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**Ben Lewis, Director.** *Blowing Up Paradise*. 60 min., DVD and VHS. First Run/Icarus Films, 2005. \$390.00 U.S.

Review by Gabrielle Hecht, University of Michigan.

France detonated its first atomic bomb on February 13, 1960 at the Reggane test site, in the middle of the Algerian Sahara. But Reggane was neither the first nor the only site that the military had contemplated for nuclear testing. As early as 1957, General Charles Ailleret (who headed the “Special Weapons Section”) had considered the Tuamotu Islands in French Polynesia. He had rejected them with some regret: they were simply too far away and well out of reach of any airport. In subsequent months, Ailleret and his committee briefly considered underground test sites on metropolitan soil—notably in the Alps—but rejected them for fear of contaminating the ground water. They contemplated Corsica, but worried about sparking local opposition just as the tourist industry was getting underway. The military also conducted studies on Réunion and New Caledonia. In the end, however, it settled on the Saharan site because it could be used quickly. But as Jean-Marc Regnault has shown, this was always a temporary measure—after all, Algerian politics were only getting more difficult for the French government. Even before the first Reggane test, Regnault argues, the government had begun building an airport in Tahiti and the military had decided to move its test site to the Pacific. In 1963, construction began on the Centre d’Expérimentation Pacifique (CEP), as the test site on the Moruroa atoll was dubbed.[1] France continued testing in the Sahara until the Moruroa site was ready. In 1966, it inaugurated the new site with the first explosion in French Polynesia.

It is at this point that *Blowing Up Paradise* takes up its narration of three decades of French nuclear testing in Polynesia. Aired originally on the BBC, this film has been making the rounds of documentary film festivals over the last year or so. The filmmakers obtained interviews with a remarkable range of people: military strategists, an army diver, CEP workers, a Tahitian opposition leader, a local newspaper editor, Greenpeace activists, scientists, and many others. Interview excerpts are punctuated by striking archival footage, not just of the tests themselves but also of propaganda films, newsreels, and amateur videos. The resulting film delivers a remarkable amount of substantive information. It also presents a compelling set of arguments about colonialism in France’s relationship with its overseas territories and the devastating environmental and health impact of nuclear testing. *Blowing Up Paradise* not only covers new empirical ground (to my knowledge, there is no other film on French nuclear testing); it’s also one of the best documentaries on the atomic age to appear in a very long time.

The film opens with footage of the first “shot” over Moruroa, interspersed with excerpts from a speech by Charles de Gaulle proclaiming that “our principal duty is to be strong, and to be ourselves. Vive la République! Vive la France!” At first many Polynesians took pride in the selection of their atoll as a testing site, seeing it as a continuation of their service to France. “My grandparents fought in the First World War,” explains islander Michel Arakino, “other relatives fought in 1945, and then we took up the baton with the nuclear tests. We have always responded positively to a call from France.”[2] The massive modernization campaign that accompanied the arrival of the CEP certainly helped islanders feel good about the tests: in addition to the afore-mentioned airport, they got roads, housing, doctors, cinemas, jobs, and much more besides.

Director Ben Lewis is adept at letting his story build. Early in the documentary he shows the CEP’s Director of Radiological Safety in the 1960s assuring reporters that every precaution was taken to

ensure the safety of the population and the environment right from the first test. We then see the test itself: the wind direction changed unexpectedly, and the mushroom cloud veered off. A mobile laboratory was sent to test “the population,” but people never heard the results. This was typical of French radiological safety practices, especially in former colonies: uranium miners in Gabon, for example, were monitored regularly for exposure but never received the results of the tests.[3] But islanders did observe that while they continued to eat local produce, the specialists from the Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (CEA) had stopped doing so. A telex from the radiation safety officer back to the *métropole* confirmed that radiation exposure had been “not negligible.” A secret report that subsequently became known shows that the contamination level around the test site was comparable to that around Chernobyl after the accident there.

The protection that the French military offered islanders during tests was, as one helicopter pilot puts it, merely “symbolic”: it consisted of hangars made out of corrugated metal, in no way an adequate barrier against fallout. But islanders took it seriously: “During the tests, we went into the atomic shelters,” Arakino recounts. “All the family went in, the whole village. Everyone went inside and we counted them. Sometimes we took our dogs and pigs with us too.” The army helicopter pilot takes up the narration: a few hours or days after an explosion, they told people it was safe to return. “But the lagoon, the fish, and the coconuts were contaminated once again.” Ordinary residents may not have suspected anything (at least initially). But islanders who worked at the test site certainly did: Raymond Tahaa—who now has leukemia—remembers that he and his co-workers didn’t have the same protective clothing as the CEA specialists. Today, Tahaa and hundreds of others belong to Moruroa e Tatou, an association of French nuclear test veterans attempting to obtain compensation from the French government, much as “downwinders” in the US have done. So far, these attempts have been unsuccessful.

Lewis doesn’t just let the subaltern speak. He also gets two generations of French strategists to justify the ongoing testing program in their own words. French grandeur is of course the first explanation. Pierre Lacoste says wryly: “the Americans and the Russians could destroy the earth a thousand times over. We could only do it once—but that’s enough!” Creepiest of all, however, is the moment when the interviewer confronts nuclear advisor Bruno Tertrais with arguments that “France has no business testing a weapon that was principally designed to defend it in Europe in the Pacific, which is very far away.”

**Interviewer:** “do you think that argument is credible?”

**Tertrais:** “No.”

**Interviewer:** “Why not?”

**Tertrais:** “Because I don’t even begin to understand it.”

**Interviewer:** “What I said?”

**Tertrais:** “No, I don’t even begin to understand the argument. The French nuclear weapons were tested in France. They were always tested in France. British nuclear weapons were sometimes tested in Australia. We didn’t do that. We always tested our nuclear weapons on our French national territory.”

While many Polynesians continued to accept French nationhood willingly as a trade-off for modernization and (semi) prosperity, some did not. A small group formed under the name Te Toto Tupuna and began to advocate for Polynesian independence. One of their first actions was to blow up a wall of the post office in Papeete. A few days later, one of them killed a French official. Te Toto Tupuna claimed this was the doing of a rogue member, not the product of a group decision. Nonetheless, Charlie Ching, the presumed ringleader, spent several years in prison (where one of his first actions was to

organize a prison mutiny). After his release, Ching ran for office on a platform for independence, but got less than 1 percent of the vote. Unfortunately, the film doesn't go on to contextualize Ching's party in terms of broader Polynesian politics.

Indeed, it would have been more interesting to spend more time on such contextualization than to delve into quite as much detail on the Greenpeace protests of French testing (this is my one quibble with the film). Activists' stories certainly make for exciting narration, and students will doubtless get usefully outraged at the violent treatment of the activists at the hands of French military. But because this part of the story is far better known, it could have been covered more briefly.

Fortunately, there's plenty of other material to sink one's teeth into. The director leaves postcolonial deconstruction of visuality to his audience, for example, but he gives us strikingly exoticized images to work with: French engineers wearing crowns of flowers, Polynesian women dancing in traditional dress, Tahitian children singing "La Marseillaise" in honor of de Gaulle's visit, and so on. There's no shortage of irony in the testimony and imagery on offer here.

Coming in at just under an hour, *Blowing Up Paradise* is ideal for classroom use. It should work well in courses that deal with postwar or twentieth-century France, colonialism, globalization, nuclear history, and environmental history (there's an excellent segment on the scientific mission to test the radiation levels in and stability of the ocean floor). Its mix of sources, images, and politics is sure to spark vigorous discussion. The film should also spark discussion at a higher level. One wonders, for example, about the personal or political context for the testimony of many of the interviewees. What's at stake for them in going on camera? What explains the particular narrative frames they use in telling their stories? How can documents and oral histories be made to speak to each other? *Blowing Up Paradise* provides an excellent basis for such discussions, important ones to have as professional historians continue to develop techniques for using oral histories, films, and other non-print media.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Marc Regnault, "France's Search for Nuclear Test Sites, 1957-1963," *The Journal of Military History*, 67 (October 2003): 1223-48. For more on Pacific nuclear testing, see also Regnault's "The Nuclear Issue in the South Pacific: Labor Parties, Trade Union Movements, and Pacific Island Churches in International Relations," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2005): 339-357 and the response by Nic Maclellan, "The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2005): 363-372. These three articles would make good companion pieces to this film. For a full-length monograph, see Bengt Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Poisoned Reign: French Nuclear Colonization in the Pacific* (1986). A far briefer distillation of that work is Bengt Danielsson, "Poisoned Pacific: The legacy of French nuclear testing," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (March 1990): 22-31, available at [http://www.thebulletin.org/article.php?art\\_ofn=mar90danielsson](http://www.thebulletin.org/article.php?art_ofn=mar90danielsson).

[2] Translations are taken from the film's subtitles, which do not always give the most elegant rendition of the original French.

[3] Gabrielle Hecht, "Rupture-talk in the Nuclear Age: Conjugating Colonial Power in Africa," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 32, Nos. 5-6 (October -December 2002): 691-728.

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