

On Civil Defence and the Staging of Modern Politics

By Patrick Wright

‘Acting is inevitable as soon as we walk out of our front doors and into society.’ So wrote Arthur Miller in his essay *On Politics and the Art of Acting* (Viking, 2001). ‘We are ruled more by the arts of performance – by acting, in other words – than anybody wants to think about for very long.’

Aware that the ‘leader as performer’ has been around since antiquity, Miller was nevertheless convinced that the rise of television had recently transformed the situation. Watching the US presidential election of 2000, with its ‘relentless daily diet of crafted, acted emotions and canned ideas’, he sensed a deterioration in ‘our democratic ways’ that raised doubts about ‘our claim to the right to instruct lesser countries on how to conduct fair elections’.

Though since exploited by Bush and Blair over Iraq, this glassy convergence was pioneered by the actor-president Ronald Reagan. According to Miller, ‘the Gipper’ was unrivalled in his ability to confuse events in films with things that had actually happened: a habit that represented a ‘Stanislavskian triumph, the very consummation of the actor’s ability to incorporate reality into the fantasy of his role’. Reagan gave us ‘the leader as leading man’, hauling policies, including the Strategic Defense Initiative (‘Star Wars’), out of the drive-in at the back of his mind. As for the print journalists who might have insisted on distinguishing between fact and artfully presented fiction, Miller reckoned that ‘the American press is made up of disguised theatre critics; substance counts for next to nothing compared with style and inventive characterisation.’

Acting may have become a requirement of high political office in the television age, but not before other fixtures had also been pulled out of the modern theatre. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the ‘iron curtain’ started out as a reassuring but largely useless anti-fire device, suspended between stage and auditorium in the 18th century theatre. It was only after late Victorian engineers had turned it into a truly effective barrier that it was enlisted as a political metaphor, used first to refer to the stand-off between Britain and Germany in 1914, and six years later to describe the blockade between Bolshevik Russia and the encircling Allies. To the anti-war campaigners who used the term, the descent of the iron curtain marked an abrupt cancellation of informed exchange between citizens, who were consequently all the more easily enthralled by their warring governments. In this respect, it had the effect of doubling rather than finishing off the show.

Metaphors weren’t the only thing that the politics of early 20th-century Europe took from the playhouse. The use of theatrical designers and scene-shifters to devise real-world special effects had a precedent in the 1780s, when Prince Grigori Potemkin was charged with improving conditions in the Ukraine and other southern territories recently annexed to Catherine the Great’s Russian empire.

Instead of implementing genuine improvements, the story goes, Potemkin found it easier to have fake settlements rigged up with pasteboard flats, and then to guide the unknowing Catherine past them on her tours of inspection. When she and her retinue had gone, the painted façades of these 'Potemkin villages' were said to have been hastily dismantled and carted over the hill to be re-erected in a new location so that the empress could admire them all over again.

Potemkin's showmanship reached its climax in 1787, when Catherine II undertook a grandiose imperial cruise along the Dnepr river, travelling from Kiev to Kherson on the Black Sea in the company of various European ambassadors and potentates. The party travelled in eighty boats, seven of which are said to have been full-sized replicas of Roman galleys, and Potemkin ensured that every imaginable luxury was laid on during the six-week journey. Determined to convince Catherine and her visitors that he had successfully brought civilisation to the primitive steppe, he ordered the towns and villages along the route to be decorated, cleared of unsightly cripples and beggars, filled with welcoming crowds. It was in reports of this extravagant cruise that the story of the 'Potemkin villages' arrived in France, Germany and Britain.

Many historians have subsequently insisted that the stories of full-scale scene-rigging are false, and that Potemkin was actually only showing the best side of reality – in a manner that remains customary with royal visits. But the myth of Potemkin's showmanship lingered into the nineteenth century, partly because it expressed a potential for confusion that genuinely existed when people from landowning circles in St Petersburg visited the remote and largely roadless Russian countryside.

In the early 20th century, however, the legend of Potemkin's pasteboard villages would be attached to new realities. Theatre designers joined artists in the camouflage effort of the First World War, reshaping the battlefield to compensate for the fact that, thanks to aerial photography, traditional hiding places no longer existed. Accusations of Potemkinism flourished, too, in the widening division between communism and capitalism.

To begin with it was little more than a hostile allegation used by the anti-Bolshevik press to pre-empt the enthusiastic reports of the first Western socialists to visit Soviet Russia. In 1920 there was still comparatively little to discredit, although members of the first British Labour delegation were shown a number of futurist projects designed to indicate what socialism might bring to a Russia that anybody could see was starving, and wrecked by years of civil war and the Allied blockade. As the 1920s advanced, the tours became more organised, and by the time of the Bolsheviks' tenth anniversary celebrations in 1927, the carefully prepared itineraries featured special hotels and restaurants, and the range of model exhibits had been expanded to include shops stuffed with products, factories, agricultural exhibitions, clinics, schools and prisons.

As Stalin consolidated his regime in the early 1930s, theatrical manipulations were being used systematically and in conjunction with measures intended to control foreign correspondents in Moscow. Soviet showmanship was also assisted by the psychological scene-shifting that zealous Western pilgrims would carry out in their own heads.

Wafted around Ukraine in 1933, Edouard Herriot, the French former prime minister and mayor of Lyon, was taken through areas that had suffered catastrophic famine under Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. Indulged and gulled into praising the harvest, he even followed his minders in suggesting that people in the stricken area complained of food shortages only because conditions had been so thoroughly improved that popular expectations had risen to unprecedented levels. D.N. Pritt, a British barrister, anti-Fascist and Labour MP, was among the apologists who visited Stalin's Russia to commend the show trials as better than anything available in a capitalist court. In 1944, Henry Wallace, America's socialist vice-president, famously managed to tour the gulag together with his academic adviser, Owen Lattimore, without either of them realizing that they were actually in a vast prison.

Comparable techniques were also used by the Nazis, notably at Terezin, a fortress and town in the Czech Republic in which Jews were imprisoned before transportation to Auschwitz. In the summer of 1944, the town was cleaned, painted and equipped with fake shops, and the population reduced by strategic deportations. The purpose of this transformation was to dupe a visiting inquiry from the International Committee of the Red Cross into believing that the ghetto was being run to an acceptable standard. Having successfully carried out the deception, the Nazi authorities ordered Kurt Gerron, a Jewish actor who was also a prisoner at Terezin, to make a propaganda film, sometimes known as 'The Führer gives a village to the Jews.' In Gerron's footage, the starved and diseased settlement, where thousands had already died, was presented as a happy camp, complete with smiling and industrious workers. Together with his cast, Gerron was despatched to Auschwitz shortly after filming.

In his book *Summits* (Allen Lane, 2007), David Reynolds remarks on the way Cold War theatricality shaped the conduct of post-war world leaders. No longer the 'parley at the summit' imagined by Churchill in 1950, or an elevated example of 'diplomatic dialogue' between several leaders, meetings between world leaders were turned into a confrontation between frozen opposites. The first postwar summit, held in Geneva in 1955, was a 'carefully staged' affair, used by both sides for propaganda purposes, with leaders reading prepared statements and addressing their remarks not to each other but to abstractly imagined audiences of their own choosing – be it public opinion in the West, or the Soviet satellite states in East Europe.

This may be taken to confirm Tracy C. Davis's contention in *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defence* that 'theatre did not dwindle in

stature after the mid-20th century; it simply broadened its range of venues.' Her own examples are drawn from the civil defence exercises with which the Canadian, British and American governments responded to the threat of nuclear attack.

One day in 1956, a boy named Donald Hurt set to work with his father to construct a bomb shelter in his backyard in rural Missouri. Built to government specifications, it was reached via a tunnel extending from the basement of the family home, and Hurt's parents slept in it every night for the next twenty years. Many contemplated a similar course of action, especially after Kennedy advised Americans to consider installing personal shelters at the time of the Berlin Crisis in 1961. Demand was such that Sears Roebuck were soon offering prefabricated versions made by the 'Peace-O-Mind' Shelter Company of Texas.

In 1964, three British women stepped into the role of 'civil defence volunteers' and entered a model shelter next to the Guildhall in York. They spent 24 hours in their miserable hollow, listening to simulated regional broadcasts beamed in from a van outside. They slept for a few hours in a specially sandbagged 'core' area intended to protect them against fallout, cooked a meal on a primus stove and swallowed aspirins for their headaches. After a single day they were plainly demoralised. As the *Times* wrote of the widely reported exercise, 'even that basic feminine impulse to make frequent cups of tea deserted them.'

By the 1970s, Americans in rural areas, which fell outside the scope of their government's large-scale Crisis Relocation Plans, were being invited to create their own shelters along the lines recommended by the Civil Defense Preparedness Agency. In Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a couple with a teenage son used a pickaxe to dig a short narrow trench. They then drove their Ford Maverick sedan over it, filling the car with earth and closing the shelter with plastic sheeting and more mud piled up around the vehicle's sides. The Hoffner family of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, spared their car, instead using mud piled on old doors to cover their experimental trench. The official suggestion was that it would be possible for a family of four to survive ten days crammed into such rudimentary accommodation.

A suspension of disbelief was plainly necessary if British city dwellers were to accept the 'cupboard under the stairs' as a potential shelter against nuclear fallout, or if American school children were to feel safer crouching under their desks at the call of 'Duck and Cover'. But Davis is at pains to establish that the preparatory exercises conducted in the name of Civil Defence were not really performances at all. She describes them as rehearsals, which gestured towards a catastrophic performance that never actually took place. In campaigns such as 'Alert America' and 'On Guard, Canada' in 1951, the aim was to command widespread attention through 'the most far-reaching public-education project of its kind'.

Other exercises, concerned with maintaining 'the continuity of government' in the event of a nuclear strike, were altogether more 'covert'. Indeed, Davis contends that in the early 1960s, the authorities 'went underground' and ran their own exercises in preparation for nuclear war. America's 'Operation Spade Fork', which ended just before the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, involved six hundred civilians from 27 federal departments and agencies, and rehearsed the activities to be carried out before an attack. Rehearsals of this kind were often set in secret bunkers such as the 12 'Regional Seats of Government' built in Britain in the 1950s: sunken caverns in which planners plotted wind direction and the spread of fallout on maps, while gazing at screens on which vast multitudes flickered and died. Richard Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, records that his boss was much troubled by 'the lightly tossed-about millions of deaths' witnessed at one such exercise: so much so, Davis says, that he encouraged the Pentagon to devote more energy to finding 'strategic alternatives' to outright nuclear warfare.

If, as Davis puts it, 'Civil Defence became like a religion' as the Cold War dragged on, this was partly because it appealed to traditional gender roles: 'Male adherents could heroically battle an enemy, embody chauvinistic strength, and fight their personal battle against Communism and the infidel. Female adherents could offer comparable gender stereotyped behaviours, including maternal reassurance, caregiving and submission.' It was also embraced by 'survivalists', who made a lifestyle out of what the sociologist Richard Mitchell, in *Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times* (Chicago, 2001), has called 'the creative transcendence of calamitous cultural change'.

Camping had been a recommended part of civil defence training since the 1950s, together with walking at least a mile a day and keeping your weight down. By the 1970s enthusiasts were forming their own associations, buying Geiger counters and, being aware of the frantic traffic jams that would attend a coming emergency, practising how to leave town by canoe and other self-propelled means. American survivalists merged civil defence with the renewed tradition of the frontiersman in his remote shack: a lineage they shared with the Unabomber as well as John Brown. In the British countryside too, folk started eyeing the road out of the city with new kinds of alarm. Responsible for organising civil defence in their region, one local authority employee in Essex noted the importance of distinguishing their own people from the hordes of 'zombies' who could be expected to come staggering out of London in the event of an attack.

In the US, Crisis Relocation Planning was discontinued by 1985. Resources were redirected to the Star Wars missile defence system and the familiar Civil Defence scenarios were 'archived'. At the end of the Cold War, optimists dreamed that nukes would be beaten into ploughshares and perhaps also that 'theatricality' would confine itself once again to the playhouse. For a while, it might have seemed that America's bunkers would start going the way of redundant anti-nuclear facilities in Britain, which, so Davis suggests, 'continue to come onto the

market and present ideal secure accommodation for computing operations, air-filtered premises for pneumo-restorative centres, damp caves for mushroom or marijuana growers, and unstormable hideouts for motorcycle gangs'.

But the 'war on terror' has launched a whole new generation of 'players, scenarios and rehearsals', together with a new Department of Homeland Security tasked with reinstalling 'preparedness' in the routines of everyday life. Davis sees the new rehearsals as being of a part with the rise of the urban sports utility vehicle, the spectre of the 'dirty' bomb and the apprehension with which many Americans might greet any brown face boarding a plane. She argues that the legacies of civil defence live on in the way we imagine 'enemies', and in public consent to surveillance and security measures that would have seemed excessive only a few years ago but are tolerated now thanks to a 'new orthodoxy of fear', expressed as patriotism at home and 'setting people free' abroad.

The Canadian and British publics may be rather less compliant than the American, as Davis suggests, yet 'embodied rehearsals' are now carried out in all three countries. 'An up-to-date version of duck and cover is conducted moment by moment in airports,' she writes, 'while in the United States the rhetoric of risk leads additionally to fears that anyone photographing federal buildings ipso facto plans to sabotage them, that the press should not report openly on defence matters, and that scrutinising financial transactions, conducting data mining and demanding libraries' lending records are duties that supersede concerns of racial, ethnic or religious bias.'

There is ample reason to be concerned about these developments. Yet we should resist any temptation to think that we are all now living in a Potemkinist set-world, like the Disneyesque 'Seaview' of Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show*. As Davis shows, attempts to involve the public in 'performed compliance' with state policy have persistently backfired. Civil defence rehearsals were met with savage mockery, which isn't surprising given, say, the British Home Office's willingness to advise householders to prepare for nuclear attack by whitewashing their windows and removing flammable old newspapers from their attics.

In *Whole World on Fire* (Cornell 2003), the Stanford historian Lynn Eden has shown that US war planners 'systematically discounted' the likelihood of nuclear firestorms in their post-strike scenarios, concentrating exclusively on blast damage instead, and that is only one example of the tactical blindnesses that supported civil defence rhetoric from the early 1950s onwards. Protesters were alert to these, and also brought their own theatrical devices to the show, including death masks and dead pigs dressed in military uniform. Davis shows that they managed to embarrass the authorities into modifying and sometimes discontinuing their plans for civil defence rehearsals.

In the estimate of one American psychiatrist quoted by Davis, civil defence was a form of 'psychological defence' that enabled citizens and public officials to 'deny the realities of nuclear war' and 'avoid the anxiety' of thinking about the extinction

it threatened. If it didn't work, then that's at least in part because the measures proposed were blatantly inadequate to the catastrophe imagined. Public scepticism about civil defence is modestly reassuring. It suggests that people can still walk out of the show – though not, perhaps, without marching straight into another one.

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