

SMALL APOCALYPSE: NUCLEAR WAR REPRESENTATIONS AND RHETORIC IN
MADE-FOR-TELEVISION FILMS

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, my sister, my brother, and my wonderful friends

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ABSTRACT

Nuclear war is a topic that has captured imaginations since the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The anxiety born out of these acts of nuclear violence has made its way to both television and film in the intervening years. This anxiety was expressed in many films, including made-for-television films; however there is a distinctive lack of analysis of nuclear issues and nuclear war representations and rhetoric in these made-for-television films. It is the gap in scholarship on made-for-television films that prompts this study.

This study investigates nuclear war centric made-for-television films by arguing that the representations and rhetoric of such films can explain the political motivation for the development and deployment of the films. Furthermore, this study argues that the particular contexts in which these films are deployed are as important as their particular representational or rhetorical moves. Five made-for-television films (*Special Bulletin* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), *Threads* (1984), *Countdown to Looking Glass* (1984), and *By Dawn's Early Light* (1990) were examined to establish timelines of nuclear war representations to uncover recurring themes or tropes of representations in these works. This study draws heavily from the master themes established by Kinsella: mystery, entelechy, potency, and secrecy to provide a typology of representations found in the various films.

The analysis shows that overwhelmingly these films deal with secrecy and entelechy, which illustrates the inaccessible nature of nuclear knowledge as well as a focus on perfection and fruition of physical and rhetorical notions of nuclear weapons.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear war is a topic that has captured imaginations since the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The anxiety born out of these acts of nuclear violence has made its way to both television and film in the intervening years. In the first twenty years after the bombs fell more than thirty films were made dealing with, in some fashion, nuclear war or nuclear radiation (Fruth, et. al, 1996). The height of this anxiety came during the Cold War when television news was able to quickly inspire panic and anxiety. This anxiety was expressed in many films, including made-for-television films; however there is a distinctive lack of analysis of nuclear issues and nuclear war representations and rhetoric in these made-for-television films. Multiple books and articles have been written critically detailing nuclear films (Shaheen, 1978), but only one book exists with made-for-television movies as its object of study, nuclear or otherwise (Rapping, 1992).

This study seeks to understand how nuclear war is represented in the fictionalized narratives made for television. There are many studies about these representations in particular films (e.g. *The Day After*, a made-for-television movie), and there are studies about nuclear war representations in film in general, but there are no studies of these representations in the made-for-television film as a discrete object of study.

While many theoretical tools exist for the analysis of the nuclear war made-for-television movie, no serious analysis has been conducted outside of the most popular examples of the films. While *The Day After* and to a lesser extent *Special Bulletin* (also a made-for-television movie) were cultural touchstones, these films did not occur in a vacuum. They are part of a tradition of

specially made content solely for the small screen that dates back to another made-for-television movie: 1957's *A Day Called X*.

Beyond the made-for-television film, there were also a number of studio-produced feature length films. Shaw (2010) focuses on one such Hollywood film, *The Russians are Coming*, in the larger context of nuclear issue films during the Cold War. Shaw (2010) argues that the Cold War was as much an artistic battle as it was a diplomatic one. He cites Lenin as calling cinema the most important of the arts and that in the context of the Cold War, the films and television programming consumed were largely the only way people could visualize “a peculiarly abstract conflict” (Shaw, 2010, p. 246). Underwood (2011) in turn, notes that Generation X’s main understanding of the Cold War comes from its proximity to television; and that television films were particularly salient in that knowledge. These understandings of the Cold War inform a larger cultural understanding of today: Kinsella (2005) points out that even today Cold War media analysis and criticism is important since we continue to use the Cold War to learn about and influence political and cultural decisions. That is, Cold War events and discourses inform modern “lessons” that impact how institutions, policies, technologies, etc. interact with the world today.

There are multiple theoretical tools for evaluating both the genre of made-for television movies themselves; as well as the themes, categories and language used in nuclear war films. The application of these tools to the discrete object of the made-for-television movie would advance the cultural understanding of how many people understood and continue to understand the Cold War, as well as the way the lessons learned from those television “events” continue to impact our understanding of disaster and the risk of nuclear war today. Furthermore, with the rise of anthology series, where a single story is told over a season, but is not tied to future seasons

(e.g. HBO's *True Detective*, FX's *Fargo* & *American Horror Story*), the essence, if not the form of made-for-television movies, has returned. *True Detective*'s first season, in fact, was entirely written by a single person and entirely directed by a single person—more akin to a movie than a standard television program (Romano 2014). Unfortunately, due to the novel nature of the anthology television program there are no examples that feature nuclear war, as well as scant scholarship on the anthology program as an object of study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Four central themes emerged from this review of literature: analysis and criticism of Cold War media, the made-for-television movie as an object of study, nuclear war representations and their impacts; and a synthesis of the previous three, the nuclear war (made-for-television) film. These themes are presented in a roughly chronological as well as thematic order, with the intent of illustrating that the nuclear issue made-for-television movie is an object worthy of study due to a vacuum of scholarship on the subject as a discrete part of culture, rather than a component of Hollywood films.

Cold War Media and the Foundations of Nuclear War in Made-for-Television Films

Television and film during the period of the Cold War was rife with anxiety over the perception of a looming nuclear threat (Underwood, 2011). Television during this period includes numerous examples of these anxieties seeping into popular media throughout the first three-quarters of the period (Underwood, 2011). Because it was assumed the American public would never accept news that “overtly resembled state-sponsored propaganda” (Underwood, 2011, p. 12), news and scripted programs sought legitimation of their Cold War messages elsewhere. Specifically the perceived backlash to overtly political news and other television programs gave rise to the “movie of the week,” an ABC invention designed to tackle pressing social and international issues (Underwood, 2011). The “movie of the week” was created by the entertainment division of ABC to help sell advertising for movie “events,” and was a discrete, one-off, fictionalized narrative that usually dealt with issues serial television programming wouldn’t touch; issues like teen pregnancy, slavery, or nuclear war (Rapping, 1992). This was an

example of how the dominant ideology would allow the dissenting viewpoints of a few entertainment executives or content producers to either control those views by purposefully casting them in a specific light, or using them in juxtaposition with their own to legitimate the dominant view (Christopher, 2014). This makes the Cold War nuclear issue television movie a fascinating and ripe topic for analysis. There are many who discuss and analyze particular nuclear war television movies (Christopher, 2014; Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Underwood, 2011), but there is not a single analysis of the genre as a discrete object of study. Christopher's (2014) main focus in examining *The Day After* and *Special Bulletin* is to uncover what the political agendas were for the creation and deployment of the films, rather than an examination of the specific rhetorical and representational content of them. Feldman & Sigelman (1985) are more concerned with the political impact and context of *The Day After* than they are with how the film fits into the larger context of nuclear war made-for-television movies, which is also a large focus of Underwood's (2011) study on cold war media.

The prevalence of nuclear issue programming came to a head during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Underwood (2011) argues that the nuclear fatigue this crisis initiated caused a dearth of nuclear issue programming until the latter half of the Cold War between 1970 and 1975. This programming reappeared in more subtle ways, using humor and farce to speak to nuclear issues (Underwood, 2011). Near the end of the Cold War, from 1985 to 1990 however, a glut of nuclear war themed television movies were produced by major networks (Christopher, 2014; Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Underwood, 2011). These films fell into several categories discussed below, but the main impact of them can be seen in the shift away from made-for-television films overall, especially those dealing with nuclear issues (Underwood, 2011). This deluge of nuclear issue programming overloaded the cultural understanding of nuclear weapons

and caused a cultural push away from nuclear issues; which coincided with the end of the Cold War (Underwood, 2011).

Made-for-Television Films and Why They Matter

The bulk of the theoretical work done that deals with nuclear war depictions in film has been in establishing master themes (Kinsella, 2005) and isolating archetypical plotlines (Bartlett, 2004). This is important because many films made today draw from the four master themes established by Kinsella (2005). There are, however, no substantial studies of the nuclear war made-for-television film.

Craig (2014) outlines the sum of scholarship dealing with the made-for-television movie succinctly: little exists. This is because rarely has the made-for-television movie been considered in terms of its cultural value (Craig, 2014). While it is true that scholars have turned a critical eye to the medium in general (Edgerton, 1991; Gitlin, 1981; Rapping, 1985 & 1992), scant coverage has been devoted to the made-for-television movie in the context of either the Cold War (Underwood, 2011) or in the context of the nuclear war made-for-television movie as a whole. Further, Rapping's (1992) book *The Movie of the Week* is the sole monograph devoted to the topic (Craig, 2014). This lack of scholarship is due, in part, to a parallel lack of useful definitions of the made-for-television movie; as well as the dominant view of the television movie as a worse version of Hollywood films rather than its own distinct medium (Craig, 2014). The problem of definition is addressed in Craig's (2014, p. 60) discussion of what he calls the "television message movie," while the problem of comparing made-for-television movies with features is resolved out of Edgerton's (1991) extensive detailing of the history of the made-for-television movie.

By drawing on Gitlin (1981) and Rapping's (1992) clumsy definitions, as well as the networks' own; Craig (2014) establishes a working definition for the made-for-television movie as an object of study. The defining characteristic of a made-for-television movie is its closed format, with close ended narratives (Craig, 2014). This closed requirement would also include long-form miniseries only if they are slated from the outset as a closed narrative. This definition could potentially be moderated by the requirement that the movie or series be established as a "one shot" event (Besley, 2006; Craig, 2014; Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Rapping, 1992; Underwood, 2011). This characterization of the made-for-television movie as an "event" is the main distinguishing factor between short run series and actual made-for-television movies, which were born out of the "movie of the week" event-style format of the late-1960's (Edgerton, 1991).

Edgerton (1991) and Craig (2014) both isolate the made-for-television movie as a distinct subset of the television industry, not the larger feature film industry. For Edgerton (1991, p. 2) the made-for-television movie has been a "programming staple of network television" since the invention of the genre. Rather than producing films to compete with or supplement theatrically released movies, the made-for-television movie was born out of a financial recognition by networks (Edgerton, 1991). These networks realized they could produce a "prestige" piece of entertainment for less than the cost of producing new scripted serials, while increasing advertising revenue through billing the films as weekly "events" (Edgerton, 1991, p. 10).

The separateness of the made-for-television movie is an important component for why, as a genre, it is useful to explore more fully. Furthermore, the made-for-television movie is a worthy object of study due to its wider and more accessible reach as opposed to theatrically released films. The lowest rated made-for-television movie can attract more viewers in a single night than many feature films can in a week (Craig, 2014). The format is also more open

creatively, which attracts more politicized subject matter, while requiring commercial breaks naturally leads to a quicker narrative arc (Craig, 2014), which could potentially increase a viewer's focus and/or interest in the topic of the event.

For Craig (2014), made-for-television movies operate as cultural narratives that have subversive and emancipatory potential. This is informed by Bruner (2008) and Nussbaum's (1997) discussion of narratives as shared cultural communication. Made-for-television movies have the ability to connect psychology with anthropology as a way of creating a shared cultural meaning (Bruner, 2008). These shared cultural narratives also help foster empathy and understanding; they enable a wider audience to put themselves in someone else's shoes (Nussbaum, 1997). This seems especially true when one understands the far reaching cultural impact of a film like *The Day After* which depicts life before, during, and after a nuclear explosion in Lawrence, KS (Underwood, 2011).

Rapping (1992) recognizes the importance of the social consciousness dimension of made-for-television movies. The fact that often these movies were not cancelled even after advertisers pulled funding meant that networks could tarry with very controversial issues such as slavery, domestic violence, nuclear war, AIDS, pollution, etc. (Rapping, 1992). This further reinforces the distinction between made-for-television movies and theatrically released movies. Additionally, the "event" status of made-for-television movies invited a much larger public and political discussion of the films (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Rapping, 1992). It is this sum evaluation of both the context of the films as well as their content that makes the topic of nuclear war made-for-television movies a deep well for discussion.

Nuclear War Representations Outside of Film

Little has been done in the specific context of how nuclear war has been presented in film in general and made-for-television films in particular. There is, however, a vast array of scholarship that deals with the political or otherwise popular representations of nuclear war. Kinsella (2005) has isolated four master themes of nuclear discourse: mystery, potency, secrecy, and entelechy. The theme of mystery, which focuses on the technological and scientific extremes that went into the creation of nuclear weapons, and is prone to overemphasizing expert rationality to the point of “coloniz[ing] debate about one of the most public issues imaginable” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 53), informs the related theme of secrecy, which deals with the operational capacity of the weapons as well as how they are used and deployed. While these two themes are closely related, they do little to help inform a discussion of nuclear war representations in film because the issues of secrecy surrounding nuclear arsenals and the mystery of their operation are more closely related to policy concerns rather than the representations of nuclear war or nuclear weapons in popular media. That is not to say these themes are completely useless for this study, simply that they will likely provide a less powerful set of tools than the other themes of potency and entelechy, which seem to be excellent ways of explaining and understanding these representations.

Potency deals with the physical power of nuclear weapons, which is a common theme throughout many nuclear war movies (Bartlett, 2004; Kinsella, 2005). This is an interesting theme because it also functions to disable new types of thinking about nuclear weapons. That is the nuclear threat “has acquired the status of transcendental signified, ... a meaning outside language” (Williams, 1989, p. 202). The discussion both in and outside of film of the potency of nuclear weapons denotes a type of hopelessness. This is expressed in such metaphors as “letting

the nuclear genie out of the bottle” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 56). Why even bother trying to think about a world without nuclear weapons if their very knowledge is so potent? This is also a trap several nuclear war films fall into as they displace personal agency on to that of an all-power bomb (Bartlett, 2004).

Entelechy is the concept of finitude, and is often understood fatalistically (Kinsella, 2005), as seen in actual senate hearings where a naval admiral remarked, “I think we will probably destroy ourselves, so what difference does it make?” (Zuckerman, 1984, p. 301). This concept of finitude also obviously intersects with the notion of nuclear weapons having the potential capability of eradicating all life from the planet. It is this understanding of the complete hopelessness of nuclear weapons that further destroys agency—if we could all be dead tomorrow from nuclear war, why bother addressing issues such as hunger or famine today (Fishel, 2008; Kinsella, 2005)? Martin (1984) expands on this notion, noting that images of nuclear extinction are an extreme form of western chauvinism. That is, a concern with nuclear extinction is largely a concern afforded to members of the first world, where the effects of a nuclear war would most be felt. This is in direct opposition to actual structural issues faced every day by those in the developing world. For Martin (1984) the focus on nuclear extinction is decidedly a first-world problem that further displaces individual agency as it encourages appealing to elites to fix the potency and entelechy of the bomb.

Brummet’s (1989, p. 86) work on applying Burke’s idea of perfection in language also provides a useful taxonomy for determining what images or discourse in nuclear war films are attempting to achieve. The “principle of perfection” takes two forms: a vocabulary used by people to its absolute extension and expansion which motivates those who use the vocabulary, and seeking one word or symbol to perfectly sum up or name a phenomena (Brummett, 1989).

For example, a group of nuclear defense analysts might attempt to perfect the language they use in describing the weapons to the point of making something horrific sound innocuous, like describing miles of nuclear missile silos as “the Christmas Tree Farm” (Cohn, 1987, p. 19). This attempt at perfection casts often terrible things in new, more appealing light. Understandings of “perfection” within this framework can guide an understanding of the use of various images and terms in nuclear war movies. Specifically, “the bomb” as it refers to nuclear explosives is often used in both political and popular discourses as a “god” term designed to invoke the “safety” of nuclear deterrence. Using “the bomb” as a “god” term sees nuclear weapons as a tool for resolving or avoiding conflict rather than a tool of incalculable destruction (Brummett, 1989). “The bomb,” however, need not always be discussed as a “god” term. Brummett (1989) points out multiple scholarly works use “the bomb” as a “devil” term in discussing its capacity for “devastating” and/or “genocide.” This “god”/“devil” taxonomy can be useful when attempting to evaluate visual forms of communication, such as those found in nuclear war films.

Finally, one of the most common tropes in discussing nuclear issues is that of “nuclear winter.” Veregin (1994, p. 12) argues that nuclear winter is a form of apocalyptic imagery designed to transform the public as “unwilling victims” rather than passive spectators. This understanding intersects the understanding of how potency and entelechy impact agency. Nuclear winter representations conjure images of a desolate wasteland, but these images are dehumanizing because they attempt to hide behind the dispassionate and objective cloak of science while discussing an inherently affective problem—that everyone has the potential to die in a nuclear war (Veregin, 1994). The problem for Veregin (1994, p. 13), as he explains, is that nuclear winter calculations involve turning human lives into abstractions where they can be moved around “in the same detached and efficient” manner as balancing a check book. This

detached understanding of the affective dimensions of nuclear war posits humans as objects rather than subjects with agency capable of impacting decisions that affect them; furthermore, these nuclear winter calculations facilitate a discussion of nuclear issues in a “detached and cavalier” manner (Veregin, 1994, p. 13)

These interrogations of nuclear war representations are useful for both political and popular reasons. The discussion of agency directly informs the way nuclear war is portrayed in film and on television. The work of these scholars provides an excellent basis for recognizing and coding potential tropes in representation of nuclear war in made-for-television films.

Nuclear War & (Made-for-Television) Films

A lot has been written about nuclear war in films. Scholars have even written about particular nuclear war made-for-television movies such as *The Day After* and *Special Bulletin* (Christopher, 14; Feldman & Sigelman, 1985; Underwood, 2011), but very little has been written about the genre as a whole. For example, *A Day Called X*, the earliest of the nuclear war made-for-television films, has a humorous supplemental audio track where they make fun of the film (Rifftrax, 2014), a review in *Time* (1957) magazine, and a mention in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (1957) newsletter, but no significant articles about the production, themes, or messages in the film. *A Day Called X* used actual footage of American citizens performing civil defense drills (Time, 1957) and presented it as a discrete made-for-television movie with a plot revolving around the destruction of Portland, Oregon, which is perhaps the first time a potentially life-saving public drill has been used as entertainment. The connection between life and art in this particular film should be of special interest, yet barely anything has been written about it.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard and communication scholar Kenneth Burke discussed nuclear war (Williams, 1989), however, only Baudrillard appears to have examined *The Day After* specifically (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 92; 1990). For him the film served as an empty referent. He felt “neither the shiver nor the charm of nuclear power, nor even the suspense or the final blinding flash” when he viewed the film (Baudrillard, 1987). Although Burke never turned his attention to the film, other scholars have used his scholarship as part of their own film analyses. Littlejohn & Foss (1986) use Burke’s notion of irony, as well as fantasy-theme analysis, to directly interrogate the film and its part in the larger context of popular fantasies regarding the potential for nuclear conflict at the time. Their central argument relies on the totality of the themes presented in the film and not on the physical and rhetorical representations of nuclear explosions. They do, however, crack a window into the discussion of the signs in the film in the context of Baudrillard, for them “media do not simply confront us with ‘real’ events . . . they also, through the means of pseudo-events, extend our awareness of reality” (Littlejohn & Foss, 1986, p. 318). Baudrillard, on the other hand, looks at the rhetorical symbols of nuclear explosions in the film and tells us that rather than the film being a “pseudo-event” informing reality; it is the case of the images in *The Day After* that they cannot affect those viewing them in any meaningful way, because we have “already been irradiated . . . to our minds the catastrophe is no more than a comic strip” (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 93), as we will see later there is some merit to this claim in terms of *The Day After*.

Even though little work has been done on the issue of nuclear war in made-for-television films as a genre, much thought has been put into common themes of nuclear war storytelling. Bartlett (2004) developed three common themes that most nuclear war stories fall into. He cautions, however, that representations in film must have “esthetic and ethical” seriousness due

to a “debt we feel to the dead” (Bartlett, 2004, p. 1). It is this obligation that drives the majority of representations of nuclear war in film to be characterized by either fear, horror, or both (Bartlett, 2004). For Bartlett (2004, p. 3) the most “genuine” or effective representations require a “horrific ugliness.”

The categories established by Bartlett (2004) line up with the limited number of made-for-television films dealing with nuclear war in the United States. They are: post-nuclear warfare movies, nuclear countdown dramas, and dramas of nuclear destruction. The post-nuclear warfare movie is the most popular film which shows no nuclear weapons or explosions. It is characterized by a fantasy of “warrior violence” because civility is lost with civilization (Bartlett, 2004, p. 16). This category can prove useful when understanding the previously mentioned subject of human agency as it relates to nuclear weapons. The post-nuclear warfare movie removes all agency from the viewer because they were *de facto* unable to prevent, or have a say in the destruction of civilization.

Nuclear countdown dramas give or threaten to give a nuclear explosion at the end of the film (Bartlett, 2004). These films defer “violence through representation,” in them there is a drama that threatens violence (like a nuclear bombing), but that violence is usually thwarted or realized based entirely on the success of nuclear deterrence (Bartlett, 2004, p. 25). Agency actually exists in these films, but not completely. That is, one is able to limit the damage or effects, but ultimately can’t overcome them (Bartlett, 2004). In discussing these films, Bartlett (2004) argues that representation of nuclear explosions like those at the end of *Dr. Strangelove*, are almost calming; the fact that the viewer is detached and above the action makes the rising clouds almost calming and peaceful. Representation of explosions factors heavily into the final category, the drama of nuclear devastation.

Bartlett (2004) argues that the drama of nuclear devastation is the most authentic type of nuclear war representation and therefore the rarest category of nuclear war films. These films depict time before, after, and during nuclear explosions which often satisfy the requirement that nuclear war representations are horrific and hopeless. Interestingly, *Terminator 2* is said to have the most “authentic” representation of nuclear explosions, this in a film that is not traditionally considered as a “nuclear war” film (Bartlett, 2004). These categories can easily be applied to the same nuclear war narratives found in made-for-television movies.

What has emerged in this review of literature is the primary question of representations in nuclear war stories is that of agency. When discussing things like nuclear winter (Veregin, 1994), master themes (Kinsella, 2005), or categories of story (Bartlett, 2004); the recurring metric is how does the representation or story affect agency? This is similar to Christopher’s (2014) analysis of the nuclear war made-for television movie, however his work only evaluates the two most popular made-for-television movies, *The Day After* and *Special Bulletin*. This analysis is different, however, in that it also examines the political agendas of particular nuclear war made-for-television films. Christopher’s (2014) argument is that both *The Day After* and *Special Bulletin* are ideological mappings of Cold War anxiety over nuclear weapons onto the Soviets. Nowhere in either film is there a discussion of the causes of arms buildup. Both films categorically blame the Soviets without any discussion of how the United States played a part in the depicted acts of nuclear violence. This is the same displacement of national agency, this time that was seen in earlier evaluations of nuclear movie categories and themes. Christopher’s analysis shows the general thrust of current scholarship on nuclear war films. It seeks to understand what the political motivations and consequences were for the creation and distribution of the films. Made-for-television movies also offer an additional object for study,

which is the context surrounding the showing of the film on television and how the film impacted the political leanings of its viewers. This course of study is valuable, but does not offer an explanation for how the particular representational and/or rhetorical moves in these films lead to the larger contextual changes of political agendas.

CHAPTER 3

PLAN OF THE STUDY

The films examined for this study were: *Special Bulletin* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), *Threads* (1984), *Countdown to Looking Glass* (1984), and *By Dawn's Early Light* (1990). These films represent nearly the entire canon of English-language made-for-television movies about nuclear war and provided the foundation of this study. Some films that might have been considered for this study were excluded. 1957's *A Day Called X* was excluded because it does not present itself as an entertainment piece, is less than half an hour long, and used no actors. 1967's *In the Year 2889* was also excluded because it was the only film in the genre that was a post-nuclear-warfare story. Finally, *On the Beach* and *Fail Safe* (both from 2000) were excluded because they were made-for-television remakes of previously theatrically released films.

This study examined each film to establish timelines of nuclear war representations to uncover recurring themes or tropes of representations in these works. Kinsella (2005) and Bartlett (2005) have both established useful taxonomies for evaluating both nuclear rhetoric (Kinsella) and nuclear story telling (Bartlett). This study draws heavily from the master themes established by Kinsella: mystery, entelechy, potency, and secrecy to help provide a useful typology of representations found in the various films. Bartlett's typology of nuclear storytelling establishes three types of stories: post-nuclear-warfare movies, nuclear countdown dramas, and dramas of nuclear devastation. These typologies added an extra layer in determining and interpreting the representations in these films.

For this study I watched each of the nine films multiple times and took notes on which of Bartlett's story telling categories the films fall into, noting the timeline and process of the story. I

also took notes on specific representational and rhetorical moves used by the films, using Kinsella's typology of rhetoric as a guide. Specifically, I took notes on notions of mystery (e.g. the arcane scientific processes used to create and develop nuclear weapons and engage in nuclear warfighting), potency (e.g. discussions or depictions of "unleashing" the power of the atom), secrecy (e.g. the mystification of the material use—not development—of nuclear weapons and nuclear warfighting), and entelechy (e.g. any concepts of finitude, hopelessness, extinction, etc.). I looked for the intersections of types of rhetorical moves with types of stories to help determine if there was a master representation and/or rhetorical theme that explained the construction and deployment of nuclear war made-for-television movies.

Plotting these intersections against the stated goals of the films as well as the observed impact of them determined the political impact of a given rhetorical/representational intersection. Determining the actual political agendas of each film was imprecise without primary documents or interviews of those directly responsible for their content, but by examining the representations of human agency in the films (e.g. who is responsible for an attack, what can be done to avoid an attack, etc.) apparent political agendas were determined based on the content of the films. This allowed the study to uncover a commonality in nuclear war representations in made-for-television films that added to the overall scholarship of both nuclear war and made-for-television movies.

CHAPTER 4

ENTELECHY

If all the thermo-nuclear warheads
Were one thermo-nuclear warhead
What a great thermo-nuclear warhead that would be.
If all the intercontinental ballistic missiles
Were one intercontinental ballistic missile,
What a great intercontinental ballistic missile that would be.
If all the military men
Were one military man
What a great military man he would be.
If all the land-masses
Were one land-mass
What a great land-mass that would be.
And if the great military man
Took the great thermo-nuclear warhead
And put it into the great intercontinental ballistic missile,
And dropped it on the great land-mass,
What great PROGRESS that would be (Burke, 1966, p. 22, emphasis in original).

This ironic poem by Kenneth Burke animates the concept of entelechy and how the “perfectionist tendency of language is what transforms national difference into international conflict” (Williams, 1989, p. 208). A very similar view is taken by one of the “terrorists” in the NBC film *Special Bulletin*. Around thirty minutes into the film, while being interviewed about the death of one of the members of the coast guard they were in a firefight with earlier, the character of Frieda Barton responds “let us not forget that one man is like all men, and all men dying is a succession of one man dying” (*Special Bulletin*, 1983). This pursuit of perfection is, perhaps, the driving theme of the film.

Special Bulletin is the first major network nuclear war made-for-television film and could be argued was also the impetus for all following films in the genre. Christopher (2014) notes that *The Day After*, which is perhaps the most famous nuclear war made-for-television movie, was

created as a direct response by ABC to *Special Bulletin*. *Special Bulletin* was broadcast by NBC in 1983 and is presented in the style of a newscast, including desk anchors, field anchors, and commercial breaks. It tells the story of a group of scientists and radicals who construct a nuclear weapon and park it in the belly of a tugboat in the Charleston harbor. The group (referred to as “terrorists” throughout the film, which will be mirrored here) demands that all of the detonation devices for the nuclear weapons in and around Charleston be brought to them so that they may carry them out to sea and destroy them. The penalty for not acceding to their demands will be the detonation of the nuclear device they have stowed in their boat. After many of the terrorist’s claims have been confirmed by the government, it seems they are willing to give up the detonation devices. However, this is revealed to be a ruse designed to allow a delta force squad to infiltrate the boat and eliminate the terrorists. While the NEST, or “nuclear emergency search team”—an actual governmental response team later renamed “nuclear emergency support team” (Department of Energy, No Date)—attempts to disarm the nuclear weapon the terrorists have created they inadvertently detonate the device. The remaining ten minutes or so of the film are dedicated to depictions and descriptions of the aftermath (*Special Bulletin*, 1983).

In terms of type of story, *Special Bulletin* is decidedly a “nuclear countdown drama” (Bartlett, 2004), with one caveat: it is noted that usually nuclear countdown dramas threaten a nuclear bombing, but the explosion is thwarted or realized based entirely on the success of nuclear deterrence. In the case of *Special Bulletin* deterrence is an afterthought because the film depicts a then new concept: domestic nuclear terrorism. Nuclear weapons at the time—and continuing to today—were conceptualized within the context of strategic deterrence, meaning that weapons were seen as deterring other states and not individual actors. In fact, the only real mention of deterrence is near the end of the film after delta force has subdued the terrorists and a

White House spokesperson notes that during the crisis in Charleston, it was observed that Soviet weapons were on high alert, so acceding to the terrorist's demands would have been unthinkable in the context of deterrence. This is distinct from a movie like *Fail Safe* where the pursuit of deterrence is the ultimate cause of catastrophe.

Returning now to the concept of entelechy, the engine that drives the plot of *Special Bulletin* is the constant pursuit for perfection. Each plot point in the first three-quarters of the film revolves mainly around the acquisition of perfect knowledge. The events in Charleston are first said to be a hoax with the Department of Energy issuing a statement that there have been eighty-five incidents of nuclear extortion in less than ten years, with each incident not actually involving a nuclear device. Then when it is discovered that the exact amount of plutonium the terrorists claimed to have stolen is missing, “experts” are brought on to the news program that serves as the narrator of the story and explain away the missing plutonium as lost. This move to include “experts” will be seen again, and serve a very similar function, in *Countdown to Looking Glass* when it brings actual analysts, politicians, and reporters—none of which are actors—onto the news. These moves to discredit the threat of nuclear terrorism rely on a fidelity to perfect knowledge and implicate the theme of agency often found in nuclear war storytelling, as is the case with both *Special Bulletin* and *Looking Glass*. Indeed, in *Special Bulletin*, the White House press secretary says shortly after the terrorists have been neutralized that, “the attack on the terrorists was predicated on the total confidence that the nuclear emergency search team would be successful in disarming the anti-tamper devices on the bomb” (*Special Bulletin*, 1983). It proves to not be the case and the NEST technicians actually cause the bomb to explode, which further complicates questions of agency—the bomb must explode inevitably, despite so-called “perfect” knowledge. This question of agency is further illustrated when *Special Bulletin*

offers a series of brief interviews with several residents of Charleston, each claiming in their own way, that there is nothing to worry about, the Navy stationed in Charleston will protect them, civil defense efforts will fix the problem, and perhaps the most naïve displacement of agency: claiming the problem is overblown due to Charleston having been a city for over 200 years. These brief vignettes illustrate Kinsella's (2005) discussion of entelechy as it intersects agency. Each of these people believe there is nothing to worry about, perhaps because each of them know there is nothing they can do about nuclear weapons themselves.

Burke uses entelechy to “signify the essence of a phenomenon manifested in its ‘fruition’ or ‘perfection.’ The essence of a thing can be defined narratively in terms of its fulfillment or fruition” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 64). This can be seen by the narrative turn in *The Day After* when nuclear explosions occur as the fruition of the existence of nuclear weapons. The entire narrative of the film revolves around the pivot point of a massive nuclear strike against the United States. In this way “nuclear weapons are . . . the fruition of nuclear discourse” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 64). Martin's (1984) argument that images of nuclear extinction are an extreme form of western chauvinism is also felt here. *The Day After* only wonders about the fate of the rest of the world briefly, with passing mentions of nuclear use in Europe. This focus on nuclear extinction is a First World problem that further displaces individual agency as it encourages appealing to elites to fix the potency and entelechy of the bomb (Martin, 1984).

The entelechial understanding of “perfection” can guide an understanding of the use of images and terms in *The Day After*: “the bomb” as it refers to nuclear explosives is used as a “devil” term and invokes the absolute destructive potential of nuclear weapons. Using “the bomb” as a “devil” term sees nuclear weapons in terms of their capacity for “devastation” and/or “genocide” (Brummet, 1989). The “god” side of this duality is seen often in the films of this

study, but nowhere more prevalent than *Early Light*. The Secretary of the Interior speaks of the U.S.'s nuclear weapons in terms of how they can “win” the war against the Soviets. More generally the “god” side of this duality is expressed as reverence for nuclear weapons and their potential for the avoidance of hostilities. Indeed, Gray and Payne wrote a 1980 article titled “Victory is Possible” which discusses how nuclear weapons are capable of positive measures to maintain U.S. security—even in the context of an actual nuclear confrontation. This duality of “god” and “devil” terms, however, is directly in opposition to Baudrillard’s (2005) conception of “speaking evil.” For Baudrillard (2005, p. 107), “the ideal opposition between good and evil has been reduced to the ideological opposition between happiness and misfortune.” For Burke, the rhetorical depiction of nuclear explosions in *The Day After* is simply a depiction of the misfortune of a nuclear conflict outside of our control. Again, bringing to light the question of agency, it is important to ask: are there mere observers? Or, can will be brought to bear on the issue of nuclear weapons? With the exception of *Early Light*, the films in this study answer that question with a simple “not really.”

Another type of nuclear countdown drama is found in *By Dawn's Early Light*, but this countdown drama gives the audience a nuclear explosion less than eight minutes into the film. Despite this early explosion, the film is not at all a post-nuclear warfare film because the remainder of the narrative revolves around political attempts to limit the severity of the exchange. By fourteen minutes into the film we learn that the initial attack against the Soviets was a false flag attack carried out by Soviet military dissidents, designed to instigate a war with the United States. The Soviet president contacts the U.S. president and claims that the observed Soviet counter attack was an automated response to a perceived attack by the U.S. The Soviet president gives his U.S. counterpart three options: absorb the Soviet counterattack, respond in

kind to the Soviets so that losses are commensurable, or escalate the confrontation to all out global nuclear war. This becomes a countdown drama because as U.S. command and control deteriorates, the president is missing, and the line of succession appoints the Secretary of the Interior as the new commander-in-chief. The new commander is a war hawk and when asked if he's afraid by one of his advisors responds with "of losing" (By Dawn's *Early Light*, 1990). When the actual president is found at the site of a helicopter crash, it becomes a race against the Secretary of the Interior to recall bombers and remove submarines from alert.

Early Light approaches the question of agency in a very different way than the preceding films—it has as much or more secrecy-based rhetoric and representations, participates in the same type of entelechial and potent rhetorical moves as the other films, but is centers its narrative on the ability of logic and reason to prevail over pre-ordained attack models. Throughout the first half of the film, the president relies on advisors and computer simulations to guide his decision. After a Soviet counterattack is confirmed, in regards to launching a massive response, the president remarks that he won't "make a decision of this magnitude" hastily, to which the general at strategic air command replies "you don't have to, SIOP has anticipated this" (By Dawn's *Early Light*, 1990). SIOP is the single integrated operational plan and is a document that describes target options for nuclear warfighting as well as launch procedures to deploy those targeting packages (Burr, 2004), while in the film SIOP is referred to as an almost mystically prescient computer that determines how to respond to attacks as they occur. Later, when the Secretary of the Interior is briefed on his options in responding to the soviet threat, SIOP is again invoked by the hawkish Colonel Fargo (played by Rip Torn) as an argument for why an attack "must" occur (By Dawn's *Early Light*, 1990). These are all examples of how *Early Light* deals with agency of its characters in a way not really explored by earlier films.

In the second half of the film the copilot of a B-52 bomber convinces the pilot to abandon their heading and mission and turn away from their targets in the USSR, and in the final climax of the film, Captain Alice (played by James Earl Jones) actually crashes the mobile command post Looking Glass into the E-4 airplane that is housing the Secretary of the Interior. He does this because the secretary will not change the standing fire orders given to U.S. submarines, which would ruin the goodwill built by the bomber turning away from Russia. This ultimate act of sacrifice to avoid the destruction of the planet is also different from the way agency is portrayed in the other films in this study. The inevitability of nuclear confrontation is avoided because a group of people were willing and in positions to do something about the threat. While it is true that the characters in the film have agency, unlike so many hapless victims in the other films, it still provides the audience with an easy way to absolve them from having to deal with the question of what can be done about nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war. *Early Light*, is much like the earlier theatrically released film *Fail Safe*, where a breakdown in information and the extreme pursuit of deterrence requires cooler heads to prevail. The consequence for the audience, however, is that there's not much to worry about (unless you live in New York, in the case of *Fail Safe*) because those in power will ultimately do the right thing, or find the right knowledge. This dangerous appeal to expert rationality flies in the face of what Captain Alice tells the secretary during their first argument: "there are no military geniuses" (By Dawn's *Early Light*, 1990), which is hoped to compel the secretary to see reason and avoid escalation, it is only by an extremely destructive act that Alice keeps the secretary from going through with his plans. Again, this hero narrative absolves the audience from worry and while *Early Light* treats its characters with a bit more care in terms of agency, the result is no less debilitating for the audience.

CHAPTER 5

SECRECY

The Day After follows several residents in and around Kansas City, MO and Lawrence, KS when their day-to-day interactions are interrupted by a massive nuclear strike from the Soviets. There are several allusions to what the causes of the conflict are in the run up to the film's climax, but the film's narrative focuses almost entirely on how everyday people are affected by the detonation of nuclear weapons in very close proximity to where they work, learn, and raise their families. If there is a main character it would arguably be Dr. Oates, who begins the film visiting his daughter and ends the film in his home in Kansas City, while throughout it he attempts to treat the wounded and dying at a hospital in Lawrence, KS. *The Day After's* narrative can succinctly be categorized as such: before, during, and after. The first half (almost exactly) of the narrative is an examination of the lives of several of the characters in the film *before* the bombing of the Kansas City-Lawrence area. It follows them as they prepare for a wedding, enroll in school at Kansas University, and work their various jobs. The inclusion of these back-stories may be instructive in a purely dramatist or semiotic interpretation of the film, but for the purposes of this study they will not be the focus. This is because the heart of this study is to understand how the actual physical and rhetorical representations in nuclear war made-for-television films effect or influence the audience's larger understanding of the issue of nuclear war. That is, how do these representations help us deal with the potential for the unimaginable destructiveness of an imagined nuclear war?

The first half of *The Day After* is mostly dedicated to establishing the "normalness" of the various characters we meet. The intention, it seems, is to get the audience to be more emotionally

invested in these characters' lives so that when the final moments of the film arrive the impact of the images presented is all the more potent. While this is the major thrust of the representations and rhetoric during the first hour or so of the film, we are also presented with glimpses of secrecy. Secrecy involves dual concerns over containment for nuclear war planners: the "material containment" of nuclear hazards and the "discursive containment" of "public knowledge about nuclear practices and their effects" (Kinsella, 2005, p. 62). In the context of *The Day After* little-to-no time is spent on material containment, beyond a heated argument after U.S. Minuteman missiles have been launched out of Whiteman Airforce Base, where the character we have met the most, Billy McCoy (played by William Allen Young), exclaims that "the war is over, we've done our jobs," their jobs being the preservation and containment of the nuclear weapons once stored in the silo (*The Day After*, 1983). The main depictions of secrecy are much more in line with the second concern for containment: discursive.

The many glimpses of the notion of secrecy that are scattered throughout the first half of *The Day After* revolve around the operational security of both the Strategic Air Command (SAC) command post depicted in the opening shots of the film, as well as the Minuteman missile silo controlled by Whiteman Airforce Base. No context is provided when we first meet the silo's security team: they are flown in on a helicopter, talking about the probability of there being a drill that weekend, plans for the weekend, and a very brief motioning to the newspaper as a way of saying perhaps they should not be planning any trips due to the tensions in East Germany. The helicopter finally sets the crew down outside of an apparently normal farmhouse, which is when we learn the crew has arrived at the entrance to a silo housed below. Later, during the run up to the climax of the film we are shown the SAC procedure for accessing the keys and documents required to issue nuclear launch orders, followed by a lengthy (over one minute) sequence of the

missileers in the silo executing those orders. These sequences are all examples of the “‘culture of secrecy’ that still pervades the U.S. Department of Energy, long after the end of the Cold War” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 60). These glimpses participate in the same mystification that the nuclear physicist in *Special Bulletin* participated in when the news anchor implored him to speak in plain English. These depictions, whether by design or accident also participate in the deployment of the “idea” of secret knowledge that has the potential to “[corrupt] public understandings of what is possible and what is not but also giving the executive authority the ability to seem more knowing than they actually are” (Masco, 2007, p. 17).

In fact, in the aftermath of *The Day After*’s climax, college students are shown listening to a radio broadcast that offers very little in detail about the attack. When one student comments “I want to know who started it, who fired first, who preempted!” another replies, “What difference does it make? You believe everything they tell you?” (*The Day After*, 1983). This illustrates the intersection of secret knowledge with the ability for “normal” (e.g. non-experts) to make use of this knowledge. At the dawn of the nuclear age, much of the challenges to nuclear secrecy were getting operational capabilities, information, and locations made public. When that knowledge was made available the challenges shifted to demand what the information meant (Kinsella, 2005). This illustrates the power of secrecy, both in observed movements against nuclear weapons and in *The Day After* the college students were being told facts on the radio, but still could not believe them due to the culture of secrecy surrounding nuclear weapons. One character, Joe Huxley (played by John Lithgow), even attempts to use this so-called “secret knowledge” to warn others during the run up to the film’s climax noting that, “there’s no nowhere anymore” because Minuteman missile silos dot the rural landscape providing “an awful lot of bullseyes” (*The Day After*, 1983). Instead of using this “secret knowledge,” however,

Huxley merely participates in the further mystification and displacement of agency that is endemic to potent depictions of nuclear weapons discussed below. This is where secrecy intersects potency. Richard Falk (1982, p. 9) notes that:

Normative opposition to nuclear weapons or doctrines inevitably draws into question the legitimacy of state power and is, therefore, more threatening to governmental process than a mere debate about the property of nuclear weapons as instruments of statecraft.

This means, as Taylor and Hendry (2008, p. 324) argue, that “nuclear policy rhetoric is highly resistant to changes that arise in cultural consciousness in response to shifting political conditions.” It is the secrecy of nuclear rhetoric that robs potent images, like those in *The Day After* of their revolutionary or emancipatory potential. The dual role of mystery might also help to explain why the potential depictions at the end of *Special Bulletin* might not be as effective as intended: participation in the mystification of nuclear weapons provides the audience with an “out”—a way of further deferring agency to experts, because the topic is too esoteric for the rest of us. Secrecy and mystery are what allows state power to remain strategically ambiguous and choose if it will accede to or ignore demands. It is also, perhaps, the knowledge of secrecy that robs the climax of *The Day After* of its potential to have changed the larger cultural consciousness more dramatically.

Looking Glass begins, as all of these films do, with a warning. A narrator informs the audience that the program is based on a wargame that was developed by experts and military advisers, and that the information provide is “meant to inform, not alarm” (Countdown to Looking Glass, 1984). The trouble with using nuclear war games as a tool of informing a population on the danger of nuclear war is that “[a]nti-nuclear games do not reveal the horrors of nuclear war any more than Pentagon simulations provide scientifically accurate strategic plans”

(Matheson, 2015, p. 89), which is potentially why *Looking Glass* relies so heavily on the trope of secrecy. That is precisely how nuclear war planning maintains and justifies itself. War games seek to make clearer the highly guarded secrets of war planning, while *Looking Glass* focuses almost entirely on the secret nature of information relating to nuclear weapons. In this way, *Looking Glass* participates in the “fundamental principle of the nuclear discursive formation” (Kinsella, 2005, p. 60).

After its initial warning, *Looking Glass* presents the viewer with nine consecutive days that plot the trajectory of a brewing international crisis that ultimately erupts in a nuclear exchange. The plot revolves around a debtor’s cartel defaulting on American loans, which in turn massively disrupts U.S. financial markets. In response, and at the invitation of Saudi Arabia, American troops are deployed to the Arabian Peninsula. A day after troops arrive, Oman begins levying a \$10,000 toll on oil tankers attempting to pass through the straits of Hormuz to bring oil to market. This action is seen as a proxy response from the Soviets, and after the U.S. sends an aircraft carrier battlegroup to the region the Soviets respond with submarine patrols in the area. This response ultimately causes the final nuclear confrontation in the film, where a U.S. destroyer uses a nuclear depth charge on a Soviet submarine, which is responded to by the Soviets with their own nuclear use.

The audience is presented with the film’s first hint of its fidelity to secrecy rhetoric only four and a half minutes into the film when Tobin brings an expert on the show “to help us make sense” of the developing situation in the mid-east (Countdown to *Looking Glass*, 1984). There are numerous other examples throughout the film. When reporting from the U.S.’s position in Saudi Arabia, the reporter makes the following remark regarding troop numbers: “the answer to that question, at this stage at least, is classified.” By day six, secrecy is all the reporters can focus

on: unable to report on the number of U.S. submarines accompanying the battle group, the implications of White House leaks, and calling back to Kinsella's (2005, p. 62) observation that as more information became available "[p]ublic debate began to shift from the issue of basic access to nuclear information, to the issue of what that information means." When the anchors ask what it means when the president says he has ordered the Navy "to take whatever steps are necessary to insure that the Persian Gulf is open to shipping," the anchors question if that means the taskforce commander has authority to initiate nuclear attacks. One replies "let's find out what that does mean" (Countdown to Looking Glass, 1984). This example of secrecy once again invokes question of agency and authority, because intrinsic to the question of interpreting information is "the related question of who can interpret the information authoritatively" and all the attendant problems with appeals to rationality mentioned earlier (Kinsella, 2005, p. 62).

By day eight of the narrative, the White House has suspended daily briefings for the news media, questions of nuclear capability of the ships on their way to Oman are not answered, SAC redeploys its bombers to "unidentified airports" and then nuclear weapons start being exchanged. Even in the midst of the nuclear melee the commander of the Nimitz, exacerbated, tells the embedded reporter "honest to God, I just don't know" when asked who authorized the use of nuclear weapons (Countdown to Looking Glass, 1984). This overall fidelity to secrecy significantly impacts the narrative arc of *Looking Glass*, where "experts" (often the real people mentioned above) are brought on during the news segments to elucidate the particularities of the tensions rising in the mid-east. Interestingly, it seems for all the worry about operational secrecy, nuclear violence cannot be avoided, even though that is presumably the goal of such secrecy. Throughout all of the films in this study repeated appeals to "perfect knowledge" and maintaining opacity regarding military strategy—despite all these measures designed to avoid

nuclear confrontation, that confrontation is inevitable. Indeed the function of the nuclear countdown drama can be seen as the fruition of nuclear discourse as described by Kinsella (2005) and Brummet (1989) in terms of the perfection of language (e.g. entelechy). While specific instances of entelechial discourse are few, especially in *Looking Glass*, the overall narrative of countdown dramas takes the abatement of nuclear violence to be the logical fruition of secrecy (especially in the case of *Looking Glass*). This is illustrated neatly when Tobin, in conversation with “senior anchor” (and actual reporter) Eric Sevareid, on the Cuban Missile Crisis remarks that he believed then, and believes during the events of the film that reasonable people, when looking in the face of the devil (read: nuclear warfare) will not “shake hands with him” (Countdown to Looking Glass, 1984). This invocation of “the bomb” as a “devil term” ties “the related themes of mystery (an unknowable telos that drives history), potency (the power attributed to that drive toward culmination), and secrecy (the unanswered question of what the end will be)” together in a meta-categorical understanding of the countdown drama as a whole (Kinsella, 2005, p. 66-67). Furthermore, Brummet (1989, p. 86) notes that “[p]erfection is destined to lead to disappointment” because while perfection can exist in language, it cannot exist in reality. Perhaps this inherent gap between symbolic perfection and real perfection is precisely why secrecy-rich narratives must deliver on a promised nuclear confrontation. One would expect such overwhelming discussion of nuclear weapons in terms of “evil” as a motivating factor for opposition to those weapons. However, it seems the cultural texts (like those in this study) that treat nuclear weapons with reverent derision cannot overcome the contradictory attribution of nuclear weapons as “god” terms in non-media environments when deterrence, and the subsequent possession of nuclear weapons it requires, is seen as beneficial to society. Publications like Gray and Payne’s (1980) “Victory is Possible” were very visible

reminders on the benefits of possessing and thinking about using nuclear weapons. Brummet (1989, p. 87-88) explains why such inconsistent treatment of the symbol of nuclear weapons may explain the relative lack of impact of films like *Looking Glass*:

[W]hen several vocabularies converge on one symbol, and if the vocabularies treat the symbol consistently as a God or Devil symbol, the result is a key cultural symbol that is highly motivating. Such a symbol represents perfection times itself and draws motivating power from more than one set of terms. On the other hand, to the extent that the perfection of vocabularies converges on such terms but treats the key symbol inconsistently, with some vocabularies taking it to be a Devil term and others a God term, then intractable conflict and controversy may arise around that symbol, creating social and rhetorical forces that keep in check the symbol's call to real action.

This question of perfection seems to readily implicate exposing secrecy in texts like the films in this study. In addition to where in the film bombs drop, Bartlett's (2004) other concern with nuclear storytelling is how it treats agency. If the meta-characteristic of countdown dramas is true, that explosions at the end of the film are the fruition of the film's exposure of the secret nature of nuclear warfighting, then what agency is the viewer left with? All the experts presented in the narrative, all the secrecy, and the best efforts of "rational" people fail to avoid nuclear violence. If such resources are incapable of doing anything, what hope does the viewer have? None—this is perhaps the most deleterious effect of entelechy in nuclear discourse.

Repressive Tolerance

A further implication of secrecy also harkens back to the concept of "repressive tolerance" explained by Christopher (2014). Made-for-television movies, as noted earlier, operate in a unique space on the landscape of television, in that seemingly subversive concepts can be presented, but the very nature of the context they are presented in can be manipulated by television networks to paint a more pointed, and non-subversive agenda related picture.

Participating in the contextual format of made-for-television movies, especially those as heavily secrecy-oriented as *Looking Glass*, invokes potentially concerning disciplinary effects hinted at earlier: “the nuclear system has colonized not only members of nuclear organizations, but the entire polis; producing a phenomenon that might be called ‘docile citizenship’” which further impacts the viewers of such films attribution of agency (Kinsella, 2005, p. 63). For Christopher (2014), however, the exemplar of this “repressive tolerance” or “docile citizenship” is *The Day After* which paints the United States as unwilling victim to Soviet aggression, which does not necessarily elicit the desired result the filmmakers intended. In the context of *Looking Glass*, while the U.S. is seen to be mostly to blame, both the narrative structure maps a series of gaffs onto the news media while simultaneously downplaying Canada’s role in nuclearization. In this way *Looking Glass* also participates in the same “repressive tolerance” Christopher (2014) reserves for only *The Day After*.

The potentially disastrous consequences of such “repressive tolerance” and secrecy are that each sustains the dominant ideology, with potentially unintended consequences as a result to a “docile citizenship” born out of secrecy. Masco (2007, p. 20) notes that “secret” knowledge was “established to protect information about the U.S. nuclear arsenal,” which is the prominent theme of *Looking Glass*. This may be a perfectly fine goal if we accept at first the utility of nuclear weapons, however the same “secret” knowledge based on the pursuit of a secure nuclear arsenal later became the justification for the invasion of Iraq, and

The secrecy/threat matrix has been revealed as a core tool of governmental agency in the “war on terror” but it has also been revealed to be a highly over-determined form, one that functions to fundamentally distort both expertise and knowledge. And in a security state where knowledge itself is rendered suspect, only ideology remains as the basis for action. (Masco, 2007, p. 20).

This secrecy/threat matrix transforms the problems of appeals to expert rationality discussed earlier into much more serious one-sided, and potentially destructive ideological crusades that “discount all alternative sources of information” (Masco, 2007, p. 20). The consequence of such pursuits in the context of a film like *Looking Glass* is that U.S. exceptionalism and capitalistic pursuit of resources can always be justified against any perceived enemy, as the president in *Looking Glass* so eloquently puts it:

My fellow Americans, our country is faced today with a serious challenge. We have been asked as a people to make a decision so important that how the world evolves, the course it takes for the next century will almost surely depend on what we decide. As your president and with the valued council of the leaders of the congress, the national Security Council, and the members of my cabinet I have made that decision. My decision is to make it absolutely clear to those who would impose unreasonable and crippling restrictions on vital commerce that such restrictions are unacceptable. To make a decision which would send a signal that is one whit less clear, less determined would be to abdicate America’s responsibilities to the free world. To give substance to this decision I have ordered the Navy to take whatever steps are necessary to insure that the Persian Gulf is open to shipping. Furthermore, I have instructed the selective service board to induct into the armed services all registrants who have reached their 20th birthday. We seek no test of arms, our commitment to peace is matched only by our resolve that no nation, great or small, may hold other nations hostage to its greed for wealth or power. God bless you, and good night. (Countdown to *Looking Glass*, 1984).

Paradoxically, the president uses greed for wealth (securing oil shipping lanes) as a justification for stopping other countries pursuit of wealth (the Omani shipping toll).

The address by the president in *Looking Glass* is a deployment of narrative suspense that “centers on the potential effects of the problem and on the question of if and how normality will right itself” (Waller, 1987, p. 5). The address is given like so many actual presidential addresses in reality, which is obviously designed to invoke a sense of involvement by the viewership, but an involvement that cannot result in any meaningful action (Waller, 1987). This is because while watching any of these nuclear war made-for-television films the audience operates from a

superior viewpoint than the characters in the film. When presented with nuclear confrontation they “see the taboo violated and the veneer of civilization scratched” and they are able to witness this from the safety of their living room (Waller, 1987, p. 5). Herein lays the problem with secrecy-based countdown dramas, even those presented realistically like *Special Bulletin* or *Looking Glass*: the audience has nothing at stake despite all the narrative attempts to convince them they do.

CHAPTER 6

POTENCY

The focus on the potency of a nuclear war is intrinsically tied to a notion of fear (Kinsella, 2005). The results of a nuclear blast, like those depicted in *Special Bulletin*, *The Day After*, and *Early Light* form the largest basis of what is to be feared when considering nuclear weapons. Overwhelmingly, in *The Day After*, this fear is discussed in terms of catastrophe, the end of the world (or Sedalia, Green Ridge, and Windsor as one disheveled farmer claims), or the destruction of all life. This theme of destruction can be further divided into two complementary parts: preparation for survival and life after the war. Representations of nuclear war in *The Day After* are bleak and hopeless as to render either part of the destruction theme unnecessary: that is, there is no possibility for survival so preparing to survive is a waste of time, an argument advanced in the actual halls of congress (Zuckerman, 1984). The argument that logically follows from this is that instead of attempting to prepare or plan for life after a nuclear war, we should pressure politicians to end arms races and/or the possession of nuclear weapons. In fact, the final scroll of *The Day After* explains that “[t]he catastrophic events you have just witnessed are, in all likelihood, less severe than the destruction that would actually occur in the event of a full nuclear strike against the United States. It is hoped that the images of this film will inspire the nations of this earth, their peoples and leaders, to find the means to avert the fateful day” (*The Day After*, 1983). This plainly states the goal of the filmmakers as engendering the political will to combat the nuclearization of the military.

Indeed, the nuclear war in *The Day After* (and essentially every other film that depicts nuclear explosions) is represented as the most destructive and horrific thing imaginable.

However, the claim that the depiction of war in *The Day After* is likely less severe than reality is up for debate; with some arguing that the overall destructiveness is exaggerated for political motives (Martin, 1988). This political motivation seems obvious when one understands the narrative turn in the film which inculcates the United States from actually inciting the nuclear exchange depicted in the film. A discussion of who is actually to blame for the war in *The Day After* is entirely missing from the narrative of the story. There are only vague mentions of blockades and military maneuvers in West Germany during the first half of the film. In this context, it makes perfect sense that the filmmakers would want to insulate the United States from blame and engender motivation for arms reduction. After all, who would not want to do something about arms buildup after witnessing the horrific destruction via nuclear war of Lawrence, KS or Sheffield, England after watching *The Day After* or *Threads*? However, there is only cursory mention of the country launching the missiles, and instead the audience is presented only with questions of what those experiencing the violence could have done (usually nothing). It is through this understanding of agency that informs the overall thrust of *The Day After*'s rhetoric and representations: mainly in the context of a fear of what would happen if, either by accident or design, the United States found itself as the recipient of Soviet nuclear weapons. This fear manifests itself in depictions of the most horrific and hopeless scenes of families dying in each other's arms, entire cities crumbling, or children at play being consumed by a brilliant and blinding light.

Potency & Equipment for Living

The climax of *The Day After* occurs almost exactly half way through with a four minute sequence of mushroom clouds rising over static, almost picturesque land and cityscapes. Followed by fire, destruction, and panic, this is the *during* portion of the narrative that has the

most to offer, especially in the context of Kinsella's (2005) potency. Potency deals with the physical power of nuclear weapons, which is displayed front-and-center during the climax of *The Day After*'s narrative. This is an important theme because it also functions to disable new types of thinking about nuclear weapons. That is, the nuclear threat "has acquired the status of transcendental signified ... a meaning outside language" (Williams, 1989, p. 202). Williams (1989), here, is using Burke to understand the rhetorical power of the symbol of nuclear explosions, which directly intersects Baudrillard's (1987) concept of speaking evil. The discussion both in and outside the film of the potency of nuclear weapons denotes a type of hopelessness. This is effectively conveyed during the film's final moments where Dr. Oates, haggard and nearly hairless from radiation, succumbs to his injuries inside the blown out shell of his former home in Kansas City. This image, along with Stephen Klein's (played by Steve Gutenberg) brief monologue on fallout—"you can't see it, you can't feel it, you can't taste it but it's here all around us. It's going through you like an x-ray"—both illustrate how "[t]he threat of material annihilation is transformed into a potent discursive annihilation encompassing public speech, cultural expression, and political process" (Kinsella, 2005, p. 58).

The remaining hour of the film, which depicts the hopeless aftermath of the nuclear strikes seen earlier, is also instructive, because it directly intersects with Burke's concept of "equipment for living," and further animates the concept of potency. Such depictions of hopelessness influence how this rhetorical move provides "equipment for living" for the viewers. Discourse, in particular, serves people as "equipment for living" by articulating the hopes and fears of people (Burke, 1969; 1984); and, can also provide people with motives for addressing dilemmas they confront in their lives (Brummett, 1985). As Brummett (1985) points out, someone afraid of nuclear holocaust might be drawn to watch an apocalyptic television program

because the show articulates their fears; and, the resolution of the drama provides the viewer with motives that encompass these concerns. Discourse of hopelessness in *The Day After* posits the question to viewers: Why even bother trying to think about a world without nuclear weapons if they are so potent? A similar question is implicitly raised by the nuclear countdown dramas in this study: *Special Bulletin*, *Looking Glass*, and *By Dawn's Early Light*. Each story submits, in each's own way, to the inevitability of nuclear violence. Conveying hopelessness in this way attends to the public's fears about nuclear weapons, and is also a trap these other films fall into as they displace personal agency on to that of an all-powerful bomb (Bartlett, 2004). Indeed, none of the characters in *The Day After*, or anyone watching the film has any power to bear on the inevitable outcome of nuclear destruction represented in the film. Similarly, in the case of every other film except *Early Light*, there is nothing anyone can do to prevent nuclear violence—expert or not. Baudrillard (1983, p. 60) takes this concept further and argues that the types of apocalyptic imagery and rhetoric found in the films in this study are part of “the installation of a universal system of security, linkup, and control whose deterrent effect does not aim for atomic clash at all,” but instead aim for the disabling of any “real” event that could disturb the dominant order. So, in this context, the nature of potent imagery not only debilitates public discourse, but also enables dominant ideologies control over thinking in non-nuclear contexts.

For Burke, “equipment for living” is a function of rhetoric that defines a situation and offers strategies for dealing with or solving that situation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Applying Burke in this way to nuclear war films is not new, Littlejohn & Foss (2011, p. 359) note that “films ... ask audiences to confront the same paradoxes that they confront in real life” and whether or not they have the tools to figure a way out of the apocalypse as depicted in those films, or if they are trapped in those spaces. This observation calls back to the question of agency

endemic in the study of nuclear war representations. The characters in *The Day After* have none, but the theory of “equipment of living” asks the viewer to consider if they, themselves, do. Because “discourse . . . is the source of motives” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 359), the question of the medium of film is an important one. If Burke’s “equipment for living” theory is correct in this instance, then the rhetorical and physical representations of nuclear explosions in this film should have provoked the audience to action, or at least reflection. The motivation of a film like *The Day After* does not require any theoretical judo; it is obviously an attempt to influence the nuclear arms debate in some way. So if “equipment for living” tells us that the medium of television can transfer “the experiences from the film to the experiences of everyday life” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 359), then why was there not more popular attitudinal changes after its broadcast? Why were the potent images presented consumed the way they were? The answer to these questions lie in the nature of entelechy.

CHAPTER 7

MYSTERY

Kinsella's (2005) theme of mystery is also prominent throughout *Special Bulletin*. When the terrorist's nuclear device is first revealed to the audience, the character of Dr. David McKeeson launches into a lengthy and technical explanation of its design and operation, noting that the weapon is an "implosion device" with "fifth generation mechanics" of a "Los Alamos design" (Special Bulletin, 1983). He continues to explain that the weapon contains 5.3 kilograms of plutonium and that he will not "get into the yield of that, you have people that can do that" (Special Bulletin, 1983). This discursive mystification of nuclear weapons is precisely what Kinsella (2005, p. 53) argues that distances "nuclear topics from the realm of public discourse." The function of mystery in the case of *Special Bulletin* animates the previous discussion of agency, in that this mystification and distancing of rhetoric from "common people" further disables agency by impeding the ability of those without mastery of the nuclear lexicon to engage in discussion or understanding of the weapons themselves. This is clearly illustrated in *Special Bulletin* when a nuclear physicist is brought into the news studio to help explain what the NEST team is doing and the news anchor responds to the explanation by demanding: "please, in layman's terms!" This illustrates a real-world problem with expert rationality: that despite the mystery surrounding the creation of nuclear weapons and the secrecy of their use, if the layperson cannot understand the experts then citizens are left to blindly trust those with specialized knowledge at the expense of actual public engagement, moral, or even ethical appeals. This is what occurred during early debates surrounding nuclear weapons that relied on moral appeals for disarmament and were rebutted with technical explanations for the

preservation of nuclear weapons. Fisher (1987) notes that appeals to expert rationality rob ethical appeals of their authority and shift decision making entirely onto the expert. This is seen throughout *Special Bulletin* as expert after expert is brought in front of the camera to tell the less knowledgeable how to think or behave in light of the crisis in Charleston. The question then shifts, in terms of the audience, from “what can we do?” to “what can the experts do?” which is seen by the interviews mentioned above.

Finally, it is unclear what the intended effect of *Special Bulletin* is. At times the terrorists in Charleston are denounced from both the left and the right. Obviously the majority of people seen in the film denounce the terrorist’s threats, in spite of their goal of nuclear disarmament. On the left, antinuclear activists are interviewed who also denounce the method by which the terrorists are attempting to achieve their goals. This makes it unclear at first to determine what the message of the film is. Is it pro deterrence or anti-nuclear weapons? The biggest clue given to answer this question is in the final minutes of the film when news footage of the actual explosion is shown. These images show the potency of a weapon comprising only “one-one millionth” of the total destructive power of U.S. and Soviet arsenals, as explained by one of the terrorists during his first appearance on the news (*Special Bulletin*, 1983). In this way *Special Bulletin* has taken part in what Williams (1989, p. 202) has called the “transcendental signified” and in which Kinsella (2005, p. 57) refers to as moving nuclear explosion from “material catastrophe to discursive catastrophe,” the result of which (perhaps paradoxically) is that those presented with images of nuclear explosions and their effects, such as those at the end of *Special Bulletin*, are left feeling so hopeless the “only available response is to submit” to the incredible display of the power of nuclear weapons. In this way, *Special Bulletin* has participated in Fishel’s (2008) criticism of the way nuclear discourse has been depoliticized. The hopelessness that accompanies

the depiction of nuclear explosion at the end of the film socializes those who view it to care *less* about issues smaller than nuclear war, and to *not care at all* about nuclear war due to the extreme potency and awful power that lies at the center of a nuclear weapon. There is no good data that answers the question of how effective *Special Bulletin* was in its message, but there is a wealth of information about the most widely recognizable film in the genre: *The Day After*.

CHAPTER 8

CONTEXT & EFFECTS

In *Special Bulletin*, when reporting about how several citizens from the Charleston area have decided to camp overnight on the docks where the tugboat is parked, a field anchor observes that “the coverage of the event [is] more important than the event itself ... television is a presence that no one can ignore” (Special Bulletin, 1983). This moment appears as almost self-awareness in the context of this study. For Craig (2014) and Rapping (1992) made-for-television films cannot be divorced from the context in which they are presented. The format and promotion of these particular types of films is just as important, if not more important. Rapping (1992) argues that these made-for-television films are presented first as a singular text, but then built upon in the context of their viewing—people talk about television more than they do movies and the way networks promote films, especially *The Day After*, promote discussion before the initial text is even presented. *The Day After* was situated to be a discussion piece, and is shown as such in the final crawl of the film. It seems to have been at least partly successful as well. President Ronald Reagan said the film depressed him, and some argue that it directly influenced the intermediate range weapons agreement with Russia (Craig, 2014). Feldman & Sigelman (1985), however, paint a much fuzzier picture. Using data from a study conducted shortly after the airing of *The Day After* they note that the effects of watching the film did not increase hopelessness *or* a call for a reduction in the arms race. However, using a threefold metric of attitudes, beliefs, and salience to determine the effects of television programs Feldman & Sigelman (1985) discovered that prime-time television like the films in this study can increase

both knowledge and consciousness about issues and subsequently increase salience of issues in an audience's mind.

A separate study on *The Day After* not considered by Feldman & Sigelman seems to support the idea that the types of images used in *The Day After* provided “an educational and enlightening experience,” even for children (Lometti, 1992, p. 16). Lometti (1992, p. 16) argues that the film “stimulated unprecedented levels of discussion, both before and after its presentation” which suggests that the context with which the film was presented was likely as important as the representations and rhetoric that the film contained. Based on these two complementary studies it is difficult to tell if the images in the film were effective (or, at least, more effective than the context of its presentation), but what appears to be likely, regardless, is that the horror depicted in the film—the images of nuclear explosions and their horrific effects—were received well by the audience, as favorable calls to ABC following the broadcast of the film outnumbered unfavorable calls by three-to-one (Lometti, 1992).

We know from the work of Feldman & Sigelman (1985) that the majority of those who watched the film did not become any more hopeless about nuclear weapons or any more politically motivated for nuclear disarmament. What is interesting, in this regard, is that the coverage of the *event* of the broadcast of *The Day After* was actually shown to impact attitudes and beliefs *more* than actually watching the film itself (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985).

From the perspective of “equipment for living,” then, the film has failed to transfer its experiences to “the experiences of everyday life.” What might account for this phenomenon? Arguably, it is largely due to the absolutely apocalyptic and bleak nature of the representations of nuclear war in the film. Agency has been removed from those representations. No one subject to the film, either as a character in it or a subject watching it, has anything within their power to

change the events of the film. In contrast, the news coverage of the film is grounded in more concrete and local terms, which is something both *Looking Glass* and *Special Bulletin* attempt to tap in to: by presenting their narratives as news they attempt to present the information in a more salient and digestible way to the audience. Through the element of news media, there is a push toward an agentive role for both participants and viewers. This is important to note when gauging what types of representations are more likely to motivate action, regardless of the initial motives of those representations. Littlejohn & Foss (1986, p. 318) argue that the debate over nuclear weapons “hinges almost entirely on a rhetorical vision” because there have been no uses of atomic weapons in anger since 1945, making the debate almost entirely speculative. Here is where the films in this study enter the discussion, as they utilized rhetorical moves designed to influence the lives and opinions of viewers; to name the “real” situation of the Cold War, and force the audience to deal with its consequences. Paradoxically, though, it is as if *The Day After* had almost no effect in-and-of itself, relying instead on the context with which it was shown to do the majority of the work of providing “equipment for living” for encompassing nuclear concerns among television viewers in the 1980s. The failure of the representations of nuclear explosions in *The Day After* by itself can largely be explained by the question of agency discussed earlier, where even against the backdrop of a growing U.S. and global nuclear disarmament movement, the general public and viewers remained paralyzed by fear and inaction.

Where Burke’s “equipment for living” explanation leaves off, Baudrillard’s notion of “speaking evil” picks up. For Baudrillard, modern media images are unable to provide the type of meaning Burke is looking for. There is nothing in the film that can give the audience tools for dealing with daily life or responding to the rhetorical situation set up in *The Day After*.

Baudrillard (1987, p. 94) says of images such as those in the film:

if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation ... it is ... because they are sites of the *disappearance* of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgment of reality, thus sites of a fatal strategy of denegation of the real and of the reality principle. (emphasis in original)

This quotation is decidedly at odds with the idea of “equipment for living,” especially in the context of images tarrying with “god”/“devil” terms like nuclear weapons. Baudrillard (2005) delineates between evil and misfortune, arguing that evil is namable and has causal relationships with its outcomes, whereas misfortune refers to a simple accident with no one to blame.

The misfortune seen in *The Day After* is not the result of some external evil, and the motives are scarcely discussed. Instead, the characters in the film are the victims of the most misfortunate of misfortunes: the absolute destruction of their lives as they know them. The representation of nuclear explosions, however, is not a real representation of what is at stake; the question of meaning inherent in depicting so totally the effects of nuclear war is lost inside the recurring medium of television. Baudrillard (1987, p. 92) admits that slides in a museum hold more power for meaning than images on a television because in still images you are better able to “shiver at the ice age and feel the charm of the prehistoric.” This idea of still versus static is addressed by Littlejohn & Foss’s (1986) study of the film; they focus on an early scene in the film where Dr. Oates and his daughter are observing a painting in a gallery. The theme of stillness is a recurring one. Dr. Oates flashes back to it at the end of the film and the four-minute “middle” section of the film’s narrative is framed in a wide shot of Kansas City, still and picturesque (Littlejohn & Foss, 1986). Such a detached view of the violence of nuclear weapons removes the viewer from action and seeks to attach the type of meaning Baudrillard is looking for in static images, but still renders the destruction a misfortune rather than the result of an evil

external force. This reduction of *motivation* ties directly to Burke's theory as well as helps explain the relative impotency of the images of the film.

Baudrillard did not like the film, even though some of his comments about the impact of still images can be applied to it (Baudrillard, 1987). Burke never publicly commented on it, but would probably argue that its images of attack and aftermath are “equipment for living” even if research after the fact seems to indicate that no one was really motivated by the images themselves. For Burke the context is just as important, because the images fit into a larger discussion of nuclear war and preparedness, whereas for Baudrillard the images just simply are. This is further compounded by the notion that the larger narrative of the film does not “speak evil” which for Baudrillard means that they cannot provide any larger meaning because they reduce all action to simple misfortune. However, it seems that Burke's explanation of “equipment for living” has much more explanatory potential than Baudrillard. It is clear that the films in this study, and *The Day After* in particular, had observable effects on the capacity to provide meaning via the contextual deployment of the particular time.

While *The Day After* seeks to absolve the United States from blame in the hostile military actions and aftermath it depicts, another film places the blame for confrontation squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. Interestingly, the same questions of agency are recurrent, regardless of who is to blame. *Countdown to Looking Glass* is a Canadian film that was simultaneously broadcast on HBO and CTV in 1984, one year after *The Day After*. It is Canadian, but deals entirely with a crisis that erupts between the United States and the Soviet Union. The film “sustain[s] a specifically Canadian ideological agenda” and is seen as a reaction against the “conservative ideological messages in *The Day After*” (Christopher, 2014, p. 26). The film is presented—much in the same way as *Special Bulletin* is presented—as a series of newscasts. Where *Looking Glass*

diverges from *Special Bulletin* is how it shifts “behind the scenes” to explore interpersonal relationships of a few of the characters, which breaks the immersion that was so engrossing in *Special Bulletin*. If anything, *Looking Glass* can be seen as positioned at the intersection of *The Day After* and *Special Bulletin*, as it plots the political goings on in the run up to a nuclear confrontation, much like the first half of *The Day After* and all of *Special Bulletin*. Similarly, like *The Day After*, it seeks to ascribe blame to an entity, in this case the United States; and like *Special Bulletin* it is interested in the geopolitical causes for the nuclear crisis it depicts. It attempts both of these things, but does neither especially well. Something the film does that had not been done since 1957’s *A Day Called X* is use recognizable non-actors in roles meant to capitalize on their celebrity. In the case of *A Day Called X* the short docudrama used the mayor and other people in the public eye of Portland, OR to illustrate the potential ramifications of a Soviet attack on the United States. The film was also presented in a series of interposed news vignettes (accompanied with superimposed text informing the viewer that no attack is happening) and “back story” or interpersonal interactions illustrating the lives of normal folks who would be affected by a nuclear attack—which is the same basic form *Looking Glass* takes. In the context of *Looking Glass* nine people play themselves, including two radio and television journalists (Nancy Dickerson and Eric Sevareid) which lend external credibility to the narrative presented. Also included are politicians, including Konstantin Chernenko (Soviet politician, General Secretary of the Soviet Union 1984-1985), Robert Ellsworth (U.S. Ambassador to NATO), Newt Gingrich (Congressperson), Eugene McCarthy (Congressperson from Minnesota 1949-1959 [House] 1959-1971 [Senate]), and Paul Warnke (US diplomat). There are even military personnel included: Lincoln Bloomfield (U.S. Defense Department & State Department official) and Gene R. LaRocque (Rear Admiral of the US Navy).

The appeal to use actual experts in a fictionalized and dramatized narrative regarding nuclear war falls into the same trap observed in *Special Bulletin*, which is that appeals to experts rob those appeals of their authority and shift decision making entirely onto the expert. This is seen blatantly when the news anchor in *Looking Glass*, Don Tobin, asks Newt Gingrich what he would do if he were the president. This invokes Bartlett's (2004) discussion of this typology of nuclear storytelling. *Looking Glass* is a nuclear countdown drama where the viewer is presented with the threat of nuclear confrontation throughout the entire film until one is delivered with only ten minutes left in the film. For Bartlett (2004) the question of agency in this type of film is always deferment, which is seen multiple times in *Looking Glass*. When the White House is evacuated a staffer notes that "it's the military's ball game now," and also in an odd rambling portion of Tobin's newscast where he remarks that a growing sense of "prudence and restraint" in the United States is "perhaps the only response we have to events we cannot control" (Countdown to *Looking Glass*, 1984). This deferment of agency is, perhaps, part and parcel of the overwhelmingly present method of nuclear discourse employed by these films: secrecy.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine nuclear war made-for-television films to determine if there are particular themes or tropes that lend themselves to the genre. Using Kinsella's (2005) taxonomy of nuclear rhetoric and Bartlett's (2004) typology of nuclear storytelling as a basis for determining these themes or tropes also gave way to one other major concept: Burke's "equipment for living," with each of these emergent themes dealing, in some manner, with the question of agency. That is, agency for the characters in the films, as well as the agency of those who view them.

Three films in this study, *Special Bulletin*, *Countdown to Looking Glass*, and *By Dawn's Early Light* are what Bartlett (2004) calls "nuclear countdown dramas." There are, however, gradients within this typology. Each film, save for *By Dawn's Early Light*, is more or less a standard nuclear countdown drama where nuclear explosions are threatened throughout the film and then realized or avoided near the end of the film, the decision of which is always related to the question of characters' agency. *Early Light*, on the other hand, begins with a nuclear explosion but then threatens more catastrophic explosions as the film progresses, with the ultimate goal of avoiding total annihilation.

The Day After and *Threads* are both "dramas of nuclear devastation" which follow the same basic plot where the first half of the film introduces the audience to several characters, somewhere near the middle of the film is a nuclear attack, and the second half of the film depicts—quite bleakly—the effects of nuclear war. This genre of film is more closely tied to

potency than secrecy, because these films are concerned with depicting the realistic consequences of a nuclear war.

Turning to Kinsella's themes, easily the most prominent is that of secrecy. Again and again, each of the films in this study focus on the extremely secretive nature of nuclear policy and operations. In the context of the films themselves, the focus on secrecy significantly impacts the perception of agency. Because access to nuclear knowledge is reserved only for "experts," the "average" people depicted in these films have no capability to alter the course of events that almost always inevitably lead to nuclear destruction. This is impactful for the viewer as well, especially in films like *Special Bulletin* and *Countdown to Looking Glass* where the content is presented in the form of news broadcasts. This question of form is important because as noted by Craig (2014), Rapping (1992), and even *Special Bulletin* itself the context of these stories—the way they are discussed or otherwise consumed more broadly—is as important or even more important than the actual content of the films themselves. The weight of context intersects with Burke's (1969) "equipment for living" because presenting these stories in easily recognizable formats like news broadcasts better enable the audience to internalize and process the content of these stories, which in turn helps people develop motives for addressing nuclear issues (Brummett, 1985). Presenting these stories in a news format animates the idea of "equipment for living" because it enables the audience to consider nuclear issues much the same way they would do if they were actually watching the news.

Paradoxically, secrecy can also create "docile citizenship," meaning that because of the specialized language and knowledge required to fully understand nuclear issues, the general public (e.g. the majority of those viewing these films) is not able to participate either materially or politically in nuclear debates because they lack the specialized knowledge required as cost of

admission. Docile citizenship interrupts the concept of “equipment for living,” but does so most successfully in those films that depict the inevitability of nuclear explosions, regardless of the best efforts of those who do possess specialized nuclear knowledge. Of the films in this study all of them save *By Dawn’s Early Light* present nuclear catastrophe as an inevitable consequence of the existence of nuclear weapons.

This notion of the inevitable consequence of the existence of nuclear weapons is precisely what Kinsella (2005) observes as entelechy, the second most prevalent theme that emerged from this study. Throughout the films characters are committed to obtain perfect knowledge—often at the expense of workable solutions to the given conflicts in each film. Also in each film nuclear catastrophe is seen as inevitable due to the existence of nuclear weapons. Even the outlier, *Early Light*, depicts some explosions early in the film—an unavoidable consequence of the cold war and the existence of nuclear weapons. The presentation of the inevitability of nuclear war further impacts questions of viewer’s agency and nuclear secrecy because, as noted by Kinsella (2005) these threats of material catastrophe become discursive catastrophe by depoliticizing public discourse on the question of the existence of nuclear weapons. This depoliticization has potentially wider consequences by socializing the population to not care about more proximate social issues like famine, poverty, or racism because of the inevitable catastrophe that resides in both the material existence and discursive construction of nuclear weapons (Fishel, 2008).

The third most prominent theme is potency. Each film depicts nuclear catastrophe in generally similar ways. They all show blinding flashes, fire, mushroom clouds, and several also depict the vaporization of characters in the film. *The Day After* and *Threads*, however, take the depiction of nuclear destruction to a higher register because the extended impact is shown in

stark images of death, disease, and the collapse of civility with civilization. These dramas of nuclear devastation are better equipped than nuclear countdown dramas because countdown dramas rely on the impact of the final actualization or avoidance of nuclear catastrophe for their affective punch, whereas dramas of nuclear devastation take their time showing the ugly consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. The main difference in these types of potent representations is in degree, not quality. That is, representations of nuclear catastrophe still show the awful and potent destructive power of nuclear weapons. Dramas of nuclear devastation simply extend the explanation of the potency of nuclear weapons by actually considering what life might be like in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear strike. These depictions are especially powerful in the context of *The Day After* and *Threads* because the audience is first introduced to characters which provide an incentive to be more invested in those characters and imagine themselves in the situations depicted in the films.

Finally, mystery is the least prevalent theme in this study. Only *Special Bulletin* engages in this theme by discussing the esoteric construction process required to physically create nuclear weapons. It is not surprising that mystery is less prevalent because of how secrecy accesses the same type of fears intrinsic to a lack of knowledge.

Limitations

This study is limited by only examining five made-for-television films, all of which are in English. It also cannot account for actual responses (except those reflected in secondary sources written at the time) made by audiences at the time of each of the film's showing. There is a potential for attitudes to not reflect the conclusions made in this study, as well as the possibility that other language made-for-television films might employ different rhetorical and

representational strategies. Also, while the focus of this study is made-for-television films, the format means that these conclusions cannot be generalized to all films.

Future Research

The most intuitive next step in this line of research would be to apply the intersection of Kinsella and Bartlett to all nuclear war films, regardless of their production and deployment. Future research could also examine films not in English as well as shorter narratives that are not deployed as films, such as those depicted in non-film television programs or even news reports. Furthermore, to speak to the question of political motivation, future research could examine primary documents from the time that these films were aired to gain better understanding of the actual stated goals of the films, rather than assumed themes. This line of research could also examine political memoirs, much in the same way that this study references President Reagan's discussion of *The Day After*.

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