

## **Images of Survival, Stories of Destruction: Nuclear War on British Screens, 1945-c.1963.**

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The cold war was above all a nuclear confrontation. If a third global war came the use of nuclear weapons would cause destruction which would dwarf that experienced in the Second World War. Once the hydrogen bomb was developed in the early to mid-1950s, any collapse of the uneasy peace between East and West seemed to promise the annihilation of great swathes of the globe. In Britain, the government's belief in the deterrent value of nuclear weapons was bitterly opposed by those such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND, formed 1959) who considered such weapons both immoral and idiotic, endangering the very future of mankind (Taylor, 1988). Central to this political contest were competing claims about the 'reality' of nuclear war. Such differences in how nuclear war was conceptualised and understood within British culture are of vital importance in understanding the British public's attitude to nuclear weapons and the cold war more generally.

This article discusses a range of depictions and discussions of nuclear war which appeared on British screens in the first half of the cold war in order to understand the changing way nuclear weapons were understood within British culture. As Geoff Eley sets out in his seminal article on the memory of the Second World War in Britain, films (and for this article, television productions) provide 'useful incitements to microhistory and the history of everyday life' (Eley, 2001: 828). By understanding how ideas about nuclear war were diffused, discussed and adapted within British culture, historians will be able to map the interactions between cultural and political discourse over this issue. A broader cultural history of the 'everyday' importance of nuclear weapons will also allow us to map how attitudes towards the bomb were not created solely by the unmediated truth

claims of either the government or CND. Instead, we can understand that everyday ideas of the bomb were formed by wider cultural processes in which narrative styles and forms could be as influential as content and in which a diffuse range of cultural tropes could prove as, or more, influential than any 'reasoned' argument.

Using such screened images to understand how nuclear war was constructed and represented within British culture, the article argues that the hydrogen bomb, not the atomic bomb, was the true harbinger of the nuclear revolution that transformed cultural understandings of warfare and destruction. Although the atomic bomb created a great deal of anxiety within British popular culture, representations of atomic attack elided atomic destruction with that experienced in 1939-45, emphasising the 'survivability' of atomic war. In the thermonuclear era, the Second World War could not undertake the same symbolic work. The image of the city-destroying bomb was an imaginative as well as technological step-change. Screened representations stressed that a thermonuclear war would *literally* end the world. As such, they preceded, and indeed provided the cultural climate for, the rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. CND exploited and further popularised this idea of the apocalyptic nuclear war as a key aspect of its political and moral standpoint. The article concludes, however, that cultural hegemony of this vision of nuclear war equally helped underpin notions of nuclear deterrence. The basic assumptions about the nature of nuclear war constructed and circulated on British screens therefore formed part of CND's 'cultural' victory but also explains why this did not translate into the political realm.

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The sheer destructive power of the atomic bomb, exploded in August 1945, forced many to imagine what a third global war would mean for both Britain and the world. These initial representations of atomic war were pessimistic, even apocalyptic in tone. From

1947/48, as real fears of a future war began to permeate British official and popular culture, great efforts were made by the government, backed by a deferential mass media, to present atomic war in a more optimistic light: not as a harbinger of the eradication of the nation, but as a mode of attack that could be survived, resisted, and ultimately defeated (Grant, 2010). These more optimistic representations used a range of narrative techniques which tapped into emotional and visual reference points that connected atomic war with the victorious legacy of the war against Hitler. By suggesting such associations, a range of images - some sponsored by government, others not - were able to create a vision of atomic war that downplayed its apocalyptic overtones.

It is hard to convey the sense of shock felt by the public when they first heard of the atomic bomb. Even at the end of a long war, which had brought visions of death and destruction into everyday life, the sheer scale of the new weapon was awe-inspiring. In the first public reactions, press reports, radio broadcasts and newsreels, commentators and ordinary citizens struggled to conceptualise the atomic bomb. From the outset, the most natural recourse was to a lexicon of apocalyptic destruction. The city of Hiroshima had 'ceased to exist', the bomb would bring about 'the end of the world', 'total calamity', the 'demise of civilisation' (Grant, 2010: 14-16). The overall tenor of discussion of the bomb stressed its enormous, almost unknowable, size and the fact that a future war would 'undoubtedly' send civilisation back to the dark ages. As the historian E. L. Woodward put it in a BBC talk in early 1946, 'it is hard to suppose that, if our rapidly accumulating instruments of destruction are used again, there can be any material recovery' (Woodward, 1946). Early newsreels that provided coverage of Hiroshima and early American nuclear tests did nothing to dispel the image of the dangers of the 'atomic age'. In one Gaumont newsreel from early October 1945, for example, we see the Japanese cityscapes ravaged by war. Vistas of destruction meant that although the newsreel stressed that 'four square miles' of Hiroshima had been destroyed with 'ease' by one 'small' bomb, the impression

given by this and other newsreels was of a city completely obliterated (Gaumont British News, 1945).

The enormous power of the atomic bomb was in fact highlighted, and indeed exaggerated, by the earnest attempts made by a range of politicians and scientists, in Britain as well as America, to internationalise atomic energy and so 'outlaw' atomic war (Boyer, 1985: 79). Once this attempt ended in failure - part of the wider disenchantment of the West with the actions and rhetoric of the Soviet Union in the 1946-48 period - representations of the bomb in both official and popular culture shifted in tone and message. The primary driver of this shift was the turn of the government towards a policy of cold war civil defence. This was announced by the Attlee Government in outline form in 1947 and in more detail the following year (Grant, 2010). At its heart was the Civil Defence Corps, a mass voluntary organisation designed to save lives in a future war. Beginning in 1949, recruitment to the Corps was the subject of a blizzard of publicity and propaganda which substantially altered the timbre of discussion about the nature of atomic war (Grant, 2011). Organised by the Central Office of Information, and legitimated by speeches and broadcasts by senior ministers, a range of pro-civil defence messages were visible on posters, in newspaper advertisements and in cinemas.

Different messages were utilised within this propaganda effort to reinforce the idea that British society could resist and defend itself against atomic attack. Efforts were made to downplay the destructive power of the new weapon, but much more emphasis was placed on the more positive messages of the spirit and ingenuity of the British public. In doing so, both the government and other producers of such images had recourse to those of the Second World War. Sometimes the links between future atomic war and the defeat of Germany were explicit, sometimes less so, but they always implied that the nation that had resisted the Blitz could resist Stalin's atomic bombs. As such they tapped into a certain type of wartime memory that has been mapped by recent historians: one that

emphasised togetherness, victory, and a vision of the wartime nation which depicted a type of heroic masculinity that was very different from representations produced during the war itself (Summerfield, 2009; Ramsden, 1998).

In one recruitment film, *Sheffield is Calling You* (Sheffield Civil Defence Committee, 1954), for example, images of the blitz were used deliberately to dramatise the consequences of people not volunteering for civil defence. In arguing that refusing to 'fight' the cold war courted the destruction wrought by the blitz, however, this film suggested an equivalency between the two conflicts that helped reduce the status of atomic attack in the minds of viewers. This was done primarily by linking the destructive potentialities of the cold war with the physical and remembered results of the blitz, especially by relying on images from the last war to illustrate points about a future, atomic war. For example, *Sheffield is Calling You* depicted staged civil defence exercises which showed rescues taking place among small, manageable bomb-sites and rubble heaps, reducing atomic war to the level experienced and resisted in 1940-41. In a nation whose urban landscape was visibly scarred by German bombing and which had placed its resistance to the blitz in the pantheon of heroic national triumphs, it is no surprise that the imaginative and cultural landscape created by the war shaped subsequent ideas of what destruction from enemy attack could look like.

The short film *The Waking Point* (1950) illustrated how more indirect references to the previous war could be also be central in shaping understandings of atomic conflict. This thirty-minute long recruitment film, the centrepiece of the government's early recruiting efforts, shows the journey one man, Joe, makes on the road to becoming a civil defence recruit. Crudely equating the cold war with the lessons of appeasement (Shaw, 2000: 134-5), the film also illustrates the complicated gender politics of the fight against nuclear war. Joe's dilemma was seen as a central one by the civil defence authorities: people appeared to agree that civil defence was necessary, but were reluctant to commit

their leisure time to it. In *The Waking Point*, Joe is initially keen to join the Corps, displaying a 'natural' patriotic sentiment. However, he is dissuaded from joining up by his wife, Gwen, who represents the lure of an easy, domestic and leisure-driven existence that sat ill with the patriotic voluntarism promoted by civil defence. By rejecting this, Joe is asserting a more patriotic, heroic masculinity that recalled the togetherness and self-sacrifice of the war years.

In its depiction of female resistance to civil defence, *The Waking Point* represented civil defence work as a necessary and a virtually exclusively male endeavour. Gendering patriotic service in this way reinforced constructions of civil defence as quasi-military endeavour. In common with postwar cinema's depiction of wartime women (Summerfield, 2009), *The Waking Point* showed bravery, dedication and heroism as predominantly male traits. In doing so, the film highlighted the seriousness with which the atomic threat was being taken the government and stressed the genuine contribution volunteers were making to British security. In contrast, the visual culture of civil defence stressed the traditional care-giving roles undertaken by female recruits, although later press advertising promoted the 'exciting' roles open to women such as driving ambulances (Grant, 2011). The documentary nature of these films, which drew on and the as-yet undimmed authority of the government, ensured that these more optimistic depictions of a future atomic war carried significant weight within postwar British culture.

We can see the same processes of direct and indirect recourse to the images and symbols of the previous war in action in the feature film *Seven Days to Noon* (1950). Made by the Boulting Brothers, this taut thriller was one of a handful of British feature films to address the issue of nuclear destruction directly and to explore contemporary nuclear politics (Shaw, 2000; Guy, 2001). The film features Professor Willingdon, a top-ranking scientist at a secret government research station. Driven to distraction by the moral problem of building a weapon capable of enormous destruction, Willingdon decides

to take the new bomb to London, threatening to explode it and destroy ‘the centre of government’ unless the Prime Minister agrees to renounce all such weapons in the future. Willingdon’s moral turmoil and his anxiety about the destructive power of the bomb are sympathetically portrayed. Both Stephen Guy and Tony Shaw are right, however, to stress that the film sides heavily with the authorities who argue that the bomb necessary is for the nation (Shaw, 2000; Guy, 2001). The Professor is portrayed as misguided, naïve and perhaps insane, confusing moral issues with profound matters of state.

In its portrayal of the atomic threat, *Seven Days to Noon* sat squarely in the cold war orthodoxy. In a set piece scene, the Prime Minister’s ‘Churchillian speech’, in Shaw’s words, equates ‘disarmament with appeasement, and Hitler with Stalin’ (Shaw, 2000: 119). The bomb itself is a guarantor of peace. When Britain actually exploded its first atomic bomb, in 1952, both newsreels and the press celebrated the news in words that could have come direct from the Boultings’ film: a Gaumont celebratory newsreel called the bomb ‘the most fearful force of destruction the world has yet seen’, and ‘the most powerful force for preserving peace’ (Gaumont British News, 1952). In defending the bomb, *Seven Days to Noon* represented a paradox in the nuclear culture of early-1950s Britain. Popular culture revelled in the enormous power of Britain’s bomb at the same time as declaring that British civil defence meant that enormous numbers of lives could be saved. In *Seven Days to Noon*, this contradiction is clear in the narrative desire to dwell on the huge power of Willingdon’s bomb, while at the same time feeling compelled to depict the faultless civil defence arrangements being undertaken. Housed in a Gladstone bag, the bomb is represented as capable of destroying London from ‘Notting Hill to Rotherhithe’. Its power is impressed on the viewer by being literally mapped out: on an enormous screen in the operations room that is depicted at various points throughout the film concentric circles are superimposed on London, revealing the zone of destruction.

Yet, in a central, extended sequence, the authorities deal with the threat of such a catastrophe extremely well. A wholesale evacuation of London is ordered and completed in the matter of days, leaving the city deserted. The entire machinery of state is utilised to complete evacuation ahead of schedule and with maximum efficiency. The uniformed civil defence volunteers staffing the train stations and buses, all men apart from one woman looking after a small child, are seen as thorough, caring, possessing of local knowledge, and determined. In short, we are left in no doubt that in an atomic emergency, the people of London – and by extension the nation in general – will be adequately protected. In conveying this impression, the film refers back to the Second World War, literally in terms of archive footage of the 1939 evacuation, and with civil defence recalling the last evacuation and the blitz. We see also see what could be termed stock characters from wartime features: a ‘spiv’ selling a Brighton hotel room, an upper class man attempting to take his fishing tackle away with him, and a comedy cockney urchin refused permission to carry his pet chicken on board a bus (‘what d’you mean, I can’t take my chicken?’). In its use of wartime footage and tropes, the film illustrates how the memory of the Second World War helped bolster the idea of efficient atomic civil defence, allowing the enormous threat of Willingdon’s to be contained by images derived from the previous conflict.

The tension between depicting the atom bomb as a world changing, and potentially world ending, weapon and as a weapon that could be survived, was never completely resolved either in *Seven Days to Noon* or wider British culture between 1945 and the mid-1950s. Representations of the atomic bomb continued to stress its enormous destructive power. At the same time, however, references to the blitz, evacuation, and wartime heroic masculinity stressed Britain’s ability to resist aerial bombardment and limited the power of these bombs in the national imagination. If we look at how the prospect of atomic attack and the possibility of defending the nation against it were represented in atomic age

Britain, we find the memory of the Second World War ever-present, providing an imagery and lexicon of destruction that served to downplay the consequences of atomic attack.

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Belief that the lessons of the Second World War would be relevant in the nuclear future was swept away, however, by the news of the hydrogen bomb in spring of 1954. Although the weapon first been tested in 1952, it was only the March 1954 test in the Pacific which seized the global imagination. Radioactive debris from the test had contaminated workers on a Japanese fishing vessel around 80 miles away from the blast – well outside of the declared ‘danger zone’ of the test. At the same time the explosion itself was vastly bigger than any previously seen, forcing the head of the United States Atomic Energy Authority, Lewis Strauss, to admit when pushed that such a weapon could destroy New York City (Grant, 2010: 77-78). Combined, the enormous power with of the weapon coupled with the horrific details about radioactive fallout, meant that ideas of surviving nuclear war were altered forever.

In many ways, the true ‘nuclear revolution’ in British culture occurred not when the atomic bomb was dropped, but in this ‘thermonuclear moment’. Before 1954, atomic bombs could be depicted as enormous, dangerous, but ultimately manageable. After this date, thermonuclear bombs represented a new threat: literally city-destroying in scope and capable of killing people hundreds of miles away from the centre of the attack. This enormous technological leap had a profound effect on Britain’s political and cultural understanding of nuclear power, destroying the belief that nuclear war could be survived. The popular press, in particular, printed gory details of the destructiveness of the new weapon (*Daily Mirror*, 1954). Whereas before 1954 filmmakers like the Boulting Brothers could agree with the government about the survivability of atomic war, the new weapon

re-established older fears that nuclear energy had the potential to destroy not only Britain but the world. Within four years this new understanding would lead to the formation of a mass-movement dedicated to banning all nuclear weapons. Between 1954 and the formation of CND in 1958, however, filmmakers attempted to understand and convey what this new weapon might mean for humanity. They did so, moreover, in increasing opposition to an official culture attempting to hold on to its traditional argument that nuclear war could be 'survived'. This amounted to the first stage in a battle over nuclear truth within British culture, one the government was destined to lose.

The revelation that thermonuclear war had the potential to completely eradicate urban centres with one blast and poison the countryside with its deadly radioactive 'fallout' threw the authorities into a state of panic. They slowly evolved a new set of ideas about nuclear survival, comprising the survivability of 'peripheral' areas and the ability to live through fallout given adequate protection and preparation. In the first two years of what we can call the 'thermonuclear era', however, the government fell back on its old policy of maintaining that nuclear war could be survived, meeting intense opposition as it did so (Grant, 2010). Likewise, filmmakers and television producers were forced to re-imagine how they could represent the consequences of these new weapons. Evocations of the blitz were clearly inadequate to depict a bomb capable of destroying London and the horrors of fallout. Cut adrift as they were from the previous anchorage of wartime-influenced imagery, filmmakers utilised new narrative techniques to create a vision of nuclear war which rejected survival and which placed death, destruction and apocalypse at its heart.

Evidence of this revolution in nuclear culture can be seen in a short animation produced in 1956 by radical animators Joan and Peter Foldes, a husband and wife team who met after Peter's emigration from Hungary, with money from the British Film Institute Experimental Film Fund (for more on this fund, see Dupin 2003). Using

animation to create a symbolism capable of reflecting the perceived new realities of nuclear messages in a comprehensible form, *A Short Vision* showed a nuclear future far bleaker than any seen on British screens before. Expressively drawn and simply animated, it creates a series of images that build into a chilling allegory of nuclear destruction. It caused a stir when shown on primetime American Television as part of the *Ed Sullivan* show (Brooke, n.d.), although its short format and graphic imagery would have made it difficult to broadcast on British television at the time. The film begins with a menacing shape flying over the countryside, frightening a succession of wild animals, who run away on sensing, rather than necessarily seeing, the object. Once it reaches a sleeping city, and the population, and especially its leaders and ‘wise men’ notice, it is too late. After an initial flash, viewers are presented with a set of searing images of human faces and animals gradually reduced to skulls and skeletons. The narrator tells us: ‘all those who saw it were destroyed.... All the people who had not seen it were destroyed too. When it was over, there was nothing else left but a small flame. The mountains, the field, the city, and the earth, had all disappeared.... And the flame died’.

This final dying of the light brought the film to an end and with it, rhetorically, all hope of survival in the thermonuclear age. In doing so, *A Short Vision* established the representational and narrative strategies that were to underpin the oppositional nuclear politics of the rest of the decade. With its allegorical approach and sharp distinctions between life and death, the film dramatised a relatively basic morality – the choice between abolishing nuclear weapons or dying in a nuclear war – that became the hallmark of CND when formed two years later. Firstly, it contrasted the sleeping population and complacent, possibly even complicit ‘wise men’ with the instinctive and ‘natural’ revulsion of the animals. Secondly, its symbolic linkage of a single bomb and a single community with total nuclear war and humanity as a whole allowed the animation to represent global destruction in easy to understand terms, and pointed the way for others to

equate nuclear weapons with world-ending destruction. Finally, and most importantly, the last image of a screen left black after the light is extinguished simply and powerfully represented the new assumption about nuclear war: that it would literally destroy the world. The inability, or refusal, of filmmakers to represent the aftermath of nuclear war suggested that there would be no aftermath – that the world would basically end. Later films, such as *The War Game* (1965) or *Threads* (1984), drew most of their power from depicting humanity's struggle after nuclear attack. Joan and Peter Foldes' stopping short of this imaginative step can be said to symbolise representations of nuclear war over the subsequent near-decade. They produced a film that had been cut adrift from the emotional and imaginative landscape of the Second World War, forging a way of representing nuclear attack in graphic, penetrative detail, able to convey a moral and political position that was to become immensely powerful within British culture.

Political and cultural trends which juxtaposed the barbarity of nuclear weapons with humanity placed the government in a quandary. They could not leave the argument that thermonuclear war could not be survived unchallenged, fearing that this would lead to a collapse in public support for Britain's nuclear deterrent and general cold war standpoint (see Grant, 2010: 82-3). Compared to the moral certainties of *A Short Vision*, however, the government's attempts to convince the public that nuclear war could be survived were a failure. Civil defence propaganda attempted to contain fears about a future war by stressing that however horrific thermonuclear war was, there would be survivors and that civil defence was a 'common sense' approach. This standpoint is most graphically illustrated in the Central Office of Information's own short animation, *A Fable for Today* (Central Office of Information, 1956). Built around its new slogan, 'Civil Defence is Common Sense', the rather 'cartoonish' animation features a sceptical rabbit and a cynical fox living in a valley menaced by a giant boulder; they ignore the common-sense tortoise and refuse to help plan for an emergency. When a storm rages, however, they begin to

panic – fleeing to the tortoise, who takes them in. The film’s message was designed to convey the basic argument message of forward-thinking preparedness in the same way as five years previously. In its use of the fable genre, however, it was likely to have fallen flat. Against the certainties and power of *A Short Vision* it is hard not to see *A Fable for Today* as little more than weak propaganda that ignores the pressing issues of the day. No matter how hard the film’s makers try, the threat of the boulder cannot stand in for menace of thermonuclear war. will not take the symbolic weight placed on it nor can the valley cannot stand in for a nation menaced by nuclear war. Considering the intense problems the government was having formulating a civil defence policy in response to the hydrogen bomb (Grant, 2010), it is hard not to conclude that the genre was picked because of its seeming ability to convey the civil defence message without recourse to specific – and perhaps controversial – policies.

Other attempts were also made by the government to tackle what it considered ‘defeatist’ understandings of nuclear war, helped by a media that was still sympathetic to its message – or at least sufficiently deferential to broadcast it. Shaw has argued, in nuclear matters the BBC could be relied upon by the Government to avoid ‘controversy’ and endorse official policy (Shaw, 2006: 1353-7). This was certainly the case in the early the hydrogen bomb era, ensuring that the government’s pro-civil defence arguments were reinforced at a time when they were coming under attack. In a slot on BBC current-affairs show *Panorama*, for instance, the Home Office Chief Scientist, Dr Ronald Purcell, was given space to refute the view, summarised by the presenter, Woodrow Wyatt, that ‘the idea of nuclear war is so appalling that many of us think that if there was another war... well, there would be no point in trying to defend ourselves... The whole of Britain, perhaps the whole of the world, will be blown up, utterly destroyed’. In common with much pro-civil defence propaganda, Dr Purcell’s advice was given directly to tackle the ‘pessimistic’ view of nuclear war, reassuring the viewers that ‘they can survive all

together' with adequate protection. Wyatt concluded the segment, in which the government line was conveyed unchallenged, by reinforcing Purcell's argument: 'although hydrogen bomb warfare would be ghastly, nevertheless life would go on. At least 40 million of the 50 million people in these islands would survive'. This edition of *Panorama* showed that in the thermonuclear age there were strong, government-sponsored messages on British screens emphasising that the vast majority of people would survive a nuclear war possibility of nuclear survival. They could not compete, however, with either the power or the sheer number of alternative representations of thermonuclear energy that emphasised death and total destruction.

Whether in television news broadcasts, newsreels or feature films portraying the effects of radiation, such as *X the Unknown* (1956), British popular culture illustrated the view that thermonuclear war could not be survived. As when Britain exploded its first atomic bomb, the celebratory tone used to give the news of the nation's entry to the thermonuclear club in May 1957 served only to under-cut the government's claims about survivability. One newsreel neatly summarised what had quickly emerged as the new orthodoxy within British culture: 'Another world conflict would almost certainly mean the end of our civilisation. But in the belief that possession of the great deterrent is the only way to ensure world peace, Britain has become joint custodian of the deadliest weapon yet devised by man'. ITN, though, discovered that men and women on the street were keen to denounce the bomb as 'immoral' as soon as Britain had exploded one (ITN, 1957). The one view seemingly held in common, however, was that the bomb could not be survived. Even the British state itself seemed confused about the survivability of nuclear war. As the Home Office continued to publicise pro-civil defence messages, the Ministry of Defence stressed in the government's 1957 Defence White Paper that there was 'no adequate defence' against nuclear war (Grant, 2010). This admission, although never intended to deny the validity of civil defence, seemed to make a mockery of the idea of nuclear

survival. The phrase became a rhetorical stick with which to beat the government, used as chapter and verse to contradict and ridicule anyone who defended nuclear survival (see Driver, 1964: 30-31).

The uncertainties within the government over how to portray the true nature of nuclear war were not mirrored within popular culture. Here, certainty reigned supreme. By the end of 1957, there had been a sustained attack on the idea of nuclear survival from a range of sources. The sheer blast power of the bomb, coupled with the insidious effects of radioactive fallout, meant that the old accommodation between destruction and survival made within popular culture during the atomic age no longer held true. Instead, representations of nuclear weapons and nuclear war consistently stressed the dangers involved and rejected the idea that a nuclear war could be survived. What is more, other cultural productions shared with *A Short Vision* the reluctance to portray a post-attack civilisation. Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach* (1957) famously portrayed a world in which life slowly became extinct, and John Wyndham's novel *The Chrysalids* (1955), for example, showed only a far-future world, technologically regressive, divorced from then-current ideas of civilisation. These representations of nuclear war presented the issue in stark, indeed binary, terms of life versus death. They were part of, and helped reinforce, a cultural and political climate in which this vision of nuclear reality motivated a major political and social movement.

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Feelings of impending doom and the impossibility of survival shaped the cultural and political currents that coalesced with the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958. Its impact on nuclear politics and culture was electrifying (Nehring, 2005). Rapidly gaining support, it reached its political peak in 1960 when it managed to

convince the Labour Party conference to commit the party to a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament in the face of bitter opposition from the leadership. This decision was reversed the following year and although CND maintained significant public support, it declined dramatically from 1962 onwards, a result of splits in the movement, a lack of direction after its political defeats, and the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Taylor, 1988; Burkett, 2010). For several years, however, CND built upon the understandings of nuclear war that had already been established to create a powerful moral message based on the impossibility of nuclear survival, dominating discussion of nuclear weapons in Britain. Convinced of the bomb's immorality and danger, CND activists earnestly believed that once people understood the 'truth' about the bomb, they would see that the only moral course to take was to renounce Britain's nuclear weapons. . It was reinforced and circulated by a range of film and television productions which, even if they rejected CND's *political* reading of nuclear weapons, accepted and repeated the cultural foundations it was based on. By the early 1960s, although the British public rejected its policy of unilateral disarmament, the idea of the apocalyptic nuclear war can be said to have become truly hegemonic within British popular culture.

CND based its appeal squarely on the revulsion many felt towards nuclear weapons, contrasting the assumption that they would 'end the world' with the simple moral beliefs of Campaign supporters. In an early CND pamphlet, the historian A.J.P. Taylor made this link clear, arguing that 'most people agree that the bomb is morally wrong. Most admit that, if used, it would destroy civilised life throughout the world' (Taylor, 1958: 1). J. B. Priestley's television play, *Doomsday for Dyson* (1958) took this basic argument onto British screens. Such 'populist moralism' (Taylor, 1988: 43), allowed a disparate set of supporters to gather around a basic 'ban the bomb' message that seemed to energise people, turning supporters into activists. We can see this process in an ITN news item from August 1958 showing the radical choreographer Peter Darrell discussing

*Impasse*, a new 'atomic ballet' produced by the Western Theatre Company. Darrell declared that 'I wanted to shock the people into doing something.... People say "the A-bomb has come and atomic fallout and the end of the world", and they do nothing about it, I want them to get up and say "let's do something"'. Darrell's desire to force the issue, using the staccato rhythms of *musique concrete*, highlights the ability of CND's message to cross boundaries, the cultural ramifications the new certainties concerning nuclear war could have, and the key role television news had as part of a cultural circuit, re-broadcasting this avant garde dance piece to a national audience. If *Impasse* could help dramatise the realities of nuclear war, it would help convert people to CND's cause (ITN, 1958).

*Impasse* was part of a wider radicalisation of the arts in Britain at the end of the 1950s, as artists and filmmakers dramatised the binary choice facing the British public – between life (renouncing the bomb) and death (keeping it, or refusing to actively oppose it). As such, the period after the formation of CND saw a proliferation of screened images discussing nuclear politics, all of which dramatised to some extent, across a range of genres and narrative strategies, this basic moral choice facing the nation. One, the short documentary *March to Aldermaston* (1959), made by the 'Film and Television Committee for Nuclear Disarmament' under the direction of Lindsay Anderson, depicted the marchers as a cross-section of society which combined moral certainty, political seriousness and sociability.. In a different genre, the Armchair Theatre production, *I Can Destroy the Sun*, also articulated the understanding that moral certainty was built on a true understanding of nuclear reality. Directed by Wilfred Eades and first broadcast on commercial television in October 1958, the teleplay was a thriller that depicted a scientist, Dr Lunn, dedicated to eliminating nuclear weapons. Lunn announces his attention to 'destroy' a star (in fact using his ability to predict its forthcoming disappearance of a star from the night sky) and once it is duly extinguished, attempts to blackmail the world into renouncing nuclear

weapons. Unlike Professor Willingdon in *Seven Days to Noon*, the latter production represents Lunn's views in a much more rational light. Forced into his scientifically improbable scheme by the cold war powers' participation in the 'nuclear rat race', and motivated by the belief that only disarmament can save mankind, Lunn's views are not contradicted by more authoritative government voices as they were in *Seven Days to Noon*. Although Lunn's tactics are criticised as foolhardy and dangerous, his aims are in contrast highlighted as sensible and indeed 'natural'. In much the same way, Val Guest's excellent thriller *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1960) treated the government's nuclear policies – and response to a nuclear disaster that sends the earth hurtling towards the sun – as behind the trend of considered, intelligent opinion, which had been against nuclear armaments for some time.

This increase in representations of nuclear politics at the end of the 1950s ensured that the apocalyptic view of nuclear war became accepted as the basic terms of the debate surrounding nuclear weapons. Even those vehemently opposed to CND's disarmament aims usually agreed about the essential nature of nuclear war, only reaching very different conclusions. Instead of unilateral disarmament, possession of the bomb was vital to deter aggression and negotiate lasting, multilateral disarmament (see Hennessy, 2010). This acceptance of the idea of the totally destructive nuclear war completely overcame the tenuous hold more 'survivalist' messages had on the popular imagination. When *Panorama* returned to the issue of civil defence in month 1960, four years after broadcasting its pro-government messages of nuclear survival, this change in the representation of nuclear war on British screens could be seen. It focused on one local civil defence unit in Stafford. Far from repeating the government line as its 1956 edition had, which emphasised the modern efficiency of the voluntary force, it now presented civil defence as hopelessly out of date and incompetent. Crucially, the programme let the volunteers speak for themselves, highlighting the small numbers of volunteers, the lack of

equipment, and the advanced age of those who were in uniform. The comparison of the blitz with nuclear war was mocked, a symbol of how out touch civil defence was, in stark contrast to the representations of the atomic bomb less than a decade before. The survivable nuclear war had become, literally, laughable. This edition of *Panorama* (BBC, 1960) epitomised the revolution in nuclear culture wrought since the hydrogen bomb, illustrating the hegemonic position the apocalyptic view of nuclear war had achieved.

The BBC programme also highlighted another ramification of this revolution: the belief that the government were not simply ‘wrong’ about nuclear war but were actually attempting to mislead the public. Eventually, with Peter Watkins’ *The War Game* (1965), attacking the government’s ‘lies’ in this field would become the main rhetorical and narrative device of pro-disarmament filmmakers. Before Watkins’ famous and oft-analysed film (see Shaw 2000; Shaw, 2006; Chapman 2006; Grant, 2010), however, a very different feature film explored the idea of the government’s complicity in making a nuclear war inevitable. The same film also provided a set of characters which symbolised tensions within the disarmament movement that would eventually contribute to its political and social defeat at the moment of its cultural triumph.

Pessimistic views of both the nuclear future and the state’s complicity with it reached their apogee in *The Damned* (1961), a Hammer production directed by Joseph Losey, a left-wing American director working in Britain after being blacklisted in Hollywood. A compelling film with a convoluted production history (see Shaw 2000: 184-6), *The Damned* is a wonderful mixture of teddy boys, figurative sculpture and radioactive kids. The plot involves an American man and a young British woman who stumble on a secret government establishment devoted to raising nine small radioactive children, victims of a previous nuclear accident. In its discussion of nuclear politics, it is not the ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ of the film that dominates, although their commitment to helping the children speaks of a level of altruistic engagement that can be held to be exemplary. Much

more nuanced and revealing of nuclear culture in early 1960s Britain are the portrayals of Bernard, the head of the government establishment, and his friend-lover-protégé Freya, a sculptor.

Freya serves as a symbol of the typical disengaged artist, caring for nothing but her art. At numerous times she refuses to contemplate what is going on around her, and when she learns both the truth and the fact that this knowledge will be fatal to her, she decides to waste no more time and gets straight back to work. Yet despite the stance of the artist, the actual art plays a pivotal role in the film. Produced by Elisabeth Frink, the sculptures dominate the office of Bernard. Frink was associated with a trend in British sculpture famously described by Herbert Read as expressing 'the geometry of fear' (see Hyman, 2001), and her cracked and scarred surfaces of recognisable but sinister forms aptly convey the fearful nature of Bernard's work. One piece, 'my graveyard bird', is given to Bernard, and in a key scene its shadow dominates half the screen as the other shows Bernard's face, laying down rules for 'his' children. Freya stands for the cultured people who have refused to engage with the politics of the bomb, but no matter how much she closes her mind to the horrors around her, her art – Frink's art – cannot but express those horrors.

Bernard is a more complex character, bringing up these children in readiness for a post-nuclear world. Radioactive themselves, they are the only things with a 'chance' of living after the next war. He does this, not as a 'mad scientist' or a fascist hell-bent on power, but out of duty arising from a feeling that war is 'unavoidable' and that ordinary people have no hope of surviving it. His absolute certainty of the annihilation of the globe is chilling, and it has caused him to imprison, or as he sees it, care for, these children in the hope of providing some sort of future. As such, Bernard stands as a symbol for the British state, presiding over the plans for mankind's post-nuclear future, fatally accepting of the system that is going to bring such a disaster about (in a way he can be seen as a

dour, Scottish, Dr Strangelove). In other ways, Bernard is portrayed as a relative liberal. He is keen to give the children a modicum of privacy, even at the expense of security, in sharp contrast to the military personnel. He is also supportive of art and culture, as embodied by Freya. These characteristics strengthen his symbolic role as the liberal British state making a catastrophic wrong turn down the nuclear path. At the end of the film, by his willingness to sacrifice everything to the continuation of the project, we see the authoritarian tendency within him win out (see Shaw, 2000). Over the cries of the children, recaptured after a brief escape, are shots of the Dorset coast and seaside, the ordinary public oblivious to what is being done in their name.

*The Damned* again illustrates that the conceptualisation of nuclear destruction which had risen after 1954 was deeply entrenched by the early 1960s. If war came, there simply would be no way of surviving it. The only hope was for mankind to turn back. The politically engaged filmmakers, such as Anderson and Guest, argued the only hope was for society to force the government to turn back. For Losey, however, the state itself was the problem, building and planning for a confrontation that it considered inevitable, spurning democracy and decency in the name of survival. Perhaps most importantly, *The Damned* reflected and prefigured the dissipation of the sort of hope that motivated and sustained CND's supporters. CND declined precipitately after 1963. Considering their inability to influence the actions of superpowers seemingly impervious to reason and morality, CND's supporters resembled Freya at the end of *The Damned*. Finishing a sculpture while awaiting death, she symbolised the choice of either struggling in vain or using what time was left for a better purpose.

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The establishment of the idea that a nuclear war could not be survived represented a revolution in the British cold war culture. It was a revolution with profound consequences and as such historians must see 1954 as the central date for later understandings of the nuclear world, not 1945. The atomic bomb created a great deal of anxiety within British popular culture, but the range of techniques utilised to make sense of the new weapon, both by the government and by others, served to reduce the sense of shock many felt about the atomic bomb and to contain the fears that had been expressed. On screens around Britain, as in the press and in novels, the atomic bomb was constantly discussed against a cultural backdrop dominated by the experience and memory of the Second World War. The victorious war against Hitler gave examples of national spirit and heroic masculinity; most of all, however, it created the physical and imaginative landscape on which people could map out what destruction from a future attack might mean. In a city littered with bomb-sites and rubble, it would have been easy to assume a future attack would be much the same. In *Seven Days to Noon*, no less than in government civil defence propaganda, we see this process in action.

Whereas the imagery and lived experience of the Second World War served to contain ideas of destruction and promote ideas of survival, it could not undertake the same symbolic work in the thermonuclear age. The image of the city-destroying, perhaps nation-destroying, bomb was an imaginative as well as technological step-change. People had struggled to imagine atomic destruction in the context of an inhabitable city; when conceptualising the hydrogen bomb, however, this city was replaced by an absence. Like the light at the end of *A Short Vision*, the city – and the globe – ceased to exist in the imagination. Those discussing nuclear war from 1954 until the early 1960s struggled to imagine what the immediate aftermath of what a nuclear war would be like. This lacuna is vital to understanding the cultural impact of the bomb. The evidence of screened representations of nuclear issues suggests that for both political and rhetorical reasons

filmmakers preferred to present nuclear war as a great void into which humanity was in danger of falling. In doing so, they helped dramatise across a range of genres and styles what they saw as the stark choice facing mankind. This placed them in the mainstream of the broadly pro-CND politics that appeared to dominate the more creative end of British popular culture. But the post-attack silence cannot be understood solely in terms of the political agency of filmmakers. It was also an imaginative failing, as filmmakers, along with writers, artists and politicians, struggled to conceptualise what such a post-attack world would look like.

Whatever the reason, the inability or unwillingness to depict nuclear war as resulting in anything else than total annihilation helped to create the cultural climate within which CND was able to articulate its political and moral ideas. The prominence of CND within British culture after 1958 re-circulated such notions and gave them added power. Ironically, however, it can be argued that the binary understanding of nuclear destruction, and the incomprehensibility of survival, actually served to undermine the political case being made by CND. Maximising the power of these weapons helped dramatise the case for disarmament but at the same time boosted the argument for deterrence. This is part of the reason why the convincing portrayals of apocalyptic nuclear reality that proliferated in Britain at the end of the 1950s did not translate into increased support for CND, and why the discrediting of government-led ideas of survival did not lead to a wider rejection of nuclear weapons. It also helps explain why those who produced later depictions of nuclear war, from *The War Game* to *Threads*, placed the horrors of survival, the pain and trauma of those left alive and broken by nuclear attack, at the centre of their work. Survival would turn out to be much more shocking than total annihilation, but representations of nuclear war in British culture had systematically attacked and removed any notion of survival from its version of nuclear truth. Its place had been taken by an absence: a symbolic black screen. This symbolic space, left yawning

in uncertainty by filmmakers wishing to illustrate the choice facing society, was filled by the perpetual present, guarded over by the nuclear deterrent.

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