke to him. Now and then the young woman would look at him with a faint smile on her deformed mouth. Deliberately, Travis made no response, hesitant to commit himself into her hands. Who were they, these strange twins - couriers from his own unconscious? For hours they drove through the endless suburbs of the city. The billboards multiplied around them, walling the streets with giant replicas of napalm bombings in Vietnam, the serial deaths of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe terraced in the landscapes of Dien Bien Phu and the Mekong Delta.

**Casualties Union.** At the young woman's suggestion, Travis joined the C.U., and with a group of thirty housewives practised the simulation of wounds. Later they would tour with Red Cross demonstration teams. Massive cerebral damage and abdominal bleeding in automobile

accidents could be imitated within half an hour, aided by the application of suitable coloured resins. Convincing radiation burns required careful preparation, and might involve some three to four hours of makeup. Death, by contrast, was a matter of lying prone. Later, in the apartment they had taken overlooking the zoo, Travis washed the wounds from his hands and face. This curious pantomime, overlaid by the summer evening stench of the animals, seemed performed solely to pacify his two companions. In the bathroom mirror he could see the tall figure of the pilot, his slim face with its lost eyes hidden below the peaked cap, and the young woman in the white dress watching him from the lounge. Her intelligent face, like that of a student, occasionally showed a nervous reflex of hostility. Already Travis found it difficult not to think of her continuously. When would she speak to him? Perhaps, like himself, she realized that his instructions would come from other levels?

**Pirate Radio.** There were a number of secret transmissions to which Travis listened: (1) medullary: images of dunes and craters, pools of ash that contained the terraced faces of Freud, Eatherly, and Garbo; (2) thoracic: the rusting shells of U-boats beached in the cove at Tsingtao, near the ruined German forts where the Chinese guides smeared bloody handprints on the caisson walls; (3) sacral: V.J.-Day, the bodies of Japanese troops in the paddy fields at night. The next day, as he walked back to Shanghai, the peasants were planting rice among the swaying legs. Memories of others than himself, together these messages moved to some kind of focus. The dead face of the bomber pilot hovered by the door, the projection of World War III's unknown soldier. His presence exhausted Travis.

**Marey's Chronograms.** Dr Nathan passed the illustration across his desk to Margaret Travis. 'Marey's Chronograms are multiple-exposure photographs in which the element of time is visible - the walking human figure, for example, is represented as a series of dune-like lumps.' Dr Nathan accepted a cigarette from Catherine Austin, who had sauntered forward from the incubator at the rear of the office. Ignoring her quizzical eye, he continued, 'Your husband's brilliant feat was to reverse the process. Using a series of photographs of the most commonplace objects - this office, let us say, a panorama of New York skyscrapers, the naked body of a woman, the face of a cata-tonic patient - he treated them as if they already were chronograms and *extracted* the element of time.' Dr Nathan lit his cigarette with care. 'The results were extraordinary. A very different world was revealed. The familiar surroundings of our lives, even our smallest gestures, were seen to have totally altered meanings. As for the reclining figure of a film star, or this hospital. . .'

**'Was my husband a doctor, or a patient?'** Dr Nathan nodded sagely, glancing over his fingertips at Catherine Austin. What had Travis seen in those time-filled eyes? 'Mrs Travis, I'm not sure the question is valid any longer. These matters involve a relativity of a very different kind. What we are concerned with now are the implications - in particular, the complex of ideas and events represented by World War III. Not the political and military possibility, but the inner identity of such a notion. For us, perhaps, World War III is now little more than a sinister pop art display, but for your husband it has become an expression of the failure of his psyche to accept the fact of its own consciousness, and of his revolt against the present con-

tinuum of time and space. Dr Austin may disagree, but it seems to me that his intention is to start World War III, though not, of course, in the usual sense of the term. The blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony.

**Zoom Lens.** Dr Nathan stopped. Reluctantly, his eyes turned across the room to the portrait camera mounted on its tripod by the consulting couch. How could he explain to this sensitive and elusive woman that her own body, with its endlessly familiar geometry, its landscapes of touch and feeling, was their only defence against her husband's all-too-plain intentions? Above all, how could he invite her to pose for what she would no doubt regard as a set of obscene photographs?

**The Skin Area.** After their meeting, at the exhibition of war wounds at the Royal Society of Medicine's conference hall, Travis and Catherine Austin returned to the apartment overlooking the zoo. In the lift Travis avoided her hands as she tried to embrace him. He led her into the bedroom. Mouth pursed, she watched as he showed her the set of Enneper's models. 'What are they?' She touched the interlocking cubes and cones, mathematical models of pseudo-space. 'Fusing sequences, Catherine - for a doomsday weapon.' In the postures they assumed, in the contours of thigh and thorax, Travis explored the geometry and volumetric time of the bedroom, and later of the curvilinear roof of the Festival Hall, the jutting balconies of the London Hilton, and lastly of the abandoned weapons range. Here the circular target areas became identified in Travis's mind with the concealed breasts of

the young woman with radiation burns. Searching for her, he and Catherine Austin drove around the darkening countryside, lost among the labyrinth of billboards. The faces of Sigmund Freud and Jeanne Moreau presided over their last bitter hours.

**Neoplasm.** Later, escaping from Catherine Austin, and from the forbidding figure of the bomber pilot, who now watched him from the roof of the lion house, Travis took refuge in a small suburban house among the reservoirs of Staines and Shepperton. He sat in the empty sitting-room overlooking the shabby garden. From the white bungalow beyond the clapboard fence his middle-aged neighbour dying of cancer watched him through the long afternoons. Her handsome face, veiled by the laced curtains, resembled that of a skull. All day she would pace around the small bedroom. At the end of the second month, when the doctor's visits became more frequent, she undressed by the window, exposing her emaciated body through the veiled curtains. Each day, as he watched from the cubular room, he saw different aspects of her eroded body, the black breasts reminding him of the eyes of the bomber pilot, the abdominal scars like the radiation burns of the young woman. After her death he followed the funeral cars among the reservoirs in the white Pontiac.

**The Lost Symmetry of the Blastosphere.** 'This reluctance to accept the fact of his own consciousness,' Dr Nathan wrote, 'may reflect certain positional difficulties in the immediate context of time and space. The right-angle spiral of a stairwell may remind him of similar biases within the chemistry of the biological kingdom. This can be carried to remarkable lengths - for example, the jutting

balconies of the Hilton Hotel have become identified with the lost gill-slits of the dying film actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Much of Travis's thought concerns what he terms "the lost symmetry of the blastosphere" - the primitive precursor of the embryo that is the last structure to preserve perfect symmetry in all planes. It occurred to Travis that our own bodies may conceal the rudiments of a symmetry not only about the vertical axis but also the horizontal. One recalls Goethe's notion that the skull is formed of modified vertebrae - similarly, the bones of the pelvis may constitute the remains of a lost sacral skull. The resemblance between histologies of lung and kidney has long been noted. Other correspondences of respiratory and urogenital function come to mind, enshrined both in popular mythology (the supposed equivalence in size of nose and penis) and psychoanalytic symbolism (the "eyes" are a common code for the testicles). In conclusion, it seems that Travis's extreme sensitivity to the volumes and geometry of the world around him, and their immediate translation into psychological terms, may reflect a belated attempt to return to a symmetrical world, one that will recapture the perfect symmetry of the blastosphere, and the acceptance of the "Mythology of the Amniotic Return". In his mind World War III represents the final self-destruction and imbalance of an asymmetric world. The human organism is an atrocity exhibition at which he is an unwilling spectator.

**Eurydice in a Used Car Lot.** Margaret Travis paused in the empty foyer of the cinema, looking at the photographs in the display frames. In the dim light beyond the curtains she saw the dark-suited figure of Captain Webster, the muffled velvet veiling his handsome eyes. The last few

weeks had been a nightmare - Webster with his long-range camera and obscene questions. He seemed to take a certain sardonic pleasure in compiling this one-man Kinsey Report on her . . . positions, planes, where and when Travis placed his hands on her body - why didn't he ask Catherine Austin? As for wanting to magnify the photographs and paste them up on enormous billboards, ostensibly to save her from Travis . . . She glanced at the stills in the display frames, of this elegant and poetic film in which Cocteau had brought together all the myths of his own journey of return. On an impulse, to annoy Webster, she stepped through the side exit and walked past a small yard of cars with numbered windshields. Perhaps she would make her descent here. Eurydice in a used car lot?

**The Concentration City.** In the night air they passed the shells of concrete towers, blockhouses half buried in rubble, giant conduits filled with tyres, overhead causeways crossing broken roads. Travis followed the bomber pilot and the young woman along the faded gravel. They walked across the foundation of a guard-house into the weapons range. The concrete aisles stretched into the darkness across the airfield. *In the suburbs of Hell Travis walked in the flaring light of the petrochemical plants. The ruins of abandoned cinemas stood at the street corners, faded billboards facing them across the empty streets. In a waste lot of wrecked cars he found the burnt body of the white Pontiac. He wandered through the deserted suburbs.* The crashed bombers lay under the trees, grass growing through their wings? The bomber pilot helped the young woman into one of the cockpits. Travis began to mark out a circle on the concrete target area.

**How Garbo Died.** 'The film is a unique document,' Webster explained, as he led Catherine Austin into the basement cinema. 'At first sight it seems to be a strange newsreel about the latest tableau sculptures - there are a series of plaster casts of film stars and politicians in bizarre poses - how they were made we can't find out, they seem to have been cast from the living models, LBJ and Mrs Johnson, Burton and the Taylor actress, there's even one of Garbo dying. We were called in when the film was found.' He signalled to the projectionist. 'One of the casts is of Margaret Travis - I won't describe it, but you'll see why we're worried. Incidentally, a touring version of Kienholz's "Dodge 38" was seen travelling at speed on a motorway yesterday, a wrecked white car with the plastic dummies of a World War III pilot and a girl with facial burns making love among a refuse of bubblegum war cards and oral contraceptive wallets.'

**War-Zone D.** On his way across the car park Dr Nathan stopped and shielded his eyes from the sun. During the past week a series of enormous signs had been built along the roads surrounding the hospital, almost walling it in from the rest of the world. A group of workmen on a scaffolding truck were pasting up the last of the displays, a hundred-foot-long panel that appeared to represent a section of a sand-dune. Looking at it more closely, Dr Nathan realized that in fact it was an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest. Glancing at the billboards, Dr Nathan recognized other magnified fragments: a segment of lower lip, a right nostril, a portion of female perineum. Only an anatomist would have identified these fragments, each represented as a formal geometric pattern. At least five hundred of the signs would

be needed to contain the whole of this gargantuan woman, terraced here into a quantified sand-sea. A helicopter soared overhead, its pilot supervising the work of the men on the track. Its down-draught ripped away some of the paper panels. They floated across the road, an eddying smile plastered against the radiator grille of a parked car.

**The Atrocity Exhibition.** Entering the exhibition, Travis sees the atrocities of Vietnam and the Congo mimetized in the 'alternate' death of Elizabeth Taylor; he tends the dying film star, eroticizing her punctured bronchus in the over-ventilated verandas of the London Hilton; he dreams of Max Ernst, superior of the birds; 'Europe after the Rain'; the human race - Caliban asleep across a mirror smeared with vomit.

**The Danger Area.** Webster ran through the dim light after Margaret Travis. He caught her by the entrance to the main camera bunker, where the cheekbones of an enormous face had been painted in faded Technicolor across the rust-stained concrete. 'For God's sake -' She looked down at his strong wrist against her breast, then wrenched herself away. 'Mrs Travis! Why do you think we've taken all these photographs?' Webster held the torn lapel of his suit, then pointed to a tableau figure in the uniform of a Chinese infantryman standing at the end of the conduit. 'The place is crawling with the things - you'll never find him.' As he spoke a searchlight in the centre of the airfield lit up the target areas, outlining the rigid figures of the mannequins.

**The Enormous Face.** Dr Nathan limped along the drainage culvert, peering at the huge figure of a dark-haired

woman painted on the sloping walls of the blockhouse. The magnification was enormous. The wall on his right, the size of a tennis court, contained little more than the right eye and cheekbone. He recognized the woman from the billboards he had seen near the hospital - the screen actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Yet these designs were more than enormous replicas. They were equations that embodied the relationship between the identity of the film actress and the audiences who were distant reflections of her. The planes of their lives interlocked at oblique angles, fragments of personal myths fusing with the commercial cosmologies. The presiding deity of their lives the film actress provided a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness. Yet Margaret Travis's role was ambiguous. In some way Travis would attempt to relate his wife's body, with its familiar geometry, to that of the film actress, quantifying their identities to the point where they became fused with the elements of time and landscape. Dr Nathan crossed an exposed causeway to the next bunker. He leaned against the dark décolleté. When the searchlight flared between the blockhouses he put on his shoe. 'No. . .' He was hobbling towards the airfield when the explosion lit up the evening air.

**The Exploding Madonna.** For Travis, the ascension of his wife's body above the target area, exploding madonna of the weapons range, was a celebration of the intervals through which he perceived the surrounding continuum of time and space. Here she became one with the madonnas of the billboards and the ophthalmic films, the Venus of the magazine cuttings whose postures celebrated his own search through the suburbs of Hell.

**Departure.** The next morning, Travis wandered along the gunnery aisles. On the bunkers the painted figure of the screen actress mediated all time and space to him through her body. As he searched among the tyres and coils of barbed wire he saw the helicopter rising into the sky, the bomber pilot at the controls. It made a leftward turn and flew off towards the horizon. Half an hour later the young woman drove away in the white Pontiac. Travis watched them leave without regret. When they had gone the corpses of Dr Nathan, Webster, and Catherine Austin formed a small tableau by the bunkers.

A **Terminal Posture.** Lying on the worn concrete of the gunnery aisles, he assumed the postures of the film actress, assuaging his past dreams and anxieties in the dune-like fragments of her body.

*Apocalypse.*

'Eniwetok and Luna Park' may seem a strange pairing, the H-bomb test site in the Marshall Islands with the Paris fun-fair loved by the surrealists. But the endless newsreel clips of nuclear explosions that we saw on TV in the 1960s (a powerful incitement to the psychotic imagination, sanctioning *everything*) did have a carnival air, a media phenomenon which Stanley Kubrick caught perfectly at the end of *Dr Strangelove*. I imagine my mental patients conflating Freud and Liz Taylor in their Warhol-like efforts, unerringly homing in on the first signs of their doctor's nervous breakdown. *The Atrocity Exhibition's* original dedication should have been 'To the Insane'. I owe them everything.

*Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown.*

The many lists in *The Atrocity Exhibition* were produced by free association, which accounts for the repetition but, I hope, makes more sense of them.

'Garden Airplane Traps.' 'Voracious gardens in turn devoured by a vegetation that springs from the debris of trapped airplanes.' Max Ernst, *Informal Life*. The nightmare of a grounded pilot

Why a white Pontiac? A British pop-star of the 1960s, Dickie Valentine, drove his daughter in a white Pontiac to the same school that my own children attended near the film studios at Shepperton. The car had a powerful iconic presence, emerging from all those American movies into the tranquil TV suburbs. Soon after, Valentine died in a car accident. By chance a telescoped Pontiac starred in my 1969 exhibition of crashed cars at the New Arts Laboratory in London.

#### *The Weapons Range.*

Weapons ranges have a special magic, all that destructive technology concentrated on the production of nothing, the closest we can get to certain obsessional states of mind. Even more strange are the bunkers of the Nazi Atlantic Wall, most of which are still standing, and are far larger than one expects. Space-age cathedrals, they threaten the surrounding landscape like lines of Teutonic knights, and are examples of cryptic architecture, where form no longer reveals function. They seem to contain the codes of some mysterious mental process. At Utah Beach, the most deserted stretch of the Normandy coast, they stare out over the washed sand, older than the planet. On visits with my agent and his wife, I used to photograph them compulsively.

#### *Serial Deaths.*

'The war the film companies had restarted in Vietnam.' Written in 1966, this was a prophetic leap in the dark. To date no Vietnam movie has been shot on the original battlegrounds, but I'm confident it will happen, and might even get out of control. Spielberg returned to Shanghai for *Empire of the Sun*, an eerie sensation for me - even more so were the scenes shot near Shepperton, using extras recruited from among my neighbours, many of whom have part-time jobs at the studios. I can almost believe that I came to Shepperton thirty years ago knowing

unconsciously that one day I would write a novel about my wartime experiences in Shanghai, and that it might well be filmed in these studios. Deep assignments run through all our lives; there are no coincidences.

#### *Casualties Union.*

The so-called Casualties Union existed in London in the 1960s, probably inspired by the nuclear disarmament movement. Putting on the cosmetic wounds was a messy business, and a recruitment leaflet reassured volunteers: 'Death is simply a matter of lying prone.'

#### *Pirate Radio.*

Tsingtao, on the north China coast near Peking, was a German naval base during World War I, and later became a popular beach resort where I spent the summers in the 1930s. As a seven-year-old I was deeply impressed by the huge blockhouses and the maze of concrete tunnels where the tourist guides pointed to the bloody handprints of (they claimed) wounded German gunners driven mad by the British naval bombardment. For some reason these were far more moving than the dead Chinese soldiers in the battle-grounds around Shanghai which I visited with my parents, though they were sad enough.

#### *Marey's Chronograms.*

'An individual is a four-dimensional object of greatly elongated form; in ordinary language we say that he has considerable extension in time and insignificant extension in space.' Eddington, *Space, Time and Gravitation*.

#### *The Lost Symmetry of the Blastosphere.*

Elizabeth Taylor was staying at the Hilton during the shooting of Cleopatra, when she contracted pneumonia and was given a tracheotomy. The Hilton's balconies remind Travis of the actress's lost gill-slits (which we all develop embryonically as we briefly recapitulate our biological past).

*Eurydice in a Used Car Lot*

'Where and when Travis placed his hands on her body.' The poet Paul Eluard, describing his wife Gala, who later left him to marry Dali, said: 'Her body is the shape of my hands.'

*How Garbo Died.*

The sculptor George Segal has made a number of plaster casts of prominent art patrons, mostly New York bankers and their wives. Frozen in time, these middle-aged men and women have a remarkable poignancy, figures from some future Pompeii.

*The Enormous Face.*

Elizabeth Taylor, the last of the old-style Hollywood actresses! has retained her hold on the popular imagination in the two decades since this piece was written, a quality she shares (no thanks to myself) with almost all the public figures in this book - Marilyn Monroe, Reagan, Jackie Kennedy among others. A unique collision of private and public fantasy took place in the 1960s, and may have to wait some years to be repeated, if ever. The public dream of Hollywood for the first time merged with the private imagination of the hyper-stimulated 60s TV viewer. People have sometimes asked me to do a follow-up to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, but our perception of the famous has changed - I can't imagine writing about Meryl Streep or Princess Di, and Margaret Thatcher's undoubted mystery seems to reflect design faults in her own self-constructed persona. One can mechanically spin sexual fantasies around all three, but the imagination soon flags. Unlike Taylor, they radiate no light.

A kind of banalisation of celebrity has occurred: we are now offered an instant, ready-to-mix fame as nutritious as packet soup. Warhol's screen-prints show the process at work. His portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy drain the tragedy from the lives of these desperate women, while his day-glo palette returns them to the innocent world of the child's colouring book.