Nuclear Warfare in the Movies

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I. Introduction: Ethical Anxiety, Esthetic Dilemma

1 For moviemakers, moviegoers and critics with a conscience, the representation of nuclear warfare in film presents problems of "seriousness," esthetic and ethical. When we talk about bombs in movies, the imaginary does not offer its customary refuge; anxiety about the real bomb tugs at us. We feel the nuclear referent stands always too close to its sign; we feel that proximity as one of the conditions of life in the postmodern era. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur, while trying to save narrative discourse from the most virulent attacks of anti-narrativist deconstruction, suggested that we preserve the essential distinction between history and fiction by owning the sense of debt we feel to the dead, the presence of a felt obligation to get things right when telling the stories of the dead. It is that sense of historical debt that creates the serious mood. The seriousness is a desire to be responsible in our representations of the nuclear bombing of human beings. In somewhat the same way that movies telling stories about the Holocaust arouse detractors and enliven defenders (see Gans's *Chronicle* 148 with remarks on on *Schindler's List*, for example), movies aiming to show truthfully the threat of nuclear warfare are bound to provoke and have provoked controversy.(1)

2 Our ethical anxiety about the topic is expressed by a double respect that looks back, and looks ahead. We must respect the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th and 9th, 1945. We are haunted by the fate of those Japanese selected as experimental examples destined to sudden unanticipated annihilation or lingering and ineradicable sorrow.(2) We fear they were victims of the under-experienced Truman administration's perhaps needlessly impatient desire to defeat Japan quickly and to gain a decisive superiority in what would quickly become the Cold War.(3) On the other hand, more selfishly but no less necessarily, in respecting ourselves and our loved ones we remain bound by the obligation to fear the future use of nuclear weapons and not to "take lightly" the nuclear threat. This ethical anxiety is not going anywhere; it circulates tirelessly in the historical situation we occupy. And just as it is inescapable, we will probably never escape feeling a given movie has not quite done justice to the threat. Indeed, our thesis partly

proposes that it is utopian to expect any movie to “do justice” to nuclear warfare, and that resentment about the topic can be circulated more favorably if we register that truth. But if it is impossible for the movies ever to “do justice” to nuclear warfare, it is a good thing they try and try again. The movies we will explore–Stanley Kramer’s *On The Beach* (1959), Sidney Lumet’s *Fail Safe* (1964), Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and Mick Jackson’s *Threads*(1984), with a glance at *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991)–do get some things right.

3 Although the esthetics of the nuclear warfare movie present indissoluble obstacles (the topos itself seems to have precluded so far in our culture any definitive treatment), we can identify a basis for the ethically responsible movie that contains the nuclear warfare trope. It is neither obstinately pacifist nor piously ascetic to require that movies at least begin to show nuclear war as exceedingly dangerous (because it is) and its effects on people as horrifically ugly (because they are). The “danger” requirement seems to be easily met in narrative films meditating on the bomb; the “horrific ugliness” requirement presents more difficulties. For now, we note only these minimal requirements are less political than ethical; the reader in agreeing the bomb should be represented as dangerous and damaging is agreeing only to minimal conditions for assessing the attractions of a given representation. By agreeing, the reader has neither been conned into defending governments’ possession of nuclear arsenals, nor required to sign up as a peace activist and join the next local disarmament march. Deterrence itself, the official doctrine that arguably helped get us through the Cold War, assumes the danger and horror as much as the anti-nuclear doctrine of the desirability of abolition assumes it. The fearsomeness of nuclear weapons is a given as much for those who threaten to use them as for those who want the threat simply to be removed. Curiously, as fear was a universal motivator at an early stage of the originary emergence of the human sign, it is a universal on the brink of possible annihilation.

4 The fearsome nuclear arsenals do threaten our real chances of survival, but they also threaten our will to think about the threat itself; the thinking and real surviving are, from an originary perspective, tied together. Our thesis must be formulated as a chiasmus spanning the dilemma of that fearsomeness. In proportion as the movie is adequate to the horrible reality of the worst results of nuclear warfare–extinction, annihilation–the movie must risk destroying hope and faith in human agency; but insofar as the movie elevates human agency and creates the illusion the bomb is controllable and thereby unthreatening, the nuclear danger risks being trivialized. Between a debilitating obsequiousness to the nuclear sublime and an irresponsibly fictive defiance of it, the moviemaker’s esthetic production and the critic’s discerning consumption are condemned to oscillate uneasily.

II. Strains of Critical Response

5 Let us elaborate on this oscillation in preparation for a survey of some of the critical literature. If a movie is faithful to the reality of nuclear warfare conceived as a genuine

threat to human survival, the moviemaker must present something so horrifically ugly that hope is destroyed, so ugly that an attack on faith in human agency for the film characters (and the viewers who identify with them) is the result. Paradoxically, the films most impressively horrific in their visual embodiments of the horror of nuclear warfare–the exemplary *tour de force* here must be Mick Jackson's *Threads* (1984)–are those most likely to induce in the viewer feelings of despair. We will call these Dramas of Nuclear Devastation (in which the bombs are usually dropped somewhere near the middle of the action). Now the violent induction of viewerly submissiveness to such hopeless feelings is an effect resented by all critics, even the anti-nuclearist ones that we would expect to celebrate these films as "responsible" and "realistic." In the plots of dramas of nuclear devastation, gestures or acts of anti-nuclear activism are conspicuously absent or shown to be futile–necessarily after-the-fact protests. The movie may get the "danger and horror" of nuclear weapons right, but the effect of representing extinction or near-annihilation in its full ugliness is to risk barring any response other than shock and horror (an ironic result, given that the didactic import of such a work would presumably be to heighten awareness of nuclear danger in a non-disabling and socially productive manner).

6 One might propose then that the esthetic solution is to mix up the horror with the hope of human (or divine) agency. Thus the moviemaker enacts the formulas of the apocalyptic imagination, not about annihilation but hope: the visionary hero can exhort us to action, provide a model for imitation and a future-oriented discourse of redemptive conduct or a fantasy of rescue. But as soon as the moviemaker gives us such a hero/heroine, the story of nuclear warfare starts to transmute itself, such that nuclear warfare is not *really* a threat and "real" nuclear warfare is just not the movie's topic. Such post-apocalyptic films as *The Road Warrior* (1981) or Kevin Reynold's*Waterworld* (1995), or such nuclear countdown dramas as John Badham's made-for-teenagers *Wargames* (1983) or the Tom Clancy CIA thriller *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) may be "in good fun," but the good fun is in no way intended to create any anxious attention directed at the nuclear threat "out there." We intuitively know the facts about nuclear weapons well enough to assess such movies according to the following proportion: the more individual human agency is elevated as heroically decisive, the more the nuclear threat is diminished by the fantasy of apocalyptic rescue.

7 So the dutiful critic, at the risk of losing attention by putting on the killjoy's sackcloth, returns to our opening archway of "seriousness." In proportion as the model of magically heroic bomb control is given free reign, movies including the trope of nuclear warfare risk defaulting on the debt that creates our ethical anxiety about what such movies should–minimally–do. Our purpose in this study, however, is not to condemn movies for falling away from an esthetic and ethical ideal. Instead, it is to provide a description of the manners and degrees in which such movies must submit to the ratio that plays the seriousness of the nuclear war threat against the necessity not to let that threat annihilate thinking about it (and by implication, making movies about it).

8 The decisive majority of movies about nuclear warfare tend toward the latter half of the chiasmus: in most, human agency triumphs and the referent of nuclear annihilation recedes while the energy of the apocalyptic imaginary takes over. This statistical fact must be fully registered. According to Jerome Shapiro, “Admittedly, a fair number forecast a dystopic future, but only a very few describe complete annihilation” (12); “very few bomb films describe the strategic annihilation of humanity” (29). John Martens captures the obstacle with a nice directness: “Films that deal with the actual [nuclear] war are minimal, as a nuclear war is simply the dropping of bombs or the sending of missiles. This would make for a short film” (197). Toni Perrine puts it more eloquently: “the contradiction inherent in the fact that even portrayals of nuclear annihilation are often positive at the narrative and structural levels deserves critical attention” (9). Indeed, that “contradiction inherent in the fact” is the paradox we wish to explore. Perrine elaborates elsewhere:

> Films must have something to show, however obliquely, and despite the fact that the ultimate nuclear apocalypse on film would logically consist entirely of rubble, destruction, and death, most tend to posit a future that also includes recognizable human life. . . . In fact, it is axiomatic that dramatic narrative film must depict social life and is structurally incapable of depicting the absence of social life. (16)

But despite the axiomatic necessities governing “dramatic narrative film,” the recession of the realism respecting the nuclear threat in most nuclear warfare movies troubles most critics, Perrine included.

9 The majority of opinion informing most criticism of nuclear warfare in the movies worries over and openly opposes “nuclearism.” The concept of “nuclearism” was established by Robert Jay Lifton, and furthered by the likes of Paul Boyer, Helen Caldicott, and Jonathan Schell. The discourse contesting nuclearism criticizes our (alleged) collective irrational worship of the bomb and our collective denial of its horrible entrapment of our human(e) reason, and implies a call for political commitment to disarmament. With respect to movies, the critical approach was anticipated by Susan Sontag in her seminal essay “The Imagination of Disaster.” We find this strain continuing in the work of Mick Broderick with his zestily exhaustive essay-and-catalogue *Nuclear Movies* (1991); in Joyce Evans’ informative cultural materialist study, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (1998); in Tony Perrine’s *Film and the Nuclear Age; Representing Cultural Anxiety* (1998), perhaps the most balanced but also, because of its balance, the most melancholy study. In this critical strain, the consistent attitude is that nuclear movies have not done and perhaps never can do enough to respond with esthetic means to the reality of the nuclear threat. They express the easily understandable unease of the left-leaning or liberal intelligentsia with our seeming subservience to stockpiles of nuclear arms, and

exemplify one instance of what Gans has identified as the resentment of theory.(4)

10 On the other side, many entertaining and not utterly unethical movies using the bomb deploy the apocalyptic formula. Those movies are championed by Jerome F. Shapiro in his magisterial *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film*(2002). Shapiro's project is to create–by defining–a genre he calls "atomic bomb cinema," in which the high-cultural (politically correct?) imperative of creating in audiences the properly sophisticated fear of the nuclear referent is firmly subordinated to the popular, if not populist, freedom of the apocalyptic imagination to play in the fields of resentful fantasy. Shapiro's refreshing perspective acts as a pugnaciously iconoclastic corrective to the equally resentful utopianism that animates the anti-nuclear tradition: he fears not to differ from Lifton, Boyer, Schell, Sontag, and others.(5) Shapiro is never depressing, and that itself is a virtue in a field which magnetically attracts portentous rhetorics about human evil, human stupidity, human inhumanity and the like. His closing chapter defends the Hollywood movie industry itself against the routine demonization Hollywood suffers as the ritually pin-pricked voodoo doll of academic intellectuals. But having said all this in Shapiro's praise, we can not serenely settle into his position without ceasing to think in originary terms.

11 Whereas Broderick, Evans, Perrine and like-minded analysts find the governing conventions of Hollywood movie-making opposed to the project of representing nuclear warfare with "seriousness," Shapiro defends Hollywood formulae informed by the apocalyptic tradition: "in atomic bomb cinema, there is little radical variation from the 'classical' use of the cinematic apparatus. That is to say, bomb films are generally not marketed as consciousness-raising events or art, but entertainment.… there are only a few films that offer formal surprises" (11). He refuses to study nuclear movies "as evidence of nuclearism, a vast break in public consciousness, or covert political and religious propaganda, and thus a distorted representation of some nuclear reality" (9). He privileges an apocalyptic narrative structure the thematic import of which is to valorize "individual, and communal, survival and self-actualization under oppressive conditions" (35).

12 But it is ironically the case that Shapiro is not interested in movies that worry explicitly about nuclear war, because his "atomic bomb cinema" itself, despite the expectations the phrase obviously creates, excludes such films. Shapiro sees no contradiction between a movie treating nuclear themes "seriously" and the movie having a happy ending Hollywood-style, precisely because the assumed innocence of apocalyptic narrative form is the respectable throne he carries onstage to legitimate reigning Hollywood formulae: "But faith in a beneficent outcome, as numerous authorities on apocalyptic and millennial thought have pointed out, is essential to the philosophical, psychological, theological and generic structure of all apocalyptic narratives" (33). The apocalyptic pattern calls for the hero to journey to another (visionary world), to return to the real world, and there to exhort and rescue the oppressed and help them survive a terrifying crisis: "The key theme that connects atomic bomb cinema to the apocalyptic tradition… is the promise of not merely

surviving the current oppressive conditions, but ‘rebirth.’ The apocalypse does not bring about the end of the world, but a crisis-like period of intense suffering that cleanses the world of evil” (28).

13 Shapiro’s critics would counter that it is one thing to tutor us about what apocalyptic formulae make possible in the imaginary world of movies but another to guarantee that those formulae themselves will have no mimetically unsettling effect on decision-makers in the real world or their electorates.

14 The severity of his attacks on those movies that attempt anything “earnest” respecting the bomb settles down, when sifted, to a hard-boiled prejudice: Shapiro enjoys bomb movies that use apocalyptic formulae and mostly despises those that do not. It is not that he proposes an attitude of indifference to nuclear issues, but that he finds the very question of “responsibility” annoying precisely to the extent that, once it is asked, his beloved “apocalyptic imagination” begins to look ethically immature by virtue of its aggressive unreality, regardless of its ancient pedigree. (One wishes Shapiro had read Girard on “Science and Apocalypse” in *Things Hidden*.) Thus he castigates attempts to be earnest about the effects of nuclear warfare such as *On the Beach* (1959) and Lynne Littman’s imperfect but valuable *Testament* (1983) as self-indulgent and simple-minded, but it must be said that *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) or *Escape from New York* (1984), which he prefers, are equally vulnerable to such descriptors. Refusing to “take a stand” on the nuclear threat, as Shapiro defiantly does in an oddly enumerated manifesto, does not make the threat evaporate. The weakness of Shapiro’s volume is at one with its strength. Defending with great persuasiveness the apocalyptic imagination in Hollywood film, he never questions *the value of employing apocalyptic structures in the first place* when treating nuclear bomb topics. That is, he simply sidesteps the way that (for Sontag, Lifton, Evans, Perrine) the apocalyptic imagination itself, when mixed up with nuclear weapons, whether in Hollywood or in the White House, might understandably be considered part of the danger (see Krauthammer; see Gates and Fineman for very recent material).

15 In what follows, we explore the critical tension between the obligation to respect the horrors of nuclear warfare (emphasised by Perrine and others) and the obligation to respect the requirement that human agency be included on the scene of representation (emphasised by Shapiro’s endorsement of Hollywood’s apocalyptic imaginings). We proceed through the three categories of movies already named, categories defined initially but not exclusively by the point in the film’s action at which the bomb falls. Although it is not our argument that one category is superior to the others, the most promising opportunities for a full treatment of nuclear warfare would seem to emerge neither in the post-nuclear-warfare nor in the nuclear countdown drama, but in the drama of nuclear devastation (which in fact includes the essential features of the first two and adds “horrific ugliness”).

III. Post-Nuclear-Warfare Movies

16 The most popular, perennial film trope related to nuclear annihilation is one in which, ironically, we do not need to see the bomb fall at all: the trope of the post-nuclear-warfare wasteland. This is the domain of the science-fiction genre in which a reluctant remnant of humanity survives to fight it out in nuclear wastelands of varying hostility and inhospitality. The desert is the most frequently chosen setting. The *Mad Max* movies belong here; the cult classic *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) (to which the Max Max films owe much) belongs here; Kevin Costner's reluctantly humanized tough-guy in the underrated *Waterworld* (1995) belongs here. Luc Besson's *Le Dernier Combat*(1983), a film deservedly notorious because in it there is no dialogue–unless one wants to elevate grunts, whimpers and semi-coughs meaningfully exchanged to the status of dialogue–belongs here. There are many, many others. The post-nuclear apocalyptic frontier provides the frame for telling the old story of the hero of warrior violence defending his honour, territory, and power to define the ethically supreme.

17 Most critics despise such movies (Shapiro the exception), partly because in their disregard for the "facts" about how nuclear war can not be "survived," the genre is suspected of contributing to delusions about global thermonuclear warfare and complacency about nuclear danger.(6) But the more substantial objection would be the way these films flatter our fantasies of resentment: as gleefully pro-war films celebrating the effectiveness of warrior violence, they exclude from the outset any fruitful meditation on the evil of war itself, let alone the evil of nuclear war. Because the civilized world has been lost, all incivilities can be excused; because the originary (fake) nuclear war has forced them into a cruel world, they may be as cruel as they wish while blaming the originary nuclear disaster for the necessity of their cruelty. The will to kindness has been annihilated, but not the will to violence. Toni Perrine comments: "These films only nominally deal with the idea of nuclear war, which is significant primarily because it resulted in a neobarbarian setting in which leather-clad characters can rape, murder and pillage" (33).(7)

18 John Martens studies such movies in the light of apocalyptic tradition as does Shapiro but–unlike Shapiro–what he finds in their deployment of apocalyptic to celebrate and enjoy is very limited. Martens' research discovery is that the hopefulness and moral reciprocity which are sanctioned by divine intervention in ancient apocalypse are conspicuously absent from modern apocalypse: "God is at the center of apocalyptic texts; God is missing in action in apocalyptic movies" (89). Martens' puzzled dissatisfaction with Hollywood and television versions of apocalyptic storytelling is a useful counterweight to Shapiro's defence of them. But the crucial difference is that Martens is willing to include the properly theological as a category for evaluation, which leads him to point out "a fatalism which imbues these films, in that humans must act to stop the apocalypse, but, even if they succeed, it could return at any time. So even following victory, the future looks bleak, filled with emptiness, desolation and doom, or, at best, more of the same…. there seems to be no joy, just hard-bitten

realism" (228). No joy indeed. The embittered survivors occupy a scene on which the allegedly futuristic is really only a mask for the pseudo-primitive, warrior values back with a vengeance. Using nuclear warfare as an initializing excuse for fresh scenarios of unembarrassed violence seems the least promising of generic frameworks. But there are flashes of humanity even in these wastelands.

19 Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959) deserves praise if for no other reason than that it does not walk into the trap of the post-apocalyptic fantasy of warrior violence, while boldly taking the already-happened full-scale nuclear war as its narrative opening. When originally released in 1959 during the height of the Cold War, opening in eighteen cities worldwide including Moscow and Tokyo, this film–a $2.9 million United Artists production (Evans 145)–was "accompanied by great fanfare and received substantial critical comment" and was "lauded as a deterrent to further nuclear armament" (Keyerleber 31). Members of President Eisenhower's cabinet were so worried that it would promote "ban the bomb" propaganda that they discussed ways of undermining it (Evans 148–49).

20 The action begins weeks after a full-scale nuclear war; the only human survivors are those living in Australia. Fully aware that a radioactive cloud is drifting toward the Australian continent and that the cloud's dust will kill them off, too, we meet characters in three storylines gathered together. At the center is an American naval captain, Dwight Lionel Towers (played by Gregory Peck), who has trouble absorbing the fact of the death of his wife and children; Peck conveys Towers' infantile denial of reality effectively, and the discomfort we feel in witnessing this "hero" refuse by mute dissociation to engage with the real personalizes the horror of extinction without merely domesticating it. A never-married but voluptuous Moira Davidson (played by Ava Gardner) falls in love with Towers, but must die with that love unrequited, after some sadly ineffective flirtations (the persistent impossibility of the reproductively heterosexual erotic in the post-nuclear-warfare scenario is a telling trope). A younger sailor named Lieutenant Holmes (Anthony Perkins) and his young wife attempt to carry on living with their newborn infant but end by gathering the courage to commit suicide–killing their baby, too–to avoid radiation sickness. The wife's nervous, near-hysterical refusal to discuss the impending mass death with scientists at an evening party which she and her husband host early in the movie functions as synecdoche of the whole film's refusal to represent open, vigorous debate about the war, its origins, and its consequences. The unspoken thesis seems to be the not-implausible notion that the pain of such open discussion could only make things worse and would anyway prove futile. Finally, a man named Julian (Fred Astaire), a former lover of Moira and one of the scientists who contributed to the development of the bomb, busies himself with winning a competition in his racing car before his clock runs out, and accompanies Towers on a sea voyage taking radiation readings. All these victims accept with some dignity–but with what we might also feel is troubling resignation, if not baffling passivity–their status as an extended-life remnant awaiting only a slightly delayed membership among the extinct.

21 Kramer's *On the Beach* does not provide pictures of explosions, but pictures only of nuclear radiation's effects. The scene in which they are most movingly shown is that which presents Captain Towers' submarine in a harbour near San Diego. The vessel has gone up to Alaska studying radiation levels and is now returning to Australia. It stops in this harbour to complete a delayed mission to track down the sender of an indecipherable telegram message that was traced to San Diego, a telegram signal which seemed possibly human in origin despite its indecipherability. Each sailor looks through the periscope and studies the streets of the city bordering the beach (before one sailor is sent into the city in a protective suit to track down the source of the telegraph signals). One by one each sailor takes his turn at the periscope. Each sees no human figure is walking the streets; there is no sign of human life; indeed, as Joyce Evans complains in her frustrated hunger for realistic signs of the horror of nuclear annihilation, there are not even any corpses (149). Nevertheless, the audience participates in this effective ritual repetition: stare through the periscope, witness a deserted and emptied San Diego, give up the periscope, grimace, turn away, be silent. None of the sailors has a word to say. It is as if we have witnessed the end of the world, and the sum of our response is…no comment. The single sailor dressed in a heavy space suit to protect him from radiation leaves the submarine, walks into the city and follows the telegraph signal to its source: a window in an office has been left open, and a breeze has been tugging a window shade and thus moving a Coke bottle against the electronic clapper. So the source of the message which the survivors had hoped might come from a miraculous single survivor–a hopeful angelic double to mitigate the monstrousness of the survivors' unspoken despair–is only a breeze, random. This figure of meaninglessness is the Holy Grail at the end of the submarine's quest: a random tapping that mirrors the seemingly "random" universe in which the whole human species now appears only an evolutionary aberration whose chances have been used up.

22 *On the Beach* has been found wanting by many. *Time* magazine excoriated it for managing "to make the most *dangerous* conceivable situation in human history seem rather silly and science fictional" (quoted in Keyerleber, 32; my emphasis), but this lampoon seems off-target: Kramer begins where the "danger" is past, in that the radiation cloud can neither be avoided nor fought. The horror of the situation is partly that human "danger" is now a non-category and fighting now is futile; we have been deprived by an ultimate violence of all fantasies about the effectiveness of violence, and the humiliating lesson is utterly disarming. Joseph Keyerleber complains with more justification that *On the Beach* "almost casually accepts the notion that once radiation sickness comes, there is nothing to do but relax and die" (37). Nor is Shapiro impressed: "Not only does the film gloss over the genuine political issues that are likely to initiate a nuclear war, it also ignores the secrecy, deception, and lack of democratic control that surrounds nuclear weapons" (92). What we ought to register in Keyerleber and Shapiro's remarks is the way they take issue with the movie's seemingly inhumane content: they want it to be about something other than extinction, they want it to include the kind of effective human agency that will diminish the baffling tragedy of extinction. Keyerleber wishes there were not "nothing to do but relax and die" and Shapiro

wants the film to be about the causes of the war, where something could be done to avoid the war that has already taken place.

23 The disturbing passivity of *On The Beach*, however, should be accepted as its very point: that painful passivity, at its most effective limit, might by frustrating the viewer's appetite for "action" or "discussion" of nuclear destruction provoke viewers into supplementing the experience of the film with their own talk. The allegedly missing content should be accepted as a deliberately formal barrier rather than denounced as unrealistic omission, which denunciation entitles us to slip away without absorbing the muted but terrible sadness of the dramatized situation. In its quiet way, Kramer's conscientious work succeeds in getting us to contemplate extinction: although the characters avoid discussing their own coming deaths, the sailors face extinction in the sign of the abandoned city and the meaningless telegram signal. The emptied city has an ingloriously sobering effect; its ineffable barrenness remains the wall against which the most hardened viewer ought to feel some heart-muscle soften. We can not possibly wish these people dead without losing our humanity, and in that sense the film succeeds in forcing us to think about extinction and the horror of nuclear warfare. It certainly succeeds infinitely more than *A Boy and His Dog* or the Mad Max movies.

IV. Nuclear Countdown Dramas

24 A second category of nuclear warfare movies, what we call the Nuclear Countdown drama, gives us–or *threatens* to give us–the explosion that signifies nuclear annihilation at the end of the plot. Nuclear annihilation is the end we wish to defer, the thing we wish not to happen, just as the good characters in the stories themselves wish it not to happen (psychotic scientists or military officers eager and able to launch a first strike attack represent human evil). The classic examples here are Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964) and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). The genre has certainly continued since 1964. It includes nuclear-armed submarine thrillers such as *The Hunt for Red October* (1992) and *Crimson Tide* (1995). A good-natured if juvenile postmodern example is John Badham's *Wargames* (1983), where the terrible question is whether the nuclear planes on the computerised maps in the Pentagon wall room are representing the "real" thing of nuclear warfare or merely computer simulations of it, and the hero is a high-school computer genius who inadvertently seems to start World War III and then later gets to stop it, or the illusion of it: everybody cheers when the war-room wall map imagery turns out to have been just simulated attack.(8) The time-limit, the drama of working against the clock and the drama of politico-military decision-making and negotiation constitute the raw material of this genre.

25 The nuclear countdown drama constitutes a tellingly transparent enactment of originary thinking's definition of human culture itself: the deferral of violence through representation. It gives us the drama of deferred violence under the sign of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear

annihilation is deferred, but deferred only through representation of the threat and representations of abstention from its enactment, its carrying out. These movies emphasise political negotiation, watching the bombers approach their targets, watching models creeping across radar screens or wall-sized maps of the simulated world, pilots in deadly planes flicking switches, checking secret codes, double and triple-checking backup systems. They give us a sophisticated culture of ritual procrastination, the action of inaction, of doing anything other than the actual thing itself, the appropriation of the object itself–the object being the privilege of intentionally launching the first nuclear attack, before the enemy brother and rival nation does the same. Andrew McKenna's remarks come to mind: "For deterrence is nothing but the deference we pay to the sacred, to absolute violence, in its difference from itself, in its differance as it originates in mimetic violence and menaces and protects undecidably" (102); "The strategy of nuclear deterrence is purely mimetic, all anticipation and deferral, all representation. It operates by feints and fictions of reprisal, including the broadcast fiction that, lest the threat lose its credibility, we don't know what the threat catastrophically implies for all" (157).

26 If language emerges at the origin as an abortive gesture of appropriation, one is tempted to suggest the appropriateness of the way that when human culture is required, as in these movies, to think about the end of humanity, culture must be self-stalled, confined to playing with the endless deferring of the absolute violence that would obliterate the scene of culture itself. When representation stops representing the deferral of absolute violence, then the movie is over and done; representation must cease to represent. Is it not anthropoetically appropriate that the abortive gesture of appropriation at the origin of human culture should be destined to find its (non)fulfillment in the abortive gesture of non-annihilation at the imagined end of human culture?

27 Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964) is an admirable example of the nuclear countdown drama. As in most examples, *Fail Safe* presents a cast of high-ranking military and political personnel, characters who represent synecdochically the states that possess nuclear arms. We witness the President of the United States on the telephone in dialogue with the Premier of the Soviet Union in the Kremlin (such phone negotiations are a staple trope in the genre). In the conclusion, we learn that Henry Fonda as President has secretly decided to destroy New York City with a bomb dropped by an American plane which has been circling over the city while the President has been negotiating. The President commits this act of national self-injury, a political choice upsetting every "patriotic" principle, in order to prove unequivocally to the rival Russian premier that the lost American plane which has destroyed Moscow is in fact a rogue plane–not sent intentionally on a mission but lost accidentally because of ironic failures of the fail-safe system. The annihilation of New York city (and that image gains a new horror after 9/11) represents a sacrificial substitution of one great city for another, reciprocal violence of the sort Girard (1977) has taught us to observe, at its most transparent. The images of the destruction of New York are not pictures of actual bombs dropping and exploding, but freeze frames of ordinary people in the street just

before the moment of the detonation; these are combined with a siren noise that indicates that the phone lines to Moscow have been destroyed in the sister annihilation.

28 This is mimetic doubling, yes, but the reciprocal violence here is deliberate, pondered, chosen, willed in the most awful fashion–not the unthinking slippage of model-obstacles. It is the willfulness of the President's choice, its necessary evil and its "rational" defensibility, that is so chilling. Michael Wollscheidt is correct to notice that the politicians' discussion evades responsibility to the extent that "technology" in the abstract is demonized, and "the theme of their soul-searching conversation is that no one is to blame. The decisions regarding nuclear weapons are almost of a mystical nature, beyond capacity to comprehend or control" (72).(9) This "mystical" attribution and the corresponding evasion of human agency and responsibility represent an instance of Lifton's "nuclearism." The "system" is shown to fail, when nothing can call the one rogue plane back, not even the desperate pleadings of the wife of the pilot, who is desperately imported into the War Room to insert the scene of private love into the scene of impending public disaster but forced to meet with her own humiliating defeat. Nevertheless, all the weight gets thrown on the President's decisive sacrificial *realpolitik*. Dramatizing the proposition that the destruction of two great cities could indeed sacrificially substitute for the destruction of world civilization, Lumet's grim picture holds back from meditating on global annihilation. But *Fail Safe* certainly succeeds in forcefully representing the horror of so-called "limited" nuclear warfare. Although an early effort (1964), it succeeds much better than the made-for-television *By Dawn's Early Light* (1990) or *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), even though these latter works built upon bigger production budgets and offered more visual pyrotechnics to seduce the viewer. In *Fail Safe*, human agency limits the nuclear threat, but certainly does not triumph over it: true to political reality, the movie defers any such fantastic possibility.

29 Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) stands as both the most famous example of the Pentagon-Kremlin nuclear countdown film, and the least reverent: as Shapiro declares, the movie's "dynamic tension between seriousness and satire makes [it] a compelling drama that never loses its appeal" (145). Kubrick opens the action with the famously psychotic General Ripper, an authoritarian cigar-chewing commie-hater who orders a complete squadron of B-52 bombers to fly into Russian airspace and drop missiles on Russian cities because of his private delusion that flouridation is a commie plot designed to rob him and all Americans of the purity of their natural body fluids, and his private decision that he is fed up with suffering the conspiracy. A good megalomaniac, General Ripper takes the matter of the world into his own hands. President Merkin Muffley, played by Peter Sellers, with long-distance help from Colonel Mandrake, the healthy and sane executive assistant to the insane General Ripper (also brilliantly played by Peter Sellers), manages after great struggle to call back from Russian airspace all but one of the loose B-52s. But in predictable sacrificial fashion, one plane emerges from the mass of recalled bombers as the anti-heroic exception that gets away. Its pilot is one Major Kong (Slim Pickens), who overcomes all obstacles (Russian

planes attempting to shoot him down, leaking fuel tanks), and at last manually opens the jammed drop doors on his B-52 to mount in phallic fashion a single nuclear missile, riding it like a bronco with a rodeo cowboy's wild cries of "yee-hah" to orgasmically apocalyptic detonation over an unprepared Russian ICBM missile facility.

30 Major Kong rides to gleeful suicidal death only one bomb, but "limited" warfare does not satisfy Kubrick. The Russian establishment has secretly set in place a Doomsday machine which was originally intended to act as the superlative deterrent. The only problem: the Russians have foolishly delayed making public the existence of their Doomsday machine. A deterrent not yet made public is no deterrent: this stupidity is one of the plot's jokes. Major Kong's single bomb sets the Doomsday machine in motion; the Doomsday machine responds by automatically releasing a full-scale nuclear attack that will destroy civilization and cover the world in a radioactive shield for ninety-three years. The movie's closing dialogue shows President Muffley and Dr. Strangelove and other leaders in the USA War Room, the poor President shell-shocked by his loss of control; the leaders calmly discuss Dr. Strangelove's proposal that they act to save a remnant of humanity in mine-shaft civilizations thousands of yards underground, civilizations that would fuel their machines with nuclear power and allegedly be required to employ a ten-woman-to-one-man ratio with the women being selected for their "sexual characteristics."

31 Concise, sardonic, clippingly paced and visually appealing, Kubrick's much-loved masterpiece is at once comical and unsettling in its exposure of the bizarre irrationalities of faith in systems of deterrence. The final scene, however, in which we witness many consecutive nuclear bombs exploding in varying shapes and sizes and shades of black and white, has an oddly calming effect. The reason for this oddly calming effect is partly the vast distance from which we see the bombs: the aerial view, the view from above, not only here but in other nuclear bomb film images, removes the viewer from the scene to such an extent that the explosion does little to horrify. The prettiness is also enhanced by Kubrick's carefully rapid choreographing of the image sequence. Above all, the contentless framework of the explosions decisively creates anonymity and detachment. We do not know where the bombs are falling, we do not see any human or animal or architectural victims, we are given no text connecting bombs to places or persons. The bombs fall on planet Earth, but because no particular locations are named, the effect is bemused curiosity. Finally, the musical selection Kubrick plays on the soundtrack is Vera Lynn and soldierboy chorus singing the World War II song of hopeful endurance, "We'll Meet Again." The disjunction between song and visual symbol is sarcastic in the extreme.

32 We might find our viewerly desire shifting uneasily between positions. On the one hand, we admire Kubrick's cleverness: witnessing the bombs as the self-condemning acts of psychotic warmongers whom he invites us to despise, one identifies with Kubrick in his ironic distance from any endorsement of the nuclear worship he shows. The explosion images say we will *not* meet again; the song says we *will* meet again; in identifying with

Kubrick's rejection of the song's appropriateness, we share his awareness that nuclear war must be utterly unlike World War II and that Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the end of containable "total" warfare (as Gans has reminded us on numerous occasions).(10) On the other hand, we may resent Kubrick not because of his political impudence and disrespect of military officialdom, but because the disjunction between song and picture risks ethical indifference to the bombs' (fictional) victims and dissatisfaction to those viewers who wish their agreement with his very anti-establishment message to be "seriously" affirmed. The irony is one which teeters on the brink of an insulting absurdity: here, human agency is shuffled offstage not by horror but by an (ironic) denial of horror. Perhaps the brusque burlesque of *Dr. Strangelove* cannot avoid appearing ironically in league with the political establishment it ostensibly undermines. Kubrick's seeming rivalry with the warmongers requires him ultimately to lose sight of the object in the very way Girard warns us intensive mimetic rivalry does so (1987: 311).

33 The nuclear countdown drama with the bomb at the end offers possibilities that, gathered together, weigh out as ethically superior to those offered by the post-apocalyptic warrior movie. By figuratively "putting off" the imagery of nuclear destruction, this genre celebrates the deferral of violence in the very process of enacting such deferral. The nuclear countdown drama cannot help but open a greater space for gestures of ethical maturity both because its narrative form dictates that the nuclear threat be presented as a "real" threat to be delayed, deferred; and because the antagonists who desire to start nuclear warfare are invariably figures of the crazy, the evil, and the irresponsible. The heroes–who act to defer nuclear exchanges–are figured as good, thoughtful, responsible; however, the regular personification and demonization of "technology" or "man's folly" or "the system" often begins to absolve the high-level actors of responsibility the moment they take it up. (In their decisive speeches, they never blame themselves but rather these mystifying powers to which they are beholden; the genuinely penitent President or Premier seems a generic impossibility.) Most curiously, in contemplating the all-too-possible but (equally) possibly avoidable end of the human world, these movies enact a version of the process originary thinking situates at the origin of the human: the deferral of violence through representation. The originary abortive gesture of appropriation here finds its terminal transposition in the endlessly abortive gesture of non-annihilation.

V. Dramas of Nuclear Devastation

34 Our third category locates fully disturbing or frightening images of or allusions to nuclear warfare in the *middle* of the narrative action. We designate this genre the Drama of Nuclear Devastation. Although genuine examples are understandably rare–the unpleasantly stark must impede commercial success–the examples we do have visualize with different degrees of earnestness the "real" consequences of nuclear war. The most famous American version, excluding the sensationally disseminated TV movie *The Day After* (1983), is Lynne Litman's *Testament* (1983). Given the constraining influence of American political culture

on Hollywood movies about nuclear bombs (see Evans), it might not surprise us that the most noteworthy dramas of nuclear devastation come from Great Britain, with its more entrenched public culture of anti-nuclear activism. Peter Watkins' 47-minute made-for-TV docudrama *The War Game*(1966) caused such scandal when it was about to be broadcast that the British Broadcasting Corporation, after spending the money to produce it, refused to show it, fearful it would cause real political panic among shocked viewers. A much more impressive drama (in my opinion the best movie treatment of nuclear war) is the BBC's made-for-TV *Threads* (1984), written by Barry Hines, produced and directed by Mick Jackson.

35 *The War Game* and *Threads*, *The Day After* and *Testament* share several features. One is a manifest "realistic" intention in that the harm, ugliness, horror of nuclear bombing is bodied forth, richly visualized, itself made central. Mick Broderick remarks: "unlike the rare and inept early attempts to depict the horror and tragedy of global nuclear conflict via stock footage of fires and conventional warfare, the eighties equivalent invest their scenarios with an almost pathological attention to detail" (40). Toni Perrine names *Threads* as the "film which comes closest to representing the full horror of nuclear war and its aftermath, as well as the catastrophic impact that the event would have on human culture" (237). The nuclear warfare in all such movies is neither mere plot device nor narrative presupposition (as in our first category), nor a concluding terminus either deferred or ironically simulated (as in our second category). Nor is the priority for representation either adventure (on the warrior wasteland) or suspense (in the Presidential war room). These films are set on the citizen streets and in private homes, and they tell stories of undistinguished people: neither warrior-heroes nor politico-military officials figure as leading dramatis personae. The destiny of the human agents here is primarily to struggle ingloriously, suffer and die. We witness the destruction of helpless families and the obliteration of institutions.

36 Perhaps as an unintended consequence of this realism, these films are vulnerable to the accusation that a message-bearing didactic intention ("content"–nuclear warfare as designated by the filmic sign) overwhelms the insulating barriers of esthetic decorum ("form"–the film as designating nuclear warfare). For example, Shapiro dismisses Lynne Litman's *Testament* (1983) as a pseudo-feminist weepie devoid of meaningful comment on the bomb. Wynne Wachhorst, in an otherwise brilliant study of nuclear aftermath movies and a defence of *Testament*, inexplicably dismisses *Threads* (1984) as a feeble attempt to re-do *The War Game* (1967). Now the charge of didacticism has merit inasmuch as dramas of nuclear devastation cannot be recommended for the prospective viewer's pleasure as mere "entertainment." *Threads* works on the viewer with a peculiar power: one finds oneself horrified, fascinated, numbed, provoked, unsettled, made restless. Its power may be the effect of its oscillation between form and content being so heavily weighted toward the pole of content–in this case, that threat of nuclear destruction which cannot help but feel "real"–so that we are unable to relax into *Threads* as "just" a movie, as we do when watching, say, *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991). This film, certainly the best of the

action-adventure American nuclear warfare movies, calls for a brief digression.

37 James Cameron in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991) manages to work in time-travelling loops of deferral and deterrence, thus cleverly combining the rescue fantasy of the post-nuclear-warfare movie with the seriousness of the desire to avert nuclear war that elevates the countdown drama's with its emphasis on avoiding nuclear warfare. The movie's plot figures forth explicitly the desirability of the postponement of nuclear war. In more simply cinematic terms, Cameron's skills as producer of stunning visual effects give us the single most powerful image of nuclear devastation in American popular cinema. We witness the brief (it takes less than five seconds) but amazingly memorable annihilation of Los Angeles, which the heroine Sarah Connor sees in the trapped nightmare framework of a (non)prophetic but terrifying private daydream. Why is this image so awful? Partly because Sarah herself is destroyed, and her figurality draws into itself all goodness and lovability of the apocalyptic heroine at her best: her being annihilated in the flames signifies the merciless murder of loving mother, escaped innocent prisoner, misunderstood but truthful prophet, resilient feminist warrior, nurturing source of wisdom and care, displacement of the earth mother, scapegoat-victim and scapegoat-queen all at once. Seeing her shrieking skeleton burn, her wire-locked arms shaking against the playground fence as skyscrapers topple like dominoes before the outcircling blast, is unforgettable. But to return to the difference between such a movie as *Judgment Day* and *Threads*: we know that *Judgment Day* is "just" a movie, even though the pictured annihilation of Los Angeles stays with us long after the Schwarzenegger robot has saved us all from doom for another decade or so. Indeed, only moments after that image, the film is carrying us along in its action ride and we are not thinking about nuclear warfare. In *Threads*, however, we must think of the harm the bomb does and nothing else. *Threads* is also "just a movie," but as we watch it, we more frequently feel the need to remind ourselves of that disowning barrier.

38 *Threads* is set in Sheffield, England, in the early 1980s. Three plot lines structure the narrative. Ruth Beckett is a twenty-something local girl of a well-to-do family who gets pregnant unexpectedly by Jimmy Kemp, her boyfriend, in an opening scene where they flirt, fight a little, and kiss into lovemaking in their car parked atop a cliff overlooking Sheffield. The movie's second scene leaps two months ahead: Ruth announces her unplanned pregnancy to Jimmy. In desultory fashion, they decide to keep the baby and get married: thenceforth, we get to know two families. The upper middle-class Becketts have Ruth as their only child; the Kemps are lower middle-class, louder, more vulgar, with a daughter Alison and son Michael, both younger than Jimmy. The families meet when the Kemps come to dinner chez the Becketts one evening, to mark their future merger as in-laws. While this coming together of Ruth and Jimmy's families is happening, news bulletins in the background with ominous persistence report the escalation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union concerning missile deployments in Iran. The citizens of Sheffield fully expect the war to occur; Sheffield's people empty the supermarkets and stock up their own cupboards with tinned food; they tape their windows, read up on radiation, or

try to leave–the motorways are jammed with families attempting to escape to the countryside. Cartoonish educational videos on TV inform citizens about radiation and fallout shelters. The government empties its hospitals of anyone not in intensive care, expecting mass casualties; Ruth's poor grandmother is taxied home and brought up to the stairs in the soon-to-be-blasted house of her children, hobbling and fragile.

39 When the city of Sheffield is devastated, one storyline follows Ruth and her parents, the other follows the Kemp household (Jimmy, Michael, Alison are killed instantly). The third storyline involves a childless couple, Mr. Sutton and wife: Sutton is a municipal bureaucrat whose duties include those of the Designated Wartime Controller for Sheffield. His wife worries when he must leave her behind to take up those duties in an improvised basement office with other officials–health systems managers, engineers, planning administrators and the like. Once the bomb falls, the scale of its destruction renders futile the efforts of Sutton and colleagues at moving such things as tinned food and petrol supplies about. Indeed, the very basement office they occupy like caged rats is buried in so much rubble that they are cut off except by a single radio line, and they themselves–ironically responsible for co-ordinating rescue activities–go unrescued and starve to death in four weeks. We see a member of the work crew that belatedly breaks through to dig them out walk past the begrimed photograph of Sutton's wife on his dust-covered desk. Sutton has died, and we see his dust-covered body slumped over the desk.

40 To Mick Jackson's credit, despite all the narrative preparations, which one might expect to destroy any suspense, we feel dread and find nothing anti-climactic about the spectacle that follows the bomb's detonation on the military base just outside Sheffield. The narrative preparations are a generic regularity: *Threads* moves us partly because we become attached (not sentimentally, minimally) to the Becketts, Kemps, and Suttons before the attack, about fifty minutes into the reel, at about the halfway point. Now the moments of footage showing the devastation of Sheffield are without rival in the realm of nuclear warfare movies: windows smash, houses collapse, people fly in panic, animals burn, people are incinerated, buildings are obliterated, waves of heat and flame fill the screen, screaming and panic and terror dominate. The stunned disbelief, the helpless panic are intensely ugly. One cannot help but feel a kind of involuntary voyeur's nausea. For its part, the mushroom cloud is seen neither from a great aerial distance, nor simulated with graphics on the wallmap of a war room; nor is the explosion signified metonymically by a white flash, a siren noise, freeze frames of victims, or the like.(11) Instead, we see the residents of Sheffield, including those we have learned to like, watching the cloud rise above the street, a monstrous presence in the sky, terrifyingly near and unremovable. And we watch the Becketts and Kemps scrambling to build pathetic mattress lean-to shelters inside their homes, getting immediately sick from the radiation, dying without dignity within days. The visual scale is close enough to be intimate; there is nothing heroic here; people endure, try hanging on, but die sooner rather than later. The suffering is presented in a manner both unsentimental and respectful. We care for the people who die, but there is nothing beautiful in their

deaths. This tension between sympathy for the victims and disgust at the ugliness of their destruction is the result of fine-tuned production (Jackson) and a careful screenplay (Hines).

41 One of the most well-calculated factors in *Thread*s results from its rejection of the conventionally sudden-and-unexpected quality of nuclear war's outbreak (the convention that does depoliticize *Testament*, for example), via the integration of a pseudo-documentary overuse of background media broadcasters that are, ironically, foregrounded. We are brought to overhear the inexorable mounting of American-Russian hostilities represented via intrusive, persistent news broadcasts: *Threads* interlaces every character's movements with radio announcers talking, television newscasts of the NATO-Soviet threats and counter-threats, images of the Kemps and Becketts reading the newspaper or glancing up at the television. It would be wrong to interpret this interference of a properly political narrative as clumsy overlay, and wrong to decode it as mere moralizing about the benighted masses' failure to tremble with politically correct fear at a doom they should have anticipated if only they had "educated" themselves. On the contrary, the patrons of the local pub get annoyed when the bartender turns the channel away from the political newscast and demand he switch it back. Jackson and Hines use this trope of foregrounded-background media interference to dissolve with subtle insidiousness the public-private boundary, thematizing the way the bomb would be felt to dissolve the boundary between public and private space were real nuclear warfare felt to be about to occur. The idea that human agency can easily manage the nuclear threat is thus dissolved; but at the same time, the formal substitute for heroic narrative does not lead to facile demonizing of political or military leaders–the temptation of that resentment is resisted. The relentless presence of newscaster voices persists up until the nuclear attack; only then, ironically, only when the public institutions of government and market have been reduced by the bombs to their skeletal remains, is something that might be called "private" space restored. The silence of destruction replaces the noise of the media. But to call the ensuing silence a restoration of the "private" would not do justice to it; what subsists is a new space where all the vanished citizen-state relationships, however imperfect, have been replaced, and the post-war state is infinitely more cruel and oppressive than it was as a mere threatener of war.

42 A second quasi-documentary technique used to powerful effect in *Threads* is the interruption of the human storylines with dark-screens upon which teletype rattles out bullet-form factual reports on the war and information about the effects of the nuclear attack. Indeed, the chronological markers of the story itself are pounded out with these typed datelines. In an effective touch, the sound of the teletype ceases after the attack–as if no human is doing the typing anymore. The formal barrier blocks our sense that the human characters can help determine their own fates, and sets Ruth and her fellow Sheffield people rigidly in a context of calendrical time indifferent to individual agency. When the air-raid signals sound off on the morning of May 26th, for example, crowds out shopping in the streets of Sheffield break into panic, and we read this teletype: "08:35: Single warhead explodes high above North Sea: Energy pulse burns out many electrical systems. Massive

damage to communications across Britain and Northwest Europe." Ten days after the attack, the teletype now spells out silently, without the rattling noise: "Sunday June 5th. Attack plus ten days. 3000 megaton exchange. Smoke produced: 10 million tons. Dust lifted into atmosphere: 500 million tons." The neutral feminine voice of the reserved narrator explains nuclear winter briefly. This presence of the voice of the narrator is itself a third quasi-documentary feature of the film.

43 Not least, *Threads* shows us the effects of nuclear war on the ecology, the dried and frozen and devastated natural landscape in the country. Once the Beckett and Kemp survivors die of radiation sickness, coughing and shaking in their makeshift mattress shelters in their blown-out homes, and once poor Sutton and his Wartime Emergency Committee colleagues starve in their buried basement, we follow the fate of Ruth Beckett alone, a wandering refugee, pregnant and starving. Things are bad in the city: hunger riots, summary executions, forced labour camps. People are shot on sight for looting tinned food from abandoned houses. Soldiers of the British state turn into agents of merciless totalitarian repression. With other survivors, Ruth wanders to the countryside five weeks after the attack. Four months after the attack, she gives birth alone in a barn to a baby girl; ten months after the attack, with the baby six months old, we see her stealing grain and pounding it herself; one year after the attack, from a pedlar she buys dead rats to eat. Three to eight years after the attack, she is working as an agricultural labourer, her daughter standing beside her, hoeing rows of struggling crops in the barren ground, a forlorn figure on a barren landscape. The land has been devastated. Food is not growing. The teletype screen estimates the United Kingdom's population has returned to medieval levels, between 4 and 11 million. Ruth unceremoniously dies one morning in a straw bed in a barn, her eyes damaged by ultraviolet light. Her daughter, born brain-damaged by radiation, is unmoved, unable to understand why Ruth is not getting up to work in the fields. This nameless daughter is raped and impregnated, and later gives birth in a primitive hospital to a stillborn "babby"… with which image the film abruptly ends.

44 However undignified her fate, we care for Ruth: her narrative line is presented with a careful fusion of the ugly and the fascinating–the fascinating, it must be said, rather than the pitiable. The moral dubiousness of finding another's suffering more fascinating than pitiable must be confronted: Ruth's condition and circumstances are so ugly, so removed from culture as we know it, "pity" would seem an inaccurate (dishonest) description of our responses. It is perhaps her minimally beautiful human endurance that fascinates us. We do not "identify with" Ruth as tragic victim. *Threads* is not tragedy, not even a tragedy of shock and horror such as *Oedipus*; in it, the obliteration of the tragic chorus as such is the point. Traumatized, inarticulate, almost somnambulant, this heroine possesses no social or metaphysical privilege we could possibly envy; Karen Meagher, the actress, has very few lines to after the fearsomely violent bomb detonation. Ultimately, the human "figure" central to *Threads* is not Ruth herself, finally only a synecdoche, but the social fabric of the city as such, as the opening epigraph implies.(12)

45 Indeed, it is the suddenness of the annihilation of civilization, particularly urban civilization, that horrifies us in *Threads*. In his incisive cutting-down-to-size of the inflated stock of mid-1980's "nuclear criticism" (see Ruthven for a valuable introduction to the trend), Tobin Siebers extracted from its baroque sophistical excesses the following paradoxical wisdom: "Nuclear criticism, in fact, returns with insistence to the idea that nuclear war makes human community more apparent than ever"; one step later, "The metaphor of nuclear war creates a sense of human community by virtue of exploring its loss" (238). Such, however, are the theoretical lessons of Hines and Jackson's very untheoretical work. *Threads* dramatizes the merciless obliteration of social institutions, of civilized culture, of language itself: the roving parentless kids of Ruth daughter's generation can barely speak English, as if Barry Hines had borrowed the invented fourth-millennium degenerate English of Russell Hoban's opaque but fascinating post-nuclear fiction *Riddley Walker* for the few lines of the rape scene.

46 But impressing us with the horror of the impending end of the world by nuclear warfare is no guarantee that our being so impressed will produce a desire in us to help "save" ourselves, let alone "save the world" from nuclear weapons. Inasmuch as the esthetic of *Threads* elicits serious horror, it creates the side-effect of serious despair, a despair that inhibits ethical conduct and invites fatalism–ironically, the fatalism one would expect its makers not to wish having created. More than any nuclear warfare movie, *Threads* risks destroying our faith in human agency by insisting on the "unrelievedly bleak" (Perrine's phrase). The anti-nuclear activists in the movie–two political demonstrations are dramatized, along with state thugs who shut them down–appear ridiculous in their seeming assumption that only they properly grasp the enormity of the threat. Ruth, on the periphery, ordinary and uneducated, is seen to grasp it just as much. We might, indeed, attribute to this minimization of political differences some of the movie's esthetic power to provoke anthropological reflection: we are not explicitly distracted by the petty culture of moralizing blame that is such a temptation in discourse about nuclear bombs. However, just as the puzzled viewer might desire to supplement Kramer's *On the Beach* with the explicit discussions of extinction it curiously omits, the viewer might feel propelled to supplement Hines and Jackson's *Threads* with the possibility for hope it obliterates in its obliteration of civilized Sheffield and its natural ecology. Otherwise, the film's horror has no ethical import, and its effect might amount to the pornography of violence wearing the mask of anti-nuclear "awareness."

VI. Conclusion: Staving off Annihilation, Saving Human Agency

47 Our enthusiastic description of *Threads* may have given the impression we are convinced it is the "one" nuclear warfare movie that "must" be seen. Inasmuch as *Threads* seems a work relatively unknown in the North America, that impression might be worth saving. We ought to return, however, to our opening chiasmus: the movie that succeeds fully in conveying the horror of nuclear warfare does so at the risk of destroying faith in human

agency, while the elevation of human agency that pretends the bomb is easily controllable trivializes nuclear horror. *Threads*, the most didactically realistic, visually powerful anti-nuclear-warfare film, must also be the one most productive of the despairing temptation to feel nothing but resignation. In somewhat the same way that originary thinking suggests we must believe our neighbor beautiful before we can learn to love him, we must believe our chances of keeping the world going are good ones before we can keep it going. It is that hope we can keep the world going that the drama of nuclear devastation threatens to prohibit.

48 We reiterate that it does no good to centralize as esthetically supreme such dramas of nuclear devastation, which might be considered the most "accurate" and thus honorable, in such a manner as to exclude post-nuclear-warfare movies or nuclear countdown dramas. Cameron's *Terminator II: Judgment Day* has power because of its deft integration of essential elements from all genres, while belonging most firmly to countdown drama. The point is not to condemn the movies that fall away from the (impossible) ethical-esthetic ideal as much as to grasp without distortion the ways in which they do fall away from a certain completeness in which both agency and annihilation could be fully figured. Each genre offers possibilities for representation that the other does not; this is not a flaccid supermarket relativism, but a respect for the minimality of the ethical conditions with which we began.

49 Humility is good to pursue when thinking about nuclear warfare. No objective feature of any movie can substitute for the critic's humility. Any good nuclear warfare movie adds something to our cultural resources for living out the threat; the differences between the genres are there to be understood, not denounced in an impossible quest for the esthetically pure. We might despise the survivor in the post-nuclear-warfare wasteland for the fantastic centrality of his violent agency–a survivor like John Connor's time-traveling birth father in *Terminator* (1984), with his machine guns and his biceps and his mystical military loyalties. But that obstinate "fantasy" of human agency appears to serve a good cause when set as a counterweight, however illusory, to the slow but total annihilation of Ruth Beckett in *Threads*.

50 We might do well to close with a return to the real Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by remembering in imitation of Akira Kurosawa the atomic bomb victims who died in those cities. One could do worse than open a new door by offering a respectful bow in the direction of Kurosawa's beautiful work in *Dreams* (1990) and *Rhapsody in August* (1992) . These are not quite movies of nuclear warfare, but in their allusiveness to the only deliberate historical bombings of real human populations, each film shows what is lost by way of nuclear destruction. *Dreams* evokes such loss in transparently didactic but wonderfully fanciful visual parables of a post-nuclear future, especially the episodes "Mount Fuji in Red" and "Demons." *Rhapsody in August* tells a tale of careful remembering, cultivated affection, and unexpected forgiveness that brings together a supposedly-but-

wrongly-suspected American beneficiary of the Nagasaki attack (played by Richard Gere) and his Japanese aunt, a survivor who was a child on just the other side of the mountain from the bomb's ground zero at Nagasaki. *Rhapsody in August*'s tragicomical treatment of the grandmother's transcendent and comically unanticipated readiness to forgive her American nephew without forgetting the damage of the bomb manages to make us laugh-while-crying about the unavoidable tensions of our nuclear dilemma. Kurosawa refuses to assign ethnic or political blame except by having the grandmother blame "war" generally; the movie indulges no temptation to validate anti-American resentment. But Kurosawa equally refuses to ignore the harm the Nagasaki bomb did: he centralizes the figures of that harm. When kind laughter in the context of remembering such horrific victimization becomes possible, we know that ethical progress has been made.

51 Staving off annihilation and saving human agency in doing so are one and the same gesture, the gesture originary thinking posits our ancestors were performing at the origin of human culture. No one movie can "do justice" to the fearsome threat of nuclear annihilation. But that impossibility is no reason to despair if we can learn that the expectation of such esthetic and ethical "justice" is utopian anyway. Once we let the expectation go, hope returns, but not with a vengeance; hope for real peace has never traded with vengeance anyway. Perhaps it is not irreverent to build on an ancient chiasmus from St. Augustine.(13) We must not presume: the threat of another Nagasaki is a reality; we must not despair: the reality of another Nagasaki is (so far only, only so far) but a threat.

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The Day After. USA, 1983. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. [TVM.]

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Fail Safe. USA, 1964. Dir. Sidney Lumet.

The Hunt for Red October. USA, 1990. Dir. John McTiernan.

On the Beach. USA, 1959. Dir. Stanley Kramer.

The Road Warrior. Australia, 1981. Dir. George Miller.

Rhapsody in August. Japan, 1992. Dir. Akira Kurosawa.

The Sum of All Fears. USA, 2001. Dir. Phil Alden Robinson.

Terminator II: Judgment Day. USA, 1991. Dir. James Cameron.

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The War Game. United Kingdom [BBC], 1967. Dir. Peter Watkins.

Wargames. USA, 1983. Dir. John Badham.

Waterworld. USA,1995. Dir. Kevin Reynolds.

Notes

1. The American government complained of Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959) that it inaccurately presented the threat of extinction from nuclear war because there were not then enough weapons to cause extinction. The Pentagon refused to help Stanley Kubrick with information about how to build a model of a B-52 bomber in preparation for *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). The BBC refused to broadcast Peter Watkins' *The War Game*(1967) after producing it. Jackson's *Threads* (1984) was restrained by "the statutes governing British broadcasting [which] require that balance and fairness are maintained, in programs

making what can readily be seen as politically related statements" (Wober, "Preface," 1992: xvii). See Evans (1998) for a full treatment of state-industry tensions in Hollywood movies until the mid-sixties. (back)

2. Sumiko Iwao: "The number of deaths from the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was approximately 200,000, and even today there are 367,000 survivors of the attacks, and a number of them are in the Atomic Bomb Hospital in Hiroshima. Survivors of the nuclear blast were all given registration cards which entitle them to medical care paid for by the state. However, there are some who have chosen not to accept the registration cards fearing the stigma of being known as a survivor. There have been cases where employers have been hesitant to hire survivors, or potential marriage partners have decided not to marry them. In the former case the main reason is the potential cost that the employer must bear in case of an employee's illness both in terms of medical expenses and the lack of dependability as a human resource; in the latter situation the reason for avoidance is mainly a fear of hereditary problems that may be suffered by the next generations) (1992: 67). (back)

3. See Lifton and Mitchell (1995) for their account of the facts which animate our suggestion initiated by the qualifier "perhaps." (back)

4. From Chronicle 125, "Presidential Kneepads and Phallic Religion": "Theory expresses the intellectual's resentment against a social order dominated by 'irrational' forces, whether those of religion or those of the market, that his mastery of discursive rationality–of 'metaphysics'–does not permit him to control." Lifton does not hesitate to describe "nuclearism" as a "religion." (back)

5. We say "utopianism" not at all in contempt of those who propose disarmament such as Lifton and Schell, whose work is essential and praiseworthy; but as Martin Amis points out about works such as Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982): "Some of the blueprints for eventual abolition . . . are wonderfully elegant and seductive; but these authors are envisioning a political world that is as subtle, as mature and (above all) as concerted as their own solitary deliberations. Nuclear war is seven minutes away, and might be over in an afternoon. How far away is nuclear disarmament? We are waiting. And the weapons are waiting" (*Einstein's Monsters*, 1987: 1-2). (back)

6. Mick Broderick: "The inability of most contemporary movies to approach the complexities of social relations in the nuclear age–whether by a nostalgic yearning for a less complicated life in some imaginary childhood past or embracing a more distant historical milieu via an apocalyptic future, constructed as a pioneering, frontier, or survivalist 'second chance'–suggests a continued determination to avoid coming to terms with the present" (45). (back)

7. Perrine elsewhere: "when nuclear war is represented, it is most often trivialized, as in the

postnuclear action-adventure genre" (242). "A post-nuclear future free of the corrupting influence of technological progress, and most often typified by radically simplified social relations (barbarism and survival of the fittest), is a recurring American fantasy of the late 20th century which inflects many of the films discussed here" (243).(back)

8. One might include as more recent if less interesting examples *The Sum of All Fears*(2000), which includes an explosion midway through the plot but remains preoccupied with the deterrence of full-scale nuclear war, and *Terminator III: Rise of the Machines*(2003), which ends with strangely detached and long-distance aerial views of the nuclear annihilation of American civilization, the heroic John Connor and his girlfriend having stumbled into safe underground space originally intended for the American President. (back)

9. Joyce Evans makes a similar observation: the military characters in *Fail Safe* "become victims of the overwhelming technological and security apparatus, of security measures so stringent and dependent on rules that they ultimately create the inability to halt the impending disaster" (161). (back)

10. See (for example) *Originary Thinking* (1993: 208-209); *Signs of Paradox* (1997: 160–67); *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, numbers 35; 70; 125; 137; 147. (back)

11. Perrine points out the way the symbolism of nuclear disaster has been "conventionalized" and gives us this useful list [enumeration added]: "Ways of visually expressing the idea of a nuclear disaster include [1] the ubiquitous mushroom cloud, often tinted an angry red, [2] flash frames (the frame goes white), [3] a firestorm or flames, [4] images of actual bombs dropping but not exploding, [5] missiles leaving their silos, [6] a fade to black or some other color and finally, [7] expository titles which inform the audience verbally rather than visually that a nuclear exchange has occurred" (241). (back)

12. The film's opening epigraph reads: "In an urban society, everything connects. Each person's needs are fed by the skills of many others. Our lives are woven together in a fabric. But the connections that make society strong also make it vulnerable. . . ."(back)

13. "Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned. Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved." (back)