

NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST IN AMERICAN FILMS

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Fyodor Dostoevsky once warned that if there is no God, everything is permitted; and scholars of all sorts have been worrying about the problem ever since. In the age of nuclear weaponry and dreams of a "strategic defense initiative," the theologico-moral focus has shifted to a very different maxim: IF I AM GOD, I CAN RISK EVERYTHING.

Ordinary people shudder at the thought that people in positions of power might do whatever they think they can get away with. But that is often the way it is in the real world, and the risks go even higher when opportunity is compounded with impatience. The ways of negotiation and diplomacy are not considered entirely outmoded. But more and more we are being duped by a dream of some ultimate technological fix: that one more fancy gadget is all it will take to solve the vexing problems that less well-tooled folks have been stumbling over for centuries. Our success rate, this reasoning goes, has been limited so far only by the limits on our equipment. With the new super-missile, or the new super-plane, or the new super-launching system in space, we will be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound-or, what is more to the point, just blow them away and walk across the crater. "Bombs can be clean." "Nuclear

Research in Philosophy & Technology, Volume 9, pages 13-21. Copyright © 1989 by JAI Press Inc.
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war is winnable." The illusion of omnipotence that accompanies this megalomania is well nurtured by manufacturers who stand in line for contracts to help build some super-weapon. This should not be surprising. What at first glance is surprising is the almost total failure of our commercial media to call this myth into question. This criticism is meant to be sweeping, but I will here focus my remarks on *film*.

The problem, it seems to me, is that we are not being given the benefit of any realistic apocalyptic vision with regard to the horror of nuclear holocaust (this being to the whole earth what a bomb is to one city). A solution that I will here support: Just such a realistic apocalyptic vision should become commonplace in film. In support of this claim I will first introduce evidence that American films about nuclear holocaust are harmless and therefore extremely dangerous to our health. Then I will answer some objections to get clear and distinct about why we need more obliteration and carnage in our nuclear war images.

I. IS THE STATE OF THE ART THE ART OF THE STATE?

Compared, say, to progress in the genre of so-called horror films, our visual representations of nuclear holocaust have been remote from the reality of a detonation. Representations of an actual detonation tend to be quite aesthetically pleasing. Much more attention, however, is given to events that occur immediately before the detonation and/or at some distance from the detonation and/or long after the detonation.

A. The Nuclear Blast Itself (Cosmetized)

Representations on film of what happens when a nuclear bomb is detonated are less threatening, on the whole, than the turmoil of rush hour traffic in any of our largest cities. Take just a handful of fairly well

known examples:

1. The "beep" of an ambassador's melted phone is heard first in Moscow, then in New York, where a sequence of familiar street scenes comes to an abrupt stop-action end: *Failsafe* (1964).
2. A bright glare (the thermal pulse?) briefly distorts the normal coloration of the sky: *Testament* (1983).
3. X-ray like scenes show people doing everyday things: *The Day After* (made-for-television, 1984), a tame representation of the end of Kansas City as seen from Manhattan, Kansas. (For reasons that must have been primarily commercial, people were forewarned this might be too much for them to view.)

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4. From on high, awesomely beautiful mushroom clouds are seen billowing up in grand profusion from the earth far below-(a) at the end of a film: with sound overlay of a popular WW II song, "We'll Meet Again"-intended, of course, to be ironic in the extreme; but by far the most beautiful sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* (1963); and (b) at the beginning of a film: as in the cinematic version of Harlan Ellison's *A Boy and his Dog* (1976), which opens with a similarly pleasing display of rising mushroom clouds intended to establish the time as being after World War IV.

B. Events Immediately Preceding a Blast

There is an extensive list of films, mostly of the "B" variety, in which the danger of a nuclear holocaust is averted at the last minute by a *deus ex machina* application of superlative human ingenuity. Higher budget examples of this approach include *Cruise Missile* (1978), in which a crack military team does the saving, and the mildly anti-military *War Games* (1983), in which a youthful computer hacker teams up with a drop-out computer wizard to divert the ultimate disaster. An early variation on this theme is *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), Robert Wise's rendition of Henry Bates' "Farewell to the Master," in which an alien and his robot come to warn earthlings that the stockpiling of nuclear weapons could lead to total obliteration.

Only occasionally are we exposed to the statistically more likely event, namely, that a series of unanticipated miscalculations might actually result in the onset of World War III. Two now classical films that dramatize this scenario approach their material very differently; but they are in agreement that the fatal flaw could be a minor glitch in an otherwise rational system.

Doctor Strangelove analyzes our "defense" capabilities satirically and discovers insurmountable human error: a mad commander of a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base, concerned about his vital fluids, deliberately orders an attack on the Soviet Union, and the collaborative efforts of American and Russian leaders prove inadequate to the task of stopping one plane from getting through the Russian defenses and dropping a nuclear bomb on Moscow.

Failsafe addresses the same topic "straight" and uncovers a sequentially interdependent concatenation of technical and human malfunctioning. On the basis of ambiguous data misread, SAC planes are erroneously sent on a "real thing" mission to bomb Moscow and can't be recalled because the Russians have jammed their radios. By the time this problem is corrected, those in the doomsday plane, well trained as they have been, can't be persuaded that they are not acting under proper orders.

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C. Events Distant from the Detonation

Some filmmakers have chosen to let nuclear detonations occur far off-screen. This could be because they lack access to a good special effects lab; or they might actually have assumed that people tend to think of nuclear holocaust as something that will happen elsewhere. Whatever the reason, the effect is counterproductive: the greater the distance, geographical or psychological, the less overwhelming the impact.

Far removed from the blast and involved principally in anticipation of the coming effects of radioactive fallout are the characters in Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959), based on the Nevil Shute novel. Most of the action takes place in Australia. The nearest blast, however, was over San Francisco, which is visited by the crew of a submarine who learn that the tap-tap radio signal they have been sent to track

down is not coming from any human agent. The city is intact, just no people; so there are no ugly sores or lesions or disintegrating bodies at which to look.

Barely removed from the blast and involved in both anticipation and experience of radioactive fallout are the characters in *Testament* (1984). This film also involves a blast over San Francisco that results in the death of the protagonist's commuter husband. But all of the on-screen action takes place in a small town outside the range of the blast. People begin dying and need to be buried; but the only indication that the process of dying might be uncomfortable is a momentary suggestion of blood on a blanket in which a young child is wrapped. The protagonist mother in the film is a perfect heroine, coping rationally through it all, with only one momentary outburst in which she curses "whoever did this." A very different response from that of the patriotic Texan in *Doctor Strangelove* who rode the bomb down with a courageous bronco buster's whoop. But for all the differences in tone between the two films, they share a defeatist message that nothing rational can be done about this great big terrible problem.

D. Events Occurring Long After the Actual Blast

Another fictional approach to nuclear holocaust is to portray the kind of life survivors and their descendants may live after the culture of the past has been blown away. The resulting image is one of tragic desolation that is supposed to lead the viewer to conclude that no amount of "preparedness" can be worth that great a price. Unfortunately, what one sees on screen is not obviously worse than, say, a cinematic indictment of the South Bronx. So the message is lost on all but those who already share the filmmaker's a priori convictions and for that reason do not see the relevance to this problem of David Hume's contentions about the conventionality of alleged links between effect and cause.

The paradigm example of this approach is a novel by William Miller, Jr., entitled *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. No one has yet made a movie of it, but a radio version has been presented on National Public Radio several times in the last few years. In this stark tale, civilization as it existed before World War III has been almost totally obliterated. People live like barbarians, except for a curious order of monks who over many hundreds of years manage to rediscover such technological wonders from the former world as the electric light bulb. How people have been able to reproduce normal offspring is not explained; but there is a valley inhabited, in the manner of lepers, by monsters born severely defective as a result of radiation.

A Boy and his Dog shows survivors of World War IV living the sort of savage lives of violence (*homo homini lupus*) that Thomas Hobbes considered ample justification for severe governmental restraint. The latter as well as the former is available, but with a nuclear twist. For no apparent reason, it is mainly males who have survived, thus putting an erotic premium on any surviving female. Nothing can grow any longer on the surface of the earth, and survival is assured for a few only so long as they can still find--and keep from others--canned goods left over from before the war. The obvious problem of radioactivity is not even mentioned; nor is there any explanation of how, in the absence of any manufacturing capacity whatsoever, the men who go about in "rover packs" manage to get ammunition for their ubiquitous and frequently used weapons. Long-term survival is no longer possible on the surface of the earth, but only "down under" or "over the hill." Down under, beneath the surface of the earth, a totalitarian regime relies on robots to assure total obedience to a life that mimics the good old days in "Topeka, Kansas." Unfortunately, the males who live there are all sterile. Above ground, the only hope is to find one's way "over the hill." But only a dog named Blood knows the way; and in this respect among others this dog displays far more intelligence than any human who is still around.

Obviously, *A Boy and his Dog* wants to make a statement about the undesirability of nuclear holocaust. But in terms of genre it is hard to distinguish from any rock-'em-sock-'em fantasy à la Clint Eastwood or Sylvester Stallone that purports to solve a serious problem with a robust, macho display of violence. And in this respect it fails in the same way as does the Australian film *Road Warrior* (1982), which in effect uses the fact that the world has been nuked as a marvelous reason for lots of footage visually indistinguishable from a run-of-the-mill car-chasing-and-banging flick.

The absurdity of this sort of reliance on pre-hominid traits to counteract post-technological disaster was appropriately lampooned in the often forgotten ending of *Doctor Strangelove*. On the basis of his anti-climactic calculations, the mad doctor posits that one could survive a nuclear blast by living for a hundred years in a deep mine shaft. This learned but useless advice quickly leads others to worry about being

caught in a "mineshaft gap"--a deftly

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sardonic echo of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's (unfounded) 1960 presidential campaign rhetoric about an alleged "missile gap."

All of this, compared to the hyper-realism being achieved in blood-and-gore horror movies seen by millions, clearly leaves the impression that the explosion of nuclear weapons is, on balance, a rather bearable albeit disruptive sort of event. In other words, there is very little in commercial films that would contradict the increasingly common claim of chomping-at-the-bit militarists that nuclear war is not only survivable but actually winnable, provided only that one have the sort of pluck and determination that has made America great in the first place.

This is all wrong. If we are to survive we need to be exposed, over and over again, the kinds of portrayals of nuclear holocaust that require the very best efforts of the blood-and-gore horror movie experts. The next time Jane Seymour (female lead in *Testament'*) has to endure the effects of radiation sickness in her community, let's really see the effects of radiation. Let us watch Jane go stark raving mad, as would be an entirely appropriate response under the circumstances. Let us get a lot closer to the blast. Let's see a fireball, a ground burst, local fallout. Let us see buildings, blocks, whole cities being flattened to the ground. Let us see second degree burns and lesions in all their natural colors. Let us see human being reduced in an instant from living flesh to dry bones.

II. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

There are, of course, all sorts of objections to the proposal I am making. Consider here just a few of them, together with my responses.

Objection 1. We just do not have the technical expertise to show all the disaster, devastation, and deterioration that would result from the explosion of many or even one large megaton device.

Response. Considering what has already been achieved in the science fiction and horror films, considering what has been put on the screen by Roman Polanski, Steven Spielberg, George Lukas, and many others, this humble estimation of what is possible simply does not merit serious consideration.

Objection 2. There is so much to choose from, it would be hard to know what to show and what to leave out. Consider just the varieties of ways in which "a person in a targeted country might die." Jonathan Schell summarizes the possibilities:

He [or she, hereafter] might be incinerated by the fireball or the thermal pulse. He might be lethally irradiated by the initial nuclear radiation . . . crushed to death or hurled to his death by the blast wave or its debris . . . lethally irradiated by the local fallout . . .

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burned to death in a firestorm . . . injured by one or another of these effects and then die of his wounds . . . die of starvation, because the economy had collapsed and no food was being grown or delivered, or because the local ecosystem had been ruined, or because the ecosphere of the earth as a whole was collapsing. He might die of cold, for lack of heat and clothing, or of exposure, for lack of shelter. He might be killed by people seeking food or shelter that he had obtained. He might die of an illness spread in an epidemic . . . [or] by exposure to the sun if he stayed outside too long following serious ozone depletion. Or he might be killed by any combination of these perils.'

Response. This, as they say, is virgin territory. With so much to choose from and no competition to speak of, you can't lose!

Objection 3. The chances of getting it all wrong are just too great, because a person can only die once. If you are killed by the thermal pulse, for example, you will not be around to die in an epidemic. So there is always the "risk of depicting scenes of devastation that in reality would never take place, because the people in them would already have been killed off in some earlier scene of devastation."²

Response. A concern for getting it right is hardly apparent in any of the cinematic portrayals of nuclear disaster produced so far. If anything, they have lingered too long at the benevolent end of the spectrum with regard to effects. So if they were to take a lesson from Aristotle and reach out in the direction of (what some would think of as) excess they might at least reach the golden mean.

Objection 4. "When we strain to picture what the scene would be like after a holocaust we tend to forget that for most people, and perhaps for all, it wouldn't be *like* anything, because they would be dead. To depict the scene as it would appear to the living is to that extent a falsification, and the greater the number killed, the greater the falsification. The right vantage point from which to view a holocaust is that of a corpse, but from that vantage point, of course, there is nothing to report.³

Response. This I take to be a most serious objection. But as a start I would suggest getting out Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, going to the animated accompaniment to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and running the sequence on the evolution of our planet backwards.

Objection 5. There is *no commercial incentive* to make films that present such an anti-nuke apocalyptic vision. Government is too committed to military interests, and the private sector is too heavily dependent on military contracts.

Response. Neither government nor business will have *any* interests to protect if the bombs ever start going off.

Objection 6. It is *better not to know* what can happen, because what can happen eventually will happen, so we might as well "go out" in blissful ignorance.

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Response. This assumes that nothing can (or should) be done to prevent nuclear holocaust, that social awareness is irrelevant to the occurrence or nonoccurrence of events. As has been seen as recently as the 1960s in this country, and more recently in other countries as well, strongly manifested public opinion can and does make a difference.

Objection 7. Exposing people to too much realism in this regard will not mobilize them to action but will *destroy their ability to act* and thus prevent them from living reasonably normal and useful lives.

Response. Horror movies, as noted above, are becoming increasingly realistic, without apparent loss of function on the part of dedicated (mostly young) moviegoers. This phenomenon can perhaps be explained by Sigmund Freud's observations in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

No matter how much we may shrink with horror from certain situations [in which people have been forced to deal with excruciating pain], it is nevertheless impossible for us to feel our way into such people-to divine the changes which original obtuseness of mind, a gradual stupefying process, the cessation of expectations, and cruder or more refined methods of narcotization have produced upon their receptivity to sensations of pleasure and unpleasure. Moreover, in the case of the most extreme possibility of suffering, special mental protective devices are brought into operation.

Objection 8. Now that is precisely the problem. Too much realism will result in people's *adapting to such horror*, with the result that not even the worst scenario will be able to stimulate in them any focused opposition to nuclear weapons.

Response. Taken literally, this concern about desensitization would require us to stop putting warning labels on containers with dangerous contents, or flasher signals at dangerous intersections. Moreover, it would render unintelligible all the (admittedly naive) endeavors in the 1950s and 1960s to build protection against nuclear war, as chronicled in *Atomic Cafe* (1982). *Clockwork Orange* (1971), a film based on Anthony Burgess's account of the operant conditioning of a violent young man, suggest the thesis that the more people associate nukes with pain, the more likely they are to seek ways to avoid that pain, hopefully by means of concerted action. That our society is ripe for this sort of "reality therapy" can be seen from

the way children are now being taught about the dangers of sexual abuse, and the way adults are now being taught about the frequently disastrous consequences of alcoholism and driving under the influence. And, as a matter of record, people do respond, in significant numbers, to seeing vivid scenes of disaster (e.g., of the effects of a famine in Africa, or an earthquake in Mexico City, or a volcanic eruption in Colombia).

For all the foregoing reasons, I say that we desperately need to be shown the horrors of nuclear holocaust in as direct and overwhelming a way as the

state of the art will permit. For when the limits of reasons have been reached, merely rational expositions are not effective. Nor is Aristotle to be blamed in this regard for having preferred a well-crafted plot that fills with horror and pity one who without seeing the things take place simply hears the account of them. Aristotle had not anticipated either cinema or strategic defense initiatives or anything in between. What is more to the point, for Aristotle a tragedy involved only the demise of a worthy personage. He, whose world was eternal, had no word for a play in which the world comes to an end.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Schell, "The Effect of Nuclear Bombs," in *Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. James E. White, St. Paul: West Publishing, 1985, p. 324.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, New York: W. W. Norton, 1962, p. 36.