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Bomb Media 1951-1964

Tristan Edward Abbott

BOMB MEDIA 1951-1964

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English Literature

Tristan Edward Abbott

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at nuclear films, commercial and governmental, that were released between 1951 and 1964. Special attention is paid to the recursivity that existed between the propagandic, often outrageously inaccurate Civil Defense films made by the United States government and the subversive popular films made by visionary dissidents.

The films are divided into three periods. The earliest period focuses on Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* and the Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (based on the novel by Mickey Spillane), along with some of the earliest Civil Defense films. Special attention is paid to the politically minded creation of the Civil Defense Bureau, as well as how the governmental films grounded their exploitative power in patriotism, fear, and the supposedly manifest goodness of the American government.

The second period focuses on the liberalization of the post-McCarthyist film industry and the production of more overtly anti-nuclear films, including the chilling *On the Beach*. This era of dissent, punctuated by frank discussions of the danger of nuclear war, segues into critical readings of nuclear war that focus on the uniquely theoretical danger that a potential all-out nuclear exchange poses, pinning much of the danger of nuclear war on the very existence of nuclear discourse.

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This Study by: Tristan Abbott

Entitled: "Bomb Media: 1951-1964"

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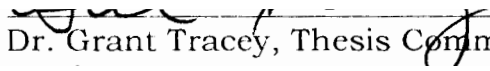
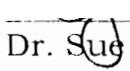|	
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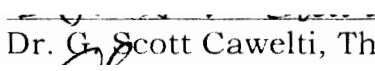
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CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL DEFENSE AND A BRIEFER HISTORY OF

AMERICAN ANTI-COMMUNISM

About halfway through Samuel Fuller's film-noir thriller *Pickup on South Street* (1953), a stool pigeon named Moe (Thelma Ritter) is about to get shot. She knows it, too; she was warned ahead of time that the man who just forced his way into her room is a desperate communist agent who is willing to kill in order to find out the location of a pickpocket named Skip. Moe, who earlier in the film had sold Skip out to a pair of detectives for fifty dollars, refuses to give the agent Skip's location, even when the agent offers her *five hundred* dollars. The agent starts threatening her, and Moe tells him that she is not going to sell Skip's location to bunch of "commies." The man then asks her what she knows about "commies," and she replies with the most famous line of the film: "What do I know about commies? Nothing! I know one thing, I just don't like them."

The plot of 1955's *Kiss Me Deadly* likewise features a detective who is caught up in a plot that involves faceless (and boundlessly evil) communists who are trying to take over the world. *Kiss Me Deadly* is

based on the popular Mickey Spillane novel of nearly the same name[1] and is a part of Spillane's publicly popular but critically reviled Mike Hammer series. Spillane was a conservative and a virulent anticommunist, and his character, Hammer, has often beencriticized as being a "right wing vigilante," a symbolic celebration of violence, nationalistic jingoism, and misogyny (Gallafent 240).

Considering the pedigree of each of these films, it is easy to understand the initial perception of each as being examples of the kind of pro-government media that was pervasive between the end of the Second World War and the middle 1950s. Propaganda scholars Sara Combs and James Combs describe postwar Hollywood as having been caught up in the nationwide "Communist hysteria" (84). The movie industry had fallen under intense government scrutiny and, due to a fear of both bad press and governmental censorship, wanted to prove itself free from any trace of Soviet influence, and the result was scores of mindlessly anti-communist films. According to the authors, the political attacks upon Hollywood alarmed the industry so much that it "did a kind of political penance to appease its political attackers and reassure the larger political community [...] that the movie capital's political heart

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[1] The novel is titled *Kiss Me, Deadly*, and the film's omission of the comma has lead to much confusion amongst both readers and critics alike. In order to prevent such confusion, I am taking the precaution of explicitly mentioning *Kiss Me, Deadly* as the book, whenever it comes up in discussion.

and mind were in the right place" (85). The "attackers" that the Combses are referring to are a variety of government agencies including most conspicuously the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the CIA, and the FBI: groups that were so paranoid about the communist threat they believed that Hollywood represented that any film that was the least bit suspect could fall under harsh scrutiny[2].

Coming as they do from such a political climate, it is no surprise that *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Pickup On South Street* both brim with anticommunist sentiment. However, as work by recent scholars has shown, the possession of such a sentiment does not mean that these two films are examples of the kind of "Red Menace" pap that Hollywood offered up to save itself from governmental scrutiny. It is my intention to prove that, according to the theoretical frameworks of subversion laid out by both nuclear film scholars and postmodern theorists, these two films were immensely subversive. I will prove this by comparing the images of both the United States government and the threat of nuclear war as they are presented in both the noir films and in government-approved Civil Defense films, which were created and distributed by the government. I will then compare the relationship between these two types of media to

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[2] Perhaps the most notable—and infamous—of these "subversive" films was Frank Capra's amazingly innocuous *It's a Wonderful Life*. Offense was apparently taken at the fact the film's villain, Mr. Potter, was a successful capitalist.

the antagonistic relationship between governmental[3] and subversive medias that has been described in varying degrees of detail by postmodern thinkers such as Robert Newman and Jacques Derrida, and link the subversion found within these films to a more general framework of nuclear discourse, insofar as such a discourse was present from 1953 until 1964.

Historian Paul Boyer notes that "[t]he politicization of terror was a decisive factor in shaping the post-Hiroshima cultural climate" (*By the Bomb's* 66), and nowhere is that more noticeable than in the overtly political creation of the United States Civil Defense Administration (USCDA). According to military historian B. Franklin Cooling, there was a significant call for the establishment of a civil preparedness program at least as early as 1935, out of concern of the possibility of an Axis air strike against United States civilians and a widespread belief that "the Army had an inescapable responsibility to the civilian population in the area of air attack" (7). In such a context, the establishment of a Civil Defense-type program, one that would equip citizens with the knowledge and infrastructure necessary to survive a prolonged or large-scale attack,

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[3] The words "government" and "governmental" are used often in this thesis. Typically, their usage is meant merely as a catch-all placeholder for various agencies, bodies, and individuals who operated within the United States government in order to advance nuclear dialogue. The use of the terms, then, is meant only to keep things concise, not to suggest that the Cold War-era government acted as a monolithic, singularly focused entity.

was a pragmatic goal that was nobly predicated upon the best interest of the United States citizenry.

Not surprisingly, the proposal was rejected on political grounds. According to Cooling, politicians repeatedly refused to address the concerns of military officials, citing a fear of upsetting the public's perception of the strength of the government and the military. Even as war with Germany became imminent—in fact, *especially* as war with Germany became imminent—the government's primary focus regarding civil preparedness was one that was concerned with the *image* that the implementation of such a program would produce. This is showcased in the following memo from 1940, sent to President Roosevelt from his Secretary of War, Harry H. Woodring:

> It is my belief that an appeal to the public at this time for the organization of local defense committees would needlessly alarm our people and would tend to create the erroneous impression that the military forces of the nation are unprepared to deal with any likely threat to our security. Even an intimation that such a condition existed would be seized upon by political opponents of the Administration. (qtd. in Cooling 8)

Throughout the entire Second World War, the topic of civil preparedness went without significant public address[4]. It was only after the war, when

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[4] Of course, the use of the qualifier "significant" is subjective. The Office of Civil Defense (OCD), a precursor to the Cold War's USCDA, was established by executive order in May of 1941. However, its creation came with little press coverage and its functions were hardly adequate to meet the danger of potential air raids or chemical or biological attacks.

the country's lack of an adequate defense program was brought up in a political context, that such a program was begun in earnest.

In spite of its admirable roots, civil defense in the sphere of American discourse has mostly been of an exploitatively political—and, and decidedly non-pragmatic—nature. As JoAnne Brown points out, the selection of schoolrooms as the main venue through which official Civil Defense materials were disseminated was no exception. In her historical essay, "*A* is for Atom, *B* is for Bomb," Brown explains that the decision to permit the showing of Civil Defense films in public school classrooms came about as a result of the paranoid political climate of the late forties and early fifties.

Brown explains that school administrators saw that the alignment of curricula with the federal government's Civil Defense goals would not only lead to an increase of federal funding but also help deflect any claims of subversion that might have been levied against the public school system. Allowing the dissemination of Civil Defense materials was therefore a defacto necessity, as it prevented schools from risking the destruction that came with being labeled subversive, as Brown explains "[c]ritics indicted 'Progressive' education as 'REDucation' and teachers as 'little red hens' poisoning young minds with communistic ideology" (71). However, the necessity of such an allowance did not preclude schools

from deriving any benefit from it, as the allowance secured federal funding for public schools. The showing of Civil Defense films in public schools was therefore a decidedly political act: as a whole, the motivations of both the government agencies which were producing and distributing the films and the schools that were screening them did so primarily in order to achieve the ostensible interest of the films. None of the information proffered in any Civil Defense film, which by the fifties were all concerned strictly with nuclear war, would have helped anybody survive a full-scale nuclear war. Some of it seems earnest but is incorrect. Some of it seems pointlessly exploitative. None of it would have worked. This makes me question the underlying motivations for such media, which, like the circumstances surrounding the media's production and dissemination, seem completely divorced from their subject matter.

An understanding of the nature of Civil Defense media according to this historical context is essential to an informed review of such media. It is important to realize that the government's concerns in releasing the media were not completely well-intentioned, and, as I shall prove, were largely based upon their perceived need to control the American public through a "give and take" system of fear and ignorance, as a reading of some select films certainly suggests.

CHAPTER 2

CIVIL DEFENSE, CIVIL DEFENSE FILMS, THE FEAR CAUSED BY CIVIL DEFENSE FILMS, AND THE FILMIC/HISTORICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF THAT FEAR

The "fear" of Civil Defense was widely felt, as Paul Boyer notes that a "heavy official emphasis on civil defense" from the early fifties into the early sixties was a primary cause of the panic that nearly launched the United States into a full-scale nuclear war several times, particularly during the Kennedy Administration ("Activism to Apathy" 822). But what about the intent of these films? How can I—or anyone—say with any degree of certainty what these films were *meant* to achieve? My answer comes through a combination of a process of logical elimination and an application of Occam's Razor: just as I can rightly assume that a woman opening a refrigerator is not hoping to fill her car's gas tank while doing so, and just as I can presume that, in doing so, she is hoping to accomplish something food-related, I can examine these Civil Defense films and assume that they were in no way meant to address the actual concerns posed by the threat of nuclear war, and that they were instead geared towards both frightening and keeping ignorant the American public. If this sounds patronizing or even sarcastic, I apologize sincerely; it is just that the intent of these films is really *that* ridiculously obvious.

Take for example 1951's *Atomic Alert*, a short film that was produced by Encyclopedia Britannica Films at the behest of the USCDA. The film combines montage images (consisting of mostly stock footage), along with stiff, monotonous narration and a few crudely shot original scenes in order to convey a wide array of inaccurate information regarding nuclear war. The schoolchildren who watched this film were told, for example, that the basement of an average home contained thick enough walls to shield them from a nuclear blast. The spread of a nuclear blast was also wildly underplayed: in one scene, an animated cutaway shows an overhead view of an atomic bomb falling on a city (see Fig. 1). After the bomb drops, an area around ground zero measuring just a few square blocks is cartoonishly blackened, and the narrator's dull voice assures the viewers that, in the event of a nuclear war, "the chance of your being hurt by an atomic bomb is slight."
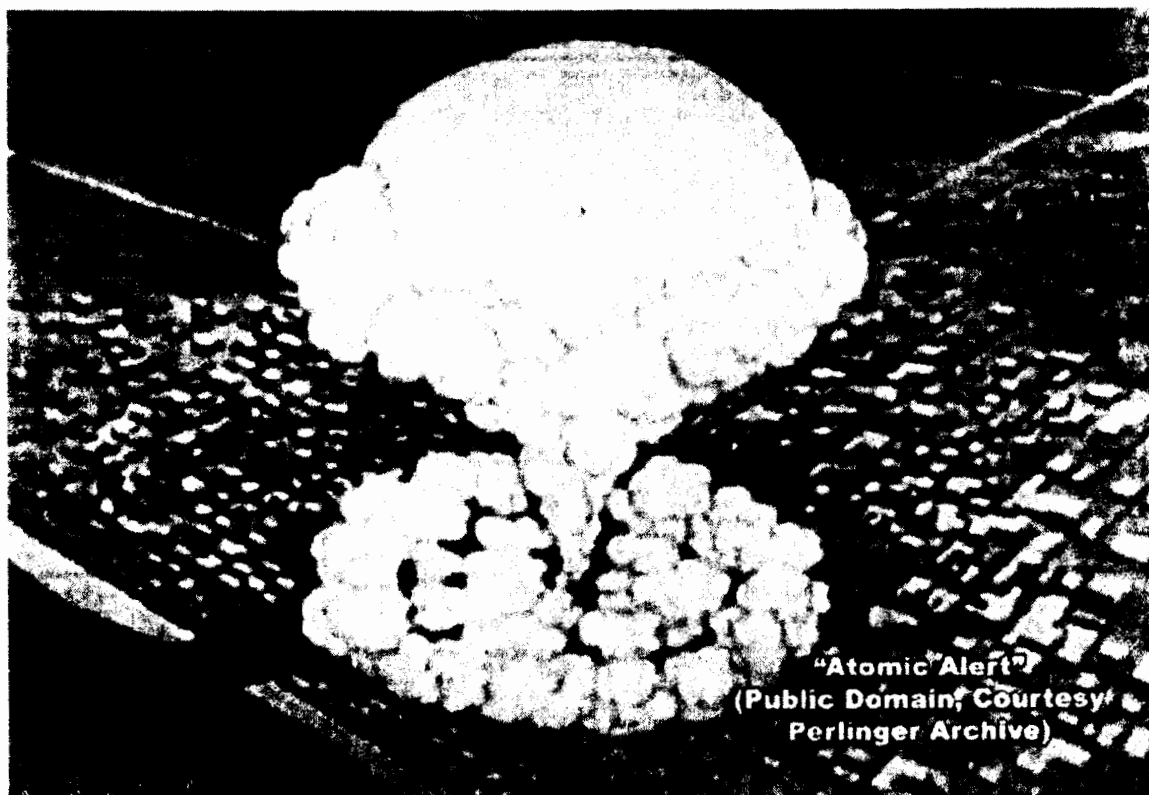
(Fig 1. "Atomic Alert")

Such a downplaying of the actual danger of nuclear war—which

presented nuclear air strikes as if they were comparable to the kind

traditional air raids suffered by Europe in the Second World War—was

common in Civil Defense films. This is particularly evident in what is

perhaps the most famous of all Civil Defense films, 1951's *Duck and

Cover*, which stars an anthropomorphic cartoon turtle who ducks into

his shell in order to survive the blast of a nuclear weapon. The actions of

the turtle were meant to serve as an example for what the film's viewers

should do to survive nuclear war. Of course, humans do not have shells,

but that is no huge problem, according to the film. Children are encouraged to "duck and cover" wherever they can: under a school desk, against the curb of a road, or even underneath a newspaper. The flimiest of shelters will keep them safe.

Probably the most ridiculous film of the era is *Our Cities Must Fight*, also from 1951. *Cities* features two official-looking government employees (who are white men with stern jaws, naturally) who spend their evening sitting around an office complaining about things. The men spend the majority of the film bemoaning the "cowards" who belong to the "take to the hills fraternity"—people who say that they would try to avoid certain death and run away from crowded metropolitan areas in the event of a nuclear attack. Cutaways of stock footage that is overlain with the narration of the men serves to relate the perils faced by the civilian populations of Europe in World War Two, once again underplaying the realities of nuclear war by asserting its comparability to traditional war. When the less-informed man asks his more intelligent companion what dangers might linger during a nuclear war, after the initial blast, the question is met with dismissive laughter. The audience is then told that there will be no significant lingering danger, and that radioactive fallout will only pose a threat lasting around a minute and a half. The film's ending can be described in no other way but as absurd;

it features one of the men taunting the audience, telling them that the inhuman "commies" behind the iron curtain think that Americans do not have the "guts" to stand up to a nuclear attack. Then, in the fashion of a WWF monologue or a fever dream, the man turns to the camera and asks plainly "have *you* got the guts?" as triumphant orchestral music begins to swell. Such an ending, though absurd seeming today, was doubtlessly very effective when presented to an audience that was both ignorant of the realities of nuclear war and fearful for its own safety and for the future of humankind. After all, the government that produced the films was the same one that could have very easily ended the world.

The misinformation presented in all three of these films is so egregious that I have trouble believing that it was not intentional. Even if it were not, the scientific accuracy of these films and the potential for these films to serve any actual good as far as equipping the public for nuclear war were both obviously of secondary importance. It is clear, rather, that the films were intended to accomplish three distinct goals. The first goal was to keep the public aware of the constant danger of nuclear war, ("Tony knows the bomb could explode any time of year, day or night" [*Duck and Cover*], "We must realize that in modern warfare city dwellers find themselves right in the front lines" [*Our Cities*]). The second goal was to underplay the actual danger of nuclear war, in order to make

it look survivable and manageable (as has been noted). The final goal was to present cooperation with the government as the only route through which survival and safety could be achieved. *Cities* accomplishes this final tenet through a combination of false pleading—insisting that attempting to escape a crowded city center is futile—and, most notably, through the use of direct taunts to evoke patriotism and shame. It will be shown that, out of necessity, *Pickup On South Street* and *Kiss me Deadly* do not attack these intentions directly; rather, they work within the mindset created by the applications of these intentions and, in doing so, erase a key moral distinction that had enabled these intentions.

CHAPTER 3

KISS ME DEADLY AND *PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET*

I mentioned earlier a staunch but mindless dismissal of

communism by *Pickup*'s most likeable character. This comment is

considered emblematic of Fuller's personal feelings, as the director was a

virulent anticommunist, his anticommunism had been so vocalized, in

fact, that early critics dismissed *Pickup on South Street* "as a McCarthyist

tract" which went supposedly overboard even for a film that was released

in 1953, at the height of the "anti-Red" movement (McArthur 139). But,

as Colin McArthur points out, "while [*Pickup*] is, indeed, an

anticommunist film, it is much less opportunistically so than [...] these

critics will allow." This is because the film itself was not seeking to curry

the favor of the United States government while putting forth an

anticommunist message, as were many other films of the time. In

reference to the film, Fuller said that "I wanted to take a poke at the

idiocy of the cold war climate of the fifties" (Fuller 10). This sets *Pickup*

apart from typical anticommunist films, which were made in

acquiescence to McCarthyism, as Fuller's film instead made a mockery of

McCarthyism by its working outside the simplistic bounds of

McCarthyism.

The subversion of *Pickup* comes, essentially, from the film's muddy moral climate. In *Our Cities Must Fight*, a pair of government employees tell the audience to stay put during a nuclear war and to have faith in the CDA to see everyone through any crisis that might arise. Most Civil Defense films were geared towards children, and they typically relied on the childish primacy of the "mental hygiene" genre of classroom films while using fear, and fear alone, as a qualifier for their statements—children are not expected to question advice that they believe their lives depend upon. The more "adult" *Our Cities*, however, derives its authority both from fear and from the virtue of the inherent goodness with which all actions of the United States are, according to the film, implicitly endowed. This goodness is due to the fact that the United States is not the U.S.S.R. and is therefore *not* evil. In the film, this is established through the use of the age-old wartime tactic of inventing and stressing the incomprehensible alterity of the enemy. As Michael Rogin points out in his examination of cold war films, their "[d]emonology [depends upon] a rigid insistence on difference" (2), and so the inherent goodness of the United States, in cold war terms, was defined in its binary relation to the badness of the U.S.S.R. Without this distinction, the moral authority of the United States melts away, and so goes its government's ability to tell its people what to do by using the rationale

that disobedience is immoral. *Pickup* is effective, then, because it erases any such moral distinction.

The plot of *Pickup* is fairly simple—it starts with a woman named Candy (Jean Peters) getting her wallet stolen by a "cannon" named Skip (Richard Widmark). Unbeknownst to Skip, Candy's wallet contains some microfilm upon which are printed nuclear secrets that Candy was unknowingly about to deliver to some Soviet agents as a favor for her ex-boyfriend, Charlie. The bulk of the film follows both the police and the Soviet agents as they try to get the secrets back from Skip, who refuses resolutely to hand them over to either side.

The confused moral status of both the police and the Soviets comes from the strikingly similar methods that the two sides employ while trying to find the missing microfilm. Both use Candy, for example, as if she were an object. She is first sent to track down Skip on behalf of Charlie and then, after falling in love with Skip upon their first meeting, she refuses to cooperate with the police when they ask her to do the same. When the police finally tell Candy about what was actually in her stolen wallet, she is aghast at the enormity of the task Charlie had asked her to perform, and immediately begins plotting a way to help Charlie, Skip, and herself escape the dangers posed by both the Soviets and the police.

The police and the Soviets both make use of Moe, the stool pigeon, offering up bribes in exchange for information regarding the whereabouts of Skip and the microfilm. When Moe is first interviewed, by the police, she hesitantly gives up Skip, in spite of the fact that Skip is a personal friend of hers. She does so only out of self interest, and when Skip finds out about it later on in the film, he forgives her without hesitation. After being informed of the details of the crime with which Skip is involved, however, Moe turns down a much larger bribe and refuses to cooperate with the communist agent, which leads to the exchange cited at the beginning of this essay. Moe may be willing to sell out a friend for money, but she balks at doing so when it entails her involvement in a communist plot—not because she necessarily hates communism, but because she knows that the communist agents will kill Skip.

In and of itself, this moral confusion is not all too subversive. The police in *Pickup* may not be angels, but they are shown in an unquestionably more positive light than are the communists with whom they are doing battle. Recent critics, such as Margot Henriksen, focus not upon the loose moral equivalence of the police and the Soviets but rather on the superiority of the moral code of a third group, the film's heroic criminals, pointing out that "[t]he criminals sacrifice themselves for one another and they will not cooperate with the communists, yet

they remain immune to the security mindset and 'patriotic eyewash' of the cops" (Henriksen 63). The focus then is not on the fact that *Pickup*'s criminals refuse to work with Soviets, per se, but that they refuse to engage in the fight being presented to them by their own government, which may be somewhat morally superior but is nonetheless reprehensible.

As Jack Shadoian notes, in *Pickup* "[i]t is not our lack of an opposing political philosophy but our lack of human value in the life we lead that leaves us poorly defended" from both the cold war and the threat of communism (188). The only *humane* characters in the seedy underworld of *South Street* are Candy, Jack, and Skip, and their basic human decency is explicitly attributable to the fact that they are outsiders, all operating outside of the plane of the cold war. Fuller himself describes these three characters as being "individualists, trusting no one, beyond politics, changes in governments, intellectual labels, and fashion" (8). Here, heroism—and survival—are not found in blind obedience to authority, nor in engaging in a fight against an enemy that audiences had been taught to hate and fear. Survival is instead achieved through the pursuit of self-interest.

Taking all of this into consideration, it can be said that, in *Pickup*, Fuller confiscates the main tenets of Civil Defense media and turns them

brilliantly around, and he does so while maintaining an anticommunist message that was strong enough to avoid ruining his career. The plane upon which Civil Defense media operates—that which was designed to keep a measured fear of nuclear war always in the backs of the minds of the American public—is, in *Pickup*, put in the filmic background in a manner that mirrors the way in which it is discussed in Civil Defense films such as *Our Cities Must Fight*. *Our Cities* simultaneously brings the threat of nuclear war to the consciousness of the viewer and also, through misinformation, manages to downplay the realities of that threat in order to make it seem manageable. Fuller achieves a very similar effect by simultaneously bringing the threat of nuclear war to the forefront by making it a primary plot device of the film and also relegating that same threat to a state of relative unimportance, acting as what Hitchcock called a "McGuffin," an interchangeable plot device that is exploited in order to further the story.

By framing his plot to set *Pickup* on the same plane as Civil Defense media, Fuller then completely subverts the typical message of such films. This is achieved first through an indirect questioning of the authority upon which the U.S. government made its declarations. This lack of moral clarity is brought to light by the fact that the film's heroes find salvation through refusing to cooperate with crooked government

officials, an act that serves to spoil the government's assertion that blind cooperation was the only route to survival.

The norms of the "hard boiled detective" genre of films were in 1976 laid out wonderfully in John G. Cawelti's New Critical (but still essential) study of formula stories. Cawelti's book sought simply to explain how the presence of certain aspects in certain stories results in those stories being considered works of a specific genre. A formula is, simply, "a conventional way of treating some specific thing or person" or some common form of a "larger plot type" to which a film can belong (5). Formulaic plots may as well be arithmetic formulas: *A* happens, then *B* happens, then *C* is added, and then the result is a romantic comedy or a suspense thriller or some other genre.

This New Critical assessment of genre formulas pertains to my postmodern reading of nuclear media because, in the case at least of the "hard boiled detective" genre that *Kiss Me Deadly* belongs to, the machinations of the genre itself were astoundingly similar to the machinations of nuclearism[5]. Released two years after *Pickup*, *Deadly* continued to use nuclearism as a McGuffin, but it also worked to subvert

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[5] "Nuclearism" is within this thesis used as a term to describe the enabling dialogue of nuclear war. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, but the main argument is that nuclear war is not a viable threat unless it is preceded by a dialogue that serves as an impetus for, among other things, the advancement of nuclear weapons technology, the creation of nuclear stockpiles, and the political/tactical justifications for launching a nuclear strike.

more directly the first two goals of Civil Defense media—in spite of this, it

is easy to understand why its message might have been initially

misunderstood, if for no other reason than that the film was a part of the

ultra-conservative "Mike Hammer" series. As a matter of fact, the novel

upon which the film was based was quite conservative, but its message

was turned around in the hands of liberal director Robert Aldrich. As

Edward Gallafent explains, "Aldrich took [his chance to make the film] as

an opportunity to express his disgust for Hammer and the politics of

Spillane" (241), and he achieved this through minor transgressions

against the norms of the "hard boiled" genre.

The "hard boiled" genre was decidedly conservative, to say the

least. As Cawelti explains, when delineating the formula,

> Two [factors] are particularly important: the subordination of the
> drama of solution to the detective's quest for the discovery and
> accomplishment of justice; and the substitution of a pattern of
> intimidation and temptation of the hero for the elaborate
> development in the classical story of what Northrop Fry calls 'the
> wavering finger of suspicion passing across several suspects."
> (142)

Also of prime importance is the detective's role as the sole force truly

capable of administering what is perceived as proper justice, "becoming a

judge as well as an investigator" (144). No one of most famous "hard

boiled" authors nor one of their respective fictional detectives so

embodied this disdain for the rational justice than Mickey Spillane and

Mike Hammer[6]. This abandonment of rationality in order to participate in a mindlessly self-destructive game acts as a parallel for nuclearism.

Aldrich's expression of disgust towards the character of Hammer was realized through the exaggeratedly selfish cruelty that the character exhibits. Acting a far cry from the suave ladies man portrayed by the other actors who had played Hammer on screen, Ralph Meeker's Hammer oozes creepiness. In *Deadly*, Hammer is not a criminal investigator, as was his wont; instead, he is a sleazy private investigator whose main sources of income are divorce cases. Even more noticeable is the shift of McGuffin between the film and the novel: in the book, Hammer is chasing after a cache of stolen jewelry. In the film, he is after a suitcase full of deadly nuclear material.

The plot of *Deadly* is complex: Hammer nearly hits a girl (Christina, played by Cloris Leachman) after she runs out into the road. She is obviously shaken and looks as if she has escaped from a mental institution. He intends to take her into town, in spite of the fact that she insists they probably will not make it and, cryptically, she makes Hammer promise to remember her. She is soon proven right—Hammer's

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[6] Textual references that back up this assertion abound, but none is a strong as the simple fact that an early Hammer novel was actually titled *I, The Jury*.

car gets ran off the road, Christina is killed, and Hammer is comatose for days.

Hammer awakes and is convinced that Christina was hooked up in something big, something so big, most likely, that if he could manage to get to the bottom of it he could stand to make a great deal of money. His search leads him into a gigantic conspiracy involving the group of people who had been around Christina around the time of her death. There are a dozen twists and turns to the plot, and the direct role of every single player in the conspiracy is never made completely clear—such minor details are unimportant both in the context of the film (which is masterfully crafted, to say the least) and as so far as this essay is concerned. What is important to know is that, at the film's end, the case full of nuclear materials is in the hands of Carmen, Christina's double-crossing roommate (or, rather, a woman pretending to be Christina's roommate), who has played for fools both Hammer and Hammer's mysterious nemesis. It is she who finishes the film, by killing Hammer's nemesis and then, against his dying declaration, opening the nuclear suitcase, which causes her to get engulfed by flames. Hammer escapes the blaze moments before he himself would have gotten engulfed and ends the film gazing helplessly up at the house from which he had just escaped as it burns to the ground.

Like *Pickup, Deadly* also focuses on the muddy moral climate of the era, and this is where the indictment of the genre and its parallel to nuclear rhetoric both come into play. Andrew Dickos goes so far as to say that the picture is "one of the definitive films of the 1950s because of the peculiar, yet uninterrupted, line it follows from the classical figure of the private eye as seeker of truth to the complications that follow *when the language of truth is no longer recognizable*" (133, italics mine). This is made *very* clear in the film. Hammer's secretary/love interest/cheap floozy Velda often quizzes him about what is exactly the *point* of his quest and his self-destructive need to participate in the search for "the great whatsit" with which he is so obsessed, pointing out that his irrational, indecent chase for the nuclear mystery is what brings about his ultimate demise. More strikingly, before Hammer loses Christine, she recites to him a piece of Christina Rosetti's verse: "But if the darkness and corruption leave a vestige of the thoughts that once we had," encouraging him to remember her as a representative of purity presumably spoilt by the corruption of the system around her, the system that he dives into determinedly.

It is also worth noting quickly that *Deadly* focuses upon a more realistic portrait of danger than that which was presented in the Civil Defense films. However, my main concern with *Deadly*'s subversive

nature is how it manages to so effectively turn the nuclear arguments propounded by Civil Defense on their respective heads. Like *Pickup*, *Deadly* annexes the government's manipulation of the public's consciousness of nuclear war. But *Deadly* goes much further than does *Pickup*, indicting directly the rhetoric and secrecy surrounding nuclearism as being the cause of damage and death, and pointing towards the conservative, "macho" players in such a system—particularly Hammer—not as heroes, but as agents that serve only to further the destructive capabilities of that system.

CHAPTER 4

POST-*KISS ME DEADLY* NUCLEAR FILMS AND A THEORETICAL

HISTORY OF CIVIL DEFENSE

With the contemporary critical consensus declaring both *Pickup*

and *Deadly* classics of American cinema, it is tempting for a modern-day

observer to overestimate the importance of these films in affecting the

greater public consciousness of their time. Unfortunately, it is doubtful

that either film had very much if any effect upon its initial release, as

both performed unremarkably at the box office and were received blandly

by critics. The greater influence of the films was felt, however, in the

subsequent liberalization of Hollywood, the likes of which of course

cannot be ascribed to two then-obscure noir films but for which those

films nonetheless acted as wonderful, and no doubt not-unnoticed,

artistic precursors, setting the field for other filmmakers to subvert

nuclearism through the sly use of generic transgression.

There is no one moment that can be singled out as the start of

McCarthyism. Some, like Athan Theoharis, suggest that it began as far

back as the Truman administration, when the rhetoric of the time

"conducted the foreign policy debate along narrowly anti-communist

lines" (76). Others point the events of the early fifties, including Sputnik,

Soviet nuclear testing, and the trial of Alger Hiss, as McCarthyism's

starting point. Likewise, the apex of McCarthyism cannot be pinpointed, and neither can the fall of McCarthyism. I think it fair to estimate the height of McCarthyism occuring between 1954 and 1955, when blacklists of normal citizens (as opposed to high profile politicians and celebrities) were being circulated. This peak coincided with beginning of the end of McCarthyism, with Edward R. Murrow's famous episodes of *See it Now* airing in 1953. This jumpstarted the public's negative perception of McCarthy and coincided nicely with the liberalization of the criticisms against McCarthy (and, soon afterwards, the relative liberalization of all dissent).

Due then to fortunate political circumstance, nuclear subject matter became fair game for Hollywood soon after the releases of *Pickup* and *Deadly*. However, very little came about by way of subversion, as most of these new nuclear-themed films were distinctly non-subversive, and the only real change that viewers were presented with was the fact that nuclear McGuffins were suddenly presented in clear language. Until fairly recently, most critics took these types of movies—movies like *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955)—as signs that nuclear-themed popular media was relatively angst-free until the high angst of the Kennedy administration. Several critics, including most prominently the aforementioned Margot Henriksen, have argued against this in several

different ways. Henriksen has attempted to refocus the issue pragmatically, much as I have done, by realizing that, up until the release of the noir films, overt mentions of The Bomb were more or less verboten except in very specific circumstances. Even after the release of the noir films, Hollywood was still generally unwilling to do anything that would have upset the government, and so the lack of nuclear angst was not due to any reflection of the public's subconscious so much as it was due to the fact that filmmakers had essentially been gagged.

Jerome Shapiro, and many others like him, take a different tack, arguing that the horror films that used nuclear themes as McGuffins (often buttressed with shoddy moralizing) were evidence of the public's continual and all-pervasive nuclear angst, which, according to Shapiro, is only nominally different than the other apocalyptic fears that have influenced art and expression throughout recorded history. While I think that Shapiro is right in principle—at least, so far as is concerned the overlooked nuclear focus of the films of the mid to late fifties—I am afraid that his interpretation "wags the dog," so to speak.

It was not the public's mindset that influenced nuclear films; rather, it was nuclear films that were influencing the public mindset. The more clear mentions of nuclear issues and materials in the post-noir films were still largely mindless and non-subversive, only they (as well as

the Civil Defense films that had followed) had been influenced by the standards set forward by the noir films. Each of these forms of media— the governmental and the subversive—were influenced by one another, fed off of one another in a system of recursive existence. The planes of argument laid down initially, by Civil Defense media, were redefined by the noir films, and were redefined yet again by the latter Civil Defense and nuclear-friendly films, which sought more than anything to normalize the notion of nuclearism and the threat of nuclear war, to make them into easily-exploitable agents that were only feared when a fear of them was beneficial.

In contemporary (post)modern cultural debate, planes of argument are really planes of existence. Group *A* does something, which is contradicted by the actions of Group *B*, which are there contradicted by Group *A*, and so on and so forth. The nuclear question was one that was discourse-focused, then, and this discourse brought into being the tangible threat of nuclear annihilation. This was noted by Jacques Derrida points in his essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now," in which he makes the case for the threat of nuclear war's creation by and manipulation through discourse, all of which were due to the fact that nuclear war was "*fabulously textual*, through and through" (23). This fabulous textuality is due to nuclear war being without precedent, having never happened

and existing only as a non-tangible, envisioned threat—"a signified referent." This imagined threat of war, Derrida realizes, led to a reality (consisting of nuclear stockpiles and weapons systems and men, like Reagan, who were, conceivably, very willing to use them) that, paradoxically, legitimized the imagined threat upon which their existence was predicated.

Like Shapiro (and many other critics/theorists), Derrida is also concerned with the uniqueness/commonality of the threat of nuclear war within the contextual spectrum of other, past apocalyptical fears. In "No Apocalypse," Derrida recognizes that the threat of nuclear apocalypse is both unique and similar to other apocalyptical threats, and he stresses the need of this awareness, so that theorists not allow themselves to ignore historical parallels just as they should not turn themselves into "suicidal sleepwalkers blind and deaf to what might be absolutely unique" (21). Such a willing acceptance of ambivalence was of monumental importance, as, at the time, most theorists and critics had concerned themselves almost exclusively with questions regarding the uniqueness of the threat of nuclear war as apocalyptic text. This question is still very much alive today, but—from a postmodern standpoint, at least—Derrida has rendered it a non-question, a background concern that one should be aware of but not concerned with

explicitly. The real concern lies in identifying and destroying the textual structure(s) that legitimize the threat of nuclear war.

In "Cartoons, Noise, Bodies as Toys," Robert D. Newman delineates postmodernity's tendency to destroy through explanation the power structures that define and control social order. As is shown by Derrida and also explained by Newman, contemporary power structures are predicated upon illusory images that beget realities, and postmodernism aims to "demythify" the illusions upon which those structures are based, "to expose myths as ephemeral constructs designed to enhance power structures" (107).

Now, the threat of nuclear war is not the kind of seemingly intractable perception that postmodernism is more obviously suited to destroy[7]. Newman's piece is concerned with the run-up to the first Iraq War, the decidedly imperialist goals of which were granted legitimacy from the functionally retarded state of popular and political discourse in the early nineties. This thesis is not concerned with the particularities surrounding the Persian Gulf War; however, I am greatly concerned with Newman's pleading conclusion, in which he maintains that "we [the postmodern, subversive, and usually anti-war community] have forgotten

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[7] These tend to be binaries of social import. For example, something along the lines of the notion that Caucasians are superior to members of other races, or something else that is equally insane as well as equally implicitly or tacitly accepted as fact.

the importance of finding new and better stories" which were necessary in order to frame their arguments according to the precepts of the sound-bite oriented climate of discourse that had been brought about by the then-bourgeoning digital age (113). This plea comes after Newman outlines the recursive-ness of the relationship between postmodern texts and existing power structures, showing how the destruction of normalized, power-structure-upholding myths comes about through the creation of new myths, which are then normalized, which are then subverted, then normalized, and then subverted, and so on and so forth. According to Newman, this mythmaking is self-consumption, "a cannibalizing of a culture of images which perpetually reproduces itself to feed our identity quest" (114).

I would not go so far as to say that any of the films being reviewed in this essay are formally postmodern. It is my assertion, rather, that these films are subversive, and that they are especially subversive in a postmodern sense, in that they disrupt the legitimizing discourse of nuclear war. Since nuclear war is unique in that its entire existence was and is discourse driven, simply disrupting the discourse of nuclearism is a subversive act.

When these films—the Civil Defense shorts and the subversive features—are viewed within the context of an antagonistic relationship

with both sides simultaneously fighting and feeding off of one another, then it can be said *both* groups of texts are postmodern. Though there were no postmodern intentions on behalf of the filmmakers, the application of the title works because it is here not being used to describe some sort of self-aware branding (as if "postmodern" were a genre, like "comedy" or "romance") or an adherence to the formal bounds of postmodernism, but is instead meant to refer to the manner in which the importance of the films is discussed. The application of the "postmodern" title is especially appropriate for nuclear media, as the myths underlying nuclear media's claims to authority (claims that were, as was outlined above, upset by the noir films) were eventually normalized and restructured by the Civil Defense films that followed.

The acceptance of the confused moral status of nuclear war is evident in—and was seemingly embraced by—the post-noir Civil Defense films. The noir films were illustrative of (and participated in the dialogue that helped to further) a shift of public consciousness away from a naïve (outward) belief in the absolute moral superiority of the United States government, but that did not serve to sever the government's claim to nuclear authority and their resultant exploitation of authority as a means to preserve power (regardless of the fact that such means *legitimized* the threat of nuclear war). In this new, especially

McCarthyist era of Civil Defense films, the justification for authority was never offered—it was assumed, not open to potential questioning. The prime focus was instead placed upon the downplaying of the actual danger of nuclear war, and it was from this basis that most post-noir Civil Defense films took their cue.

The "most fabulous" example of this is the outrageous *The House in the Middle*, a film that was a cooperative effort of the USCDA and the "National Clean-Up, Paint-Up, Fix Up Bureau" which seems to have been forgotten by history but was assumedly a branch of the USCDA itself. Now, the question that the reader is probably asking his or her self right now is "what on earth do cleanliness and fresh paint have to do with national security?" Why, *everything*, according to *House in the Middle*. Near the film's beginning, its stark narrator booms that "a house that is neglected is a house that may be *doomed* in the atomic age." The film then takes viewers to the Nevada Proving Ground, where they are shown how fresh-painted, clean houses hold up to nuclear blasts for a full one quarter of one second longer than do dirty, run-down homes.

The film is a treasure trove for scholars concerned with a wide number of fields—its contempt for the poor and their implied role in actually *causing* nuclear war is especially evident, as the narrator often talks of the dirty houses as the ones that a viewer might find in "slum

areas," with a strong tone of disgust used to punctuate the word *slum*. All I am concerned with, however, is the fact that the film continues to achieve the primary goals of early Civil Defense films—the creation and maintenance of exploitable fear that is small enough to avoid uncontrollable (and unexploitable) panic but still large enough to remain persistent—and that it does so through distraction. I cannot believe I am actually writing this since it seems so ridiculous, but *this government-produced film tries to use the threat of nuclear war in order to scare people into keeping their lawns clean.* This film serves as clear and unmistakable evidence the government was trying to downplay the threat of nuclear war and was exploiting such a downplaying as a means through which they could placate their citizens while at the same time, by speaking of nuclear war as if it were an everyday fact of life in the contemporary era, served to reinforce people's fear of the war.

The foundation upon which this control is predicated is the perceived manageability of nuclear war. *On the Beach* (1959) uses this foundation and very postmodernly turns it on its head, annexing the government's strategy of making nuclearism all-pervasive and bringing the actual danger of nuclear war to the forefront of the issue's discourse. And the film's postmodernity does not stop there; it also annexes the

presentation of the de facto pro-nuclear popular films of the time[8] by presentation of the de facto pro-nuclear popular films of the time[8] by presenting its stark message in a manner that can only be described as traditional, expected, and—were it divorced from its subject matter— unexceptional (which, as it is used to convey its dire subject matter, makes it quite exceptional). A simple look at the cast listing should be enough to catch most readers off guard: Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, and even Fred Astaire all appear in the film. These are big Hollywood stars, and *On the Beach* is a big-budget (for the time) Hollywood melodrama. All that sets it apart is that it just so happens to deal with the complete and total annihilation of mankind after a nuclear war.

In the film, Peck stars as an American submarine captain who was fortunate enough to be underwater during an all-out nuclear war between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Everyone in both of those countries died in the blasts and in the ensuing fallout, as did everyone else on earth aside from the people of Australia, whose fortunate geographic placement has granted them a reprieve of four or five months, before wind patterns are to cover them with deadly fallout. The film more or less follows its cast of characters as they prepare for the death that is moving quickly towards them. At the film's end, all animal life on earth

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[8] These were mostly horror films, like the aforementioned *It Came from Beneath the Sea,* in which nuclear war or nuclear byproducts typically create a monster of some sort. These helped the government, by keeping the issues non-pervasive, and also by making the threat of nuclear war seem manageable, since the monsters were almost always defeated handily.

dies. Such a simple, hopeless ending acted as a clear indictment of the inability of anyone or anything—politicians, the military, movie heroes, honor, or even love—to stave off the total annihilation that would come with a full-scale nuclear exchange.

On the Beach is more of a traditional "movie" than any other film being reviewed in this essay. Its dialogue is simple and melodramatic. Its characters fit into common molds (Peck as a grizzled seaman; Anthony Perkins as a young, wide-eyed Private; Gardner as a floozy seeking redemption). There is even a very run-of-the-mill romantic subplot involving Peck and Gardner. Some critics, like Shapiro, point to the film's "hollow characters [and] obvious directorial machinations in order to deride *On the Beach* as little more than a nuclear-themed "weepie" " (92-93). I feel, however, that the power of the film comes from the fact that these generic, predictable aspects are contrasted against some eerily horrific scenes.

The most striking of these is a scene near the film's end in which a viewer is presented, without prompting, with a man standing at a street corner before a doctor and a pair of Red Cross nurses. The man gives his name, address, and the number of people in his household. It is up to the viewer to realize that the man is picking up his family's allotment of suicide pills, and, just as this realization is being made, the camera pulls

back to reveal the man standing at the front of the line that contains several hundred people and extends for blocks. Even now, and even to my cynical, media-saturated self, the scene is remarkably chilling.

Susan Sontag was one of the first critics to take pervasive, pre-Kennedy nuclear anxiety as a given, but she argues that nuclear films, as well as all other science-fiction films, exploit this anxiety only for cheap effect, and in doing so serve to "normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring [viewers] to it" (37). As far as are concerned the films that used nuclear issues merely as McGuffins, this was certainly true, and the same can be said for the saturation of Civil Defense media that the public was forced to endure. What sets apart postmodernly subversive films like *On the Beach* is that they were able to annex the particular means of such a purveyance of normality—in this case, the means of melodramatic presentation—and tweak them enough to convey a subversive message.

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CHAPTER 5

FAIL-SAFE, DOCTOR STRANGELOVE, AND THE FINAL STAGE OF COLD WAR CIVIL DEFENSE MEDIA

At the time of its release, *On the Beach* was a commercial and critical success and its messaged aided to help shift public consciousness regarding the threat of nuclear war. The actual dangers of nuclear war were finally being aired openly, to large audiences. The misinformation spread in the old Civil Defense films was now more widely revealed as being laughable.

Tensions between the United States and the U.S.S.R. heightened, peaking with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, and the public's perception of nuclear war had changed from it being an abstract, somewhat unlikely, and reasonably survivable potentiality into something that was not only likely but would also bring about the complete destruction of all life on earth. It was at this juncture that subversive resistance nuclear dialogue brought itself into full focus, stopped holding back and began directly and harshly indicting nuclearism.

Of course, an immeasurable amount of other factors must have also contributed to what appeared to be a fairly sudden liberalization of free expression, but so far as Hollywood was concerned it is very safe to

assume that *On the Beach's* success (and the government's lack of significant reaction after its release) helped usher in the unprecedented allowance of mainstream filmic dissidence that soon followed. This is not to say that *On the Beach* ushered in some sort of sea change of governmental policy regarding film. It is just that no one was blacklisted for their participation in the creation or release of *On the Beach.* It may not have caused the liberalization of filmic dissent, then, but it certainly acted as a sign that filmmakers could get away with more than they perhaps thought they could.

It is because of this that I can say that, were it not for pieces of subversive media such as *On the Beach*, much of the era's latter dissent would never have come into being, and, although the films of 1964—*Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*—were concerned primarily with the destruction of official nuclear discourse aside from—and including—that which was presented in Civil Defense films, these subversive films were nonetheless influenced by all Civil Defense films, and were concerned particularly with the Civil Defense films that were released between 1959 and 1964.

A-Bomb Blast Effects (1959) and *About Fallout* (1963) were both typical examples of post-*On the Beach* Civil Defense media, in that each was concerned with pseudo-scientific diversion. That is, they sought to divert a viewer's attention away from any realistic consideration of the

danger of nuclear war, and such a diversion was undertaken in a manner that attempted to effect authority through a more "honest" presentation of the inner workings and potential affects of nuclear war. *A-Bomb Blast Effects* is a silent filmstrip that contains pictures detailing early nuclear tests. It was meant to be played with accompanying narration that explained the effects felt by soldiers who were very near a blast. Of course, these effects were downplayed, but the film's sparse, documentary style presentation lent it more of an air of credibility than did the melodramatic or cartoonish presentations of older Civil Defense films.

About *Fallout* is more obviously pseudo-scientific, and it goes so far as to begin in a laboratory in which a scientist, replete with white lab coat, holds towards the camera a glass plate on which pieces of "actual radioactive fallout" are sitting (they look like little rocks). The film then goes in the direction of innumerable other, non-Civil Defense classroom films, featuring a loud-voiced narrator, shoddy animation, pictures of outer space, and orchestral music that vaguely resembles the theme from *The Jetsons*. The film clearly—and, amazingly, *correctly*—details the creation of radioactive fallout, and explains in no uncertain terms that fallout is, indeed, deadly (affirming what the public had already been taught by subversive media).

Against this backdrop of seeming respectability, the film very cleverly continues the Civil Defense tradition of downplaying the danger of nuclear war. Only instead of lying outright, as did the earlier films, *About Fallout* uses tricks of rhetoric to undermine the danger. At one point, for example, the film explains via the use of a cartoon clock and a big purple dot (meant to symbolize the radioactive power of fallout), that fallout retains only "one one-hundredth" of its initial radioactive strength a mere forty-eight hours after its creation.. The purple dot shrinks to a miniscule size and the viewer is left to feel quite safe, but what the film fails to mention is that a very small piece of fallout can still be *immensely* deadly for months—sometimes even years—after a nuclear explosion[9].

At the film's end, the wondrousness of the USCDA's realistically ineffectual fallout shelter program is stressed, and the viewer is made to believe that he or she is being led by a competent and caring government. This was a lie, of course: even government-sponsored Civil Defense literature said that the best possible outcome of widespread shelter use would see projected death tolls fall from about 170 million to

[9] Minimal exposure to the radioactive fallout at Hiroshima, for example, produced a significant death rate increase years after the city was bombed. According to the Institute for Energy and Environmental research, some 80,000 US cancer cases were caused by fallout emanating from highly controlled (and supposedly safe) open-air nuclear tests. A full-scale nuclear exchange would produce fallout levels that would dwarf either of these. According to a report filed by Congress' Office of Technology Assessment in 1972, the *residual* cancer deaths that would be spawned by a single series of surface burst attacks aimed *only* at U.S. oil refineries would number between one and five and one half million (113), and that is assuming an adequate shelter program is used for an extended period of time. In the case of a full-scale nuclear conflict, death by fallout would be inevitable for all those not killed in the initial blasts.

about 110 million in the event of a 10,000 megaton nuclear exchange, as is shown at the table in the bottom of this paragraph. This very hopeful figure not only undermines the probability that a full-scale nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union would most likely see blasts that were much larger than a mere 10,000 megatons, but also assumed ideal wind conditions and nearly universal compliance with suggestions for sheltering, downplayed the lingering danger posed by fallout, and completely ignored the other disastrous effects of a full-scale nuclear war. So then, even ignoring actual dangers and assuming that everything worked according to plan during a nuclear exchange, by the government's own projections more than half of the United States' population would be wiped out in the first few days of a nuclear war. In spite of this, *About Fallout* still attempts to suggest that compliance with government suggestions is somehow a realistic route to survival.

POPULATION
MILLIONS

SURVIVORS WITHOUT SHELTER

LIFE SAVING POTENTIAL OF FALLOUT SHELTER SYSTEM

FATALITIES WITHOUT SHELTERS

FATALITIES WITH SHELTERS
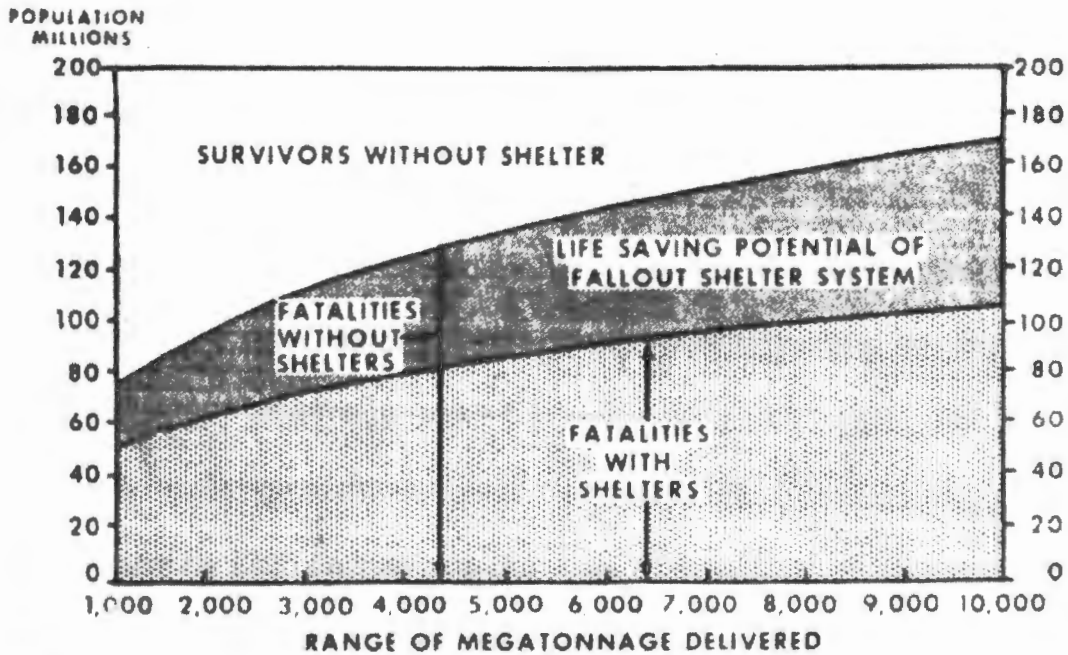
RANGE OF MEGATONNAGE DELIVERED

FIGURE 1.—Lifesaving potential of fallout shelter system in attacks against military-urban-industrial targets. In event of attacks against military targets alone, total fatalities would be reduced and lifesaving potential of shelters would be increased. (Source: Composite of Department of Defense damage-assessment studies.)

(Figure 2. Congress of the United States. *Effects.* 3)

This shows that, although the means of presentation had to adjust themselves in answer to the forms of subversive media that had come about since the introduction of Civil Defense media, the main goals of such media were by the early to mid 1960s very much the same as they had been all along. *About Fallout* still makes its viewers acutely aware of the danger of nuclear war, still grossly underplays the actual danger of nuclear war, and still presents cooperation with the government as the only way through which a nuclear war could be survived.

The anti-nuclearism of the middle 1960s, including very prominently *Dr. Strangelove* and *Fail Safe,* rendered moot most pillars of nuclear dialogue. Civil Defense media had managed to adapt itself in order to answer the concerns posed by ten years of subversive media, keeping its messages essentially the same while adjusting only its means of presentation. What was needed in order for a new generation of subversive media to really succeed, then, was not to address directly the claims made by Civil Defense media—not to question the authority of the government or to point out the inaccuracies of their invalid claims—but to demonize nuclear rhetoric itself so much so that the government would view engaging in any sort of nuclear discourse as a no-win situation.

The first of these films to be released was Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Strangelove* is one of—if not *the*—most critically revered films ever made, and as I assume that any reader of an essay such as mine is at least somewhat familiar with it, I will keep my plot outline as simple as possible: the film shifts between three separate locations, including an Air Force base, a high-altitude bomber plane, and the Pentagon's ultra-secret "war room." The film begins with the obviously insane commander of the Air Force base, General Jack D. Ripper, putting his base on

lockdown and ordering the bombers under his command to break into Soviet airspace and commence a nuclear attack.

This leads to the cockpit of one of the fighter planes, whose leader, Major Kong (played by American "cowboy" actor Slim Pickens) lauds his crew with flowery, patriotic speech regarding the gallant necessity of their unpleasant task. The speech is made comical both by the earnest fire with which Pickens delivers it—the actor was unaware of *Strangelove's* antinuclear "doomsday" nature—and by the fact that the audience knows it to be little more than hot air. Picture the following accompanied by the swelling sounds of "Johnny Comes Marching Home Again:"

Well boys I reckon this is it: Nuke-a-lar combat, toe-to-toe with the Ruskies. Well look boys, I ain't much a hand at makin' speeches, but I got a pretty fair idea that something pretty dog-gone important is goin' on back there. Now I got a pretty fair idea about some of the personal emotions that some a' you fellas may be thinkin'. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be human beings if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelings about nuke-a-lar combat. But I want you to remember one thing: the folks back home is a' countin' on ya' and by golly we ain't about to let 'em down. Tell ya' something else: if this things turns out to be half as important as I figure it just might be, I'd say that you're all in line for some important promotions and personal citations when this thing's over with. And that goes for every last one of ya' regardless of your race, color, or your creed. Now let's get this thing on the hump, we got some flyin' to do!

The film then segues to the government's "war room," in which the fictional president, his cabinet, and various high-ranking officials,

including the Soviet ambassador, try desperately to prevent the attack from occurring. The desperation becomes all the more great with the Soviet ambassador's revelation that his government had created a "Doomsday" device. Designed as a deterrent to war, the device automatically and without exception will release a flurry of nuclear missiles upon the occasion of the USSR receiving an attack. These missiles have been specially designed to create a fallout so intense that it will last for nearly a century, effectively meaning that a nuclear strike against the USSR would guarantee the destruction of all animal life on earth.

Strangelove cuts back and forth between these three locations for the entirety of the film. Eventually, the men in the war room manage to issue the recall code that had been kept secret by General Ripper, which leads to all of the attack planes pulling back before dropping their bombs. That is, all of the attack planes except the one led by Major Kong, as a radio malfunction resultant of a missile attack prevents the reception of the recall code. The plane's crew work together quite brilliantly to overcome a huge number of obstacles, including nearly getting shot down, being chased by the entire Soviet air force, and then having to manually release the bombs, in order to bring about the end of the world. The irony of the crew's actions—that they worked so hard and

overcame staggering odds in order to bring about their own demise—is a key aspect of the film's subversive message.

Strangelove's popularity, social import, and easily perceived socio-sexual subtexts have led to a large number of critical works being written about it; however, due paradoxically to the massive and diverse amount of critical works the film has generated, there is no "typical" or common reading of the film, nor does there exist any popularly or contemporarily debated argument regarding the film's intentions or reception. As such, I plan on limiting my sources to just a few, and to limit them to pieces written more recently, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the effective end of the cold war.

Ray Pratt, in his study of cinematic paranoia, heaps praise on the film. His prognosis of the film's reception and import resonates so strongly with the vast majority of readings of the film (not to mention my personal feelings towards the film), that I cannot help but quote it at length:

> In terms of *radical* documents, [*Strangelove*] is arguably as important as Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (written with Alex Haley), the SDS's "Port Huron Statement," Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, or the songs of Bob Dylan. No single cultural artifact better represents the disintegration of the American consensus in the early and mid-1960s and the new cultural forces challenging it. It is the quintessential parodic portrait of cold war anti-Communist paranoia, visionary in its moral critique of the arrogance of power

and presumptive conceit of military planners who seemed certain
that an accidental nuclear war could never occur. (97)

Pratt goes on explain that much of the film's general appeal lies in its
documentation of what Joshua Meyrowitz calls the "'back region' of
behavior by public persons," the desire by the general public to know
what is happening behind official fronts put up by the ruling classes.
This showcasing of the "back regions" of the powers behind the nuclear
war recursively influenced and was influenced by the public's perception
of the nuclear war machine, confirming the widely held but previously
rarely articulated belief that Americans "were part of a culture trapped in
its military technology, unable to recognize the enormous horrific
possibilities posed by nuclear weapons and strategies, and full of
illusions about the ability of humans to control them" (100). The film's
power, then, came not simply from mocking or examining the
machinations of nuclear war but by validating the public's preconceived
notions of the machinations of nuclear war, notions that were most
certainly influenced by the preceding decade of nuclear media.

Toni Perrine says more or less the same about *Strangelove* as well
as *Fail Safe* (which will be discussed shortly), claming that both "give
cinematic articulation to widely shared but largely unvoiced anxiety
about the irreconcilable absurdity of life in the nuclear age," an absurdity

that in *Strangelove* was imbued with serious currency in spite of the film's slapstick/comical nature (126). To do this, Kubrick used essentially the same route as did the civil defense films of the era, making silliness seem completely believable through the use of a serious-seeming, documentary style presentation.

As Perrine notes, the film effects the authoritative, almost objective feel of a documentary, using "a documentary-style voice-over narration" at certain points, and recreating "documentary-style combat footage" with its occasional, highly effective use of shaky handheld cameras (123). This observation is important, as it showcases *Strangelove*'s postmodern subversion—its ability to annex the supposedly authoritative narrative presentation of government media and use it towards a subversive end. It is this effected authority, illusory but powerful, that allows *Strangelove* to present a message that is taken seriously in spite of its being comically absurd. Jerome Shapiro points out that "behind [the film's] humor lies an intense seriousness: the characters and events are not real but the neuroses seems plausible" (144).

Shapiro discusses *Strangelove* mainly as the film relates to his argument regarding the apocalyptic commonality of nuclear films, and so he does not focus directly upon the film's subversive aspects. However, Shapiro's observations regarding the duality of the film—its being both

comically absurd and deadly serious—are of great interest to this essay.

Shapiro notes that

> [o]n the one hand, the film is a burlesque; all the characters and institutions are lampooned. One source of humor is that each character is familiar, a cliché, a stereotype taken to the point of unbelievable exaggeration. On the other hand, the characters are so tightly constructed that they are credible, real. (150)

This is of interest as it shows how *Strangelove* managed to bring to light the rather constructed nature of its contemporary nuclear discourse. Arms races, official casualty approximations, bomb shelters, *The House in the Middle*, McCarthyism, and Khrushchev banging his shoe against the table at the UN: all of it was, as Derrida noted decades later, fabulously textual. It was playacting. The dialogue surrounding nuclearism was as formulaic as a romance novel, as absurd as a *Keystone Cops* serial, and as dependent upon the proper reception of its audience for the continuation of its own existence as is any hackneyed, third rate, unfunny television program. Nuclearism was a *joke,* and the people who manufactured it were clowns. Only those clowns could have ended the lives of every single thing in the whole, wide world. That is where the brilliance of *Strangelove* is found: the film managed better than any other work of art before or since to bring to light the absurd nature of nuclearism.

The reason this bringing to light of the absurd, constructed, and theatrical nature of nuclear discourse is so important is perhaps better described by a viewing of Sidney Lumet's venerable *Fail Safe*, a film that was released months after *Strangelove* and was largely ignored by both audiences and critics. This lack of attention was no doubt due primarily to the poor timing of the film's release: not only is it not as enjoyable a film as *Strangelove* (really, what is?), but it shared with *Strangelove* a very similar structure: most of the film's action segues between three different settings and its characters are overblown caricatures meant to resemble the real-life promulgators of nuclear discourse.

Those clichéd characters that Shapiro mentioned, in *Strangelove*, all have rough counterparts in *Fail Safe*. *Strangelove* had its insanely paranoid army-man-with-his-finger-on-The-Button with General Ripper, who launched the war that would destroy mankind because he feared that fluoridation was a Communist plot that had robbed him of his sexual potency. It had its cowboy-blind-with-moronic-patriotism in Major Kong, who, in perhaps the most iconic scene is the history of western film, rides a nuclear warhead between his legs as if it were a bucking bronco, cheering wildly, waving his cowboy hat in the air, so full of nationalism and happy to be unquestioningly completing his mission that he is blindly *proud of the fact that he is ending the world.* It had a

bumbling, ineffectual president, a military strategist who regarded the deaths of tens of millions of people as an acceptable loss, a Werner Von Brahn-type of crazed, ex-Nazi scientist, and a Russian ambassador who, in spite of knowing full well that the world has effectively ended, persists in taking spy pictures of the pentagon's war room at the film's end.

In *Strangelove* all of these characters are overblown to comic effect that is so dismissive of the absurdity of these characters that, were it not for the film's subject matter, I might consider it unfair or even mean. In *Fail Safe*, these characters are treated less derisively, and allowed to speak their parts in the same manner that they were in the popular press. Perrine notes that, "[i]n *Fail Safe*, the nuclear dilemma is personified in the character of various military strategists and advisors who *overtly* represent various viewpoints in the nuclear debate" (123, emphasis mine). The "overt" nature of this representation is due to the realistic nature of the way through which characters are portrayed.

Ironically, it was *Strangelove's* over-the-top derision that had apparently divorced its characters enough from their real-world counterparts to allow for outward criticism. When the same criticism was made towards similar characters but in more restrained tones, in *Fail Safe*, it was dismissed. This popular reception has not stopped a handful of the film's admirers from asserting otherwise, however. Due

mostly in reaction to the sad fact that majority of *Fail Safe*'s usually mediocre reviews unfailingly compare the film unfavorably to *Strangelove*, most critics who praise the film do so in defensive tones, framing the picture against its more successful counterpart.

In his examination of Lumet's entire body of work, for example, Frank Cunningham starts off his 20-page reading of *Fail Safe* by dedicating nearly two pages to a dismissal of *Strangelove*. The critic calls *Strangelove* counterproductive, essentially, saying that in it "Kubrick desensitizes his audience, allowing us the easy response of laughing away a horror about which, his film implicitly alleges, we can do nothing anyway" (136). This is to be taken as a special affront, because for the rest of Cunningham's reading of *Fail Safe* it is clear that he either considers the "placation/desensitization through overexposure" readings of dissident nuclear media as being indicative of ineffective forms of such media. Sure, he seems to suggest, *other* anti-nuclear films may have lulled their audience into complacency but *Fail Safe* is a notable exception. I hope that the rest of this essay has proven this assertion false.

I beg to not be misunderstood: aside from its start, I think Cunningham's reading of *Fail Safe* is fantastic. I would never dream of questioning Cunningham's scholarship or his encyclopedic knowledge of

the works of Lumet; however, I fear that he takes a poor tack in starting off his reading of Lumet's film with a dismissal of Kubrick's. If anything, such an inclusion should have made obvious the fact that the two films—and the public's reception of each—compliment one another. One does not cancel the other out, and both films work towards the same, basic goal. At one point, Cunningham suggests that Kubrick's turning the arms race into a burlesque unfairly "generalize[s] the cause of horror to cartoonlike figures" which, he implies, will prevent audiences from treating the subject of nuclear war with the somber tone it deserves (137). What he fails to realize is that *Fail Safe*, while presenting the same basic characters only through a more sedate, sober manner, does essentially the same thing: it blames the presence of these characters and the activities of these characters for the inevitability of nuclear war. Kubrick chose to dismiss these characters and their real-life counterparts through outward mockery; Lumet merely chose to dismiss them by showing the horrible outcome that their discourse had made inevitable.

Fail Safe also borrows its authority by aping latter Civil Defense films and presenting itself as a science-y pseudo-documentary, including the character of a hapless-but-curious Senator who serves little narrative purpose aside from letting the film's "scientist" characters explain the

strategy behind nuclear air attacks. The Senator spends the majority of the film (as do *all* of the other major characters) speaking, arguing his point against those of the peaceniks who believe that there are no winners in nuclear war, the political scientists who think the focus should be on "winning" a nuclear war, the supposedly-objective hard scientists, the citizens who are concerned for their own well-beings, and the warmongers-disguised-as-peaceniks who say that nuclear armament and war were the only paths to peace. Each of these characters had direct, real-life parallels, and the rhetoric used by each character may well have been taken from the popular press of the day.

Focusing on the film's presentation and criticism of these obviously representative characters misses the film's rather pronounced and self-explanatory point, a point that most critics and reviewers are always sure to mention but never seem to spend much time really thinking about. Michael Wollscheidt, in his largely negative review/critical essay of the film, goes so far as to call this the film's "premise," the idea that "[a]n accident similar to the one depicted in *Fail Safe* is mathematically inevitable" (70).

This accident is a computer glitch. It is that simple. A computer designed to monitor United States airspace bugs out and sends out an attack signal to U.S. bombers. The bombers receive the signal and there

is nothing that anyone can do to stop them. This happens in the very early goings of *Fail Safe* and the remaining hour and a half or so consists of the different viewpoints bickering. It is made explicitly clear that this bickering, this debate between the many different characters, has lead to the *mathematical inevitability* of nuclear war. *Fail Safe* does not take the side of any character, it does not say that if one man's viewpoint is followed then nuclear war can be limited or avoided. It insists instead, and in very Derridian terms, that it is the talk of nuclear war that has made nuclear war a possibility, and that the continued talk of nuclear war will make nuclear war an inevitability.

CHAPTER 6

ON THE SPARSE NATURE OF POST-1964 NUCLEAR DIALOGUE

The promulgators of nuclear dialogue could not counter the

arguments epitomized in the 1964 films. Nuclear dialogue itself had

been now demonized; it could not argue for its own necessity because

even making such an argument would have constituted a continuation of

itself, and therefore a continuation of a serious risk of full scale nuclear

war. After 1964 and until the Reagan administration, widespread,

popular opposition to nuclear armament shifted focus; while there was a

still strong resistance to all things nuclear, the resistance was not as

passionate or wide reaching as it was in the late 50s and 60s. Anti-

nuclear sentiment still existed and still exists to this day, of course, and

so does sentiment regarding the potential tactical usage of nuclear

weapons, the potential necessity of the use of nuclear weapons, and all of

the other parts of nuclear discourse that, were they ever again to be

allowed to control public consciousness as they were in the height of the

Cold War, would make nuclear war an inevitability. However, the

resistance seems to have peaked in the early 1960s.

This is not, as has been assumed by most historians and asserted

by Paul Boyer, due to the mere fact that nuclear "opposition diminishe[s]

at times of tension and surge[s] upward when tension ease[s]."

("Activism" 823). An assertion such as this ignores the recursiveness of

popular nuclear discourse, as if one side causes tension and the other

merely responds to it with oppositional angst and that that exchange is

the entirety of the ordeal. The assertion also assumes that when the

discourse is silent that nuclear war is still as viable a threat as it when it

is being brought to full public view. As Derrida noted, this is incorrect.

The nature of nuclear armament and the threat of nuclear war are both

exploitative, brought into existence largely as a means through which

publics can be controlled towards various ends. More than anything, it

was this exploitation—not communism, not Soviet imperialism—that

allowed the fantasy of nuclear war to give life to the realities of nuclear

armament and therefore gave the nuclear fantasy realistic currency.

When this means of exploitation stopped being so effective, when a large

percentage of public had realized that it was nuclear discourse that had

created and legitimized the threat of nuclear war, exploitative factions

within the United States government then toned down nuclear discourse,

stopped making Civil Defense films, and, in such a grandiose sense at

least, stopped standing in front of the Soviet Union with their chest

puffed out and their guns drawn.

When nuclear discourse had run out of currency, new threats were invented, and subversives busied themselves fighting these new methods of control. For example, when the powers that be were rallying support for military intervention in southeast Asia, they focused not on the danger of eradication posed by communist expansion, but rather on the fact that "the American way of life was in danger." The threat of nuclear war barely factored into the discourse, and as it went unmentioned it therefore was not as viable a threat as it was when it was being wielded as an instrument of exploitative fear.

There was a small-scale revival of nuclear discourse during the fear-mongering heyday of Reagan and Thatcher's respective reigns. In the U.S. there was Secretary of Defense Weinberger's "fabulously textual" disavowal of the infamous "Fiscal Year 1984-1988 Defense Guidance" document, which said that the U.S. planned to "prevail" in the event of a nuclear war. Derrida mentions specifically this document in the early goings of "No Apocalypse," as he focuses on how the inclusion of a single word, "prevail," caused a firestorm of righteously angry media coverage. In particular, New York *Times* national security correspondent Leslie H. Gelb used the inclusion of the word as the base from which to launch an attack against Reagan's poorly conceived foreign policy, noting correctly that an insane belief in the possibility of one nation prevailing in the case

of a nuclear war could, if left unchecked, "induce some leader some day

to think he *could* risk starting a nuclear war because he would be able to

stop short of a complete catastrophe" (qtd in Derrida 25).

More generally there were Reagan's many invocations of

Armageddon. When discussing anything related to Reagan, one must of

course keep in mind the man's epic capacity for both hypocrisy and

unintentional self-contradiction. So, even though it is technically true

that Reagan did at times deny that he was preparing the country for

Armageddon, he did insist several other times not only that he believed

that the End Times would occur, but that there was a good chance they

would occur in his lifetime. Take the following passage from the 1984

presidential debate, for example:

> Mr. Kalb, I think what has been hailed as something I'm
> supposedly, as President, discussing as principle is the recall of
> just some philosophical discussions with people who are interested
> in the same things; and that is the prophecies down through the
> years, the biblical prophecies of what would portend the coming of
> Armageddon, and so forth, and the fact that a number of
> theologians for the last decade or more have believed that this was
> true, that the prophecies are coming together that portend that.
> But no one knows whether Armageddon, those prophecies mean
> that Armageddon is a thousand years away or day after tomorrow.
> So, I have never seriously warned and said we must plan according
> to Armageddon.
> □*Now, with regard to having to say whether we would try to
> survive in the event of a nuclear war, of course we would.* But let
> me also point out that to several parliaments around the world, in
> Europe and in Asia, I have made a statement to each one of them,
> and I'll repeat it here: *A nuclear war cannot be won* and must never

be fought. And that is why we are maintaining a deterrent and trying to achieve a deterrent capacity to where no one would believe that they could start such a war and escape with limited damage. (Italics mine)

Such ambivalence worked well enough to allow Reagan to bring up (and therefore exploit) the general public's fear of nuclear war while still covering himself against accusations of warmongering and/or threatening directly to launch or otherwise needlessly participate in a nuclear exchange.

All of this seemed to put the Soviets on edge. The RYAN program, launched in 1983, was designed by the KGB to collect information on an expected, first strike nuclear attack. The project was gigantic and spawned a surprisingly amount of public dissent (for the USSR), and historians such as Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin dismiss it as coming out of a Soviet delusion, calling the Soviet assumption that the U.S. and Britain were preparing a first strike "alarmist" (433) and "paranoid" (457). I find it hard to indict the Soviets for taking Reagan's threats seriously, however, especially when the American was so willing to use nuclear rhetoric in his public address and as well as actively seeking to spends hundreds of millions of dollars on a "Star Wars" missile defense system.

Back in America, however, the best that popular culture could muster in response to Reagan's incautious talk of nuclear war and Armageddon were *Testament* and the made-for-TV film *The Day After*. Aside from their subject matter, the films are unremarkable— "workmanlike" is a good way to describe them, competent in an artistic sense but in no way as visionary as the films that preceded them. Even ignoring the small audience each film received and the little amount of critical discussion that each generated, it is obvious that each sought to attack the outrageous notion of a survivable nuclear war, as did the film's two main British counterparts, *When the Wind Blows* and *Threads*.

The reason why there was not as strong a reaction against Reagan's nuclear rhetoric as there was against the rhetoric of the 60s is simple: it was not as big a threat. It worth noting that, while the US certainly ramped up its nuclear rhetoric in the 80s, the Soviets did nothing of the sort. A nuclear monologue does not act to validate the possibility of a nuclear war in the same way that does a multi-faceted, response-focused nuclear dialogue, like the one that existed during the fifties and early sixties.

Furthermore, as was shown in the quote from the 1984 debate, there was no need for subversives to counter any government lie regarding the survivability of a nuclear war—the government already did

that for them. What came about during the Reagan era was more of a refined sort of exploitation of nuclear fear, one that through its outrageous self-contradiction managed to insulate itself from criticism and place the U.S.S.R. on edge not because of its adversarial, puffed-chest nature but rather because it appeared to emanate from the mouth of a man who was at best unstable and at worse completely insane.

In Reagan's era, and extending to the present day, the mechanisms of exploitation have been diverse and complicated enough to preclude a dangerous over reliance on nuclear rhetoric. Newer fears, ranging from the spread of the "homosexual agenda," to Islamo-fascism, to the influx of Hispanic immigrants, to the "culture wars" supposedly being promulgated by crazed secularists against all aspects of American traditions, are being used to frighten, perturb, and ultimately to control the American people. The reason these fears are currently in fashion is that they are effective. And they will keep being used until they cease being effective. And, yes, there is a reason why one sees these moronic things getting so much media hype in spite of the fact that they are mostly imaginary and otherwise pose no actual threat to the well-being of Americans while, conversely, discussions involving the prospect of a nuclearised Iran or North Korea are barely mentioned save for when the current president is under some particularly harsh scrutiny. That is

because it is no longer very profitable to exploit nuclear fear, but it is very profitable to exploit other fears.

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