

LET'S ALL HIDE IN THE LINEN CUPBOARD

Jack Kibble—White on the nuclear issue on British television

Given what we know about the life expectancy of human beings, it is entirely likely that the Queen Mother will snuff it within the next few years. The fact that – at the time of writing – she hasn't yet seems to have developed into something of a national preoccupation. Year in year out, bets are laid that the old dear will die before Christmas. Every now and then a rumour spills out from the internet, or from teletext, or from Australia, that she has finally passed away; and on a recurring basis, newspapers fill column inches by describing to us the meticulous plans that have been laid down by National Broadcasters to cover the event. Tantalisingly, we are told that on a semi-regular basis, the BBC's great and good run through the motions, rehearsing how they will break the sad news to us when it finally happens. They could be having a practice right this very minute. Such a truly bizarre thought allows us for a moment to feel the existence of a strange parallel world, in which all of this is actually happening. Strangely, it's a good feeling.

I was eight years old when the Falklands War began. Unable to grasp the intricacies of this particular struggle, and in particular who the enemy was, I assumed that we stood at the cusp of a nuclear conflict. I don't recall how I knew about nuclear war but I remember being sufficiently informed to be able to gloomily advise my schoolmates that a prophet had foreseen that America and Russia were going to team up to fight China and that in 1999 we would all die. I would then cast a rueful glance at my schoolteacher and calculate that by that time she would be in her 50s, whereas I would only be 26. Ever since that realisation I have always scoffed slightly at older people's protestations about their declining physical condition – life may have dealt them a rough hand for sure, but at least they didn't die young.

Two years on from Nostradamus's scheduled date I now have cause to wonder whether today's eight year olds are ever privy to such gloomy thoughts. Does the endless fascination and anticipation of the death of a head of state or elderly member of the Royal Family trickle down to that level in the way that talk of a nuclear holocaust once did for us? After all, it seems to me that the demise of the world through man's pollution is too exotic an ending for us to surmise, and so it is only through the imaginings of the death of a prominent figure, or the initiation of a fuel strike, that we are able to construe a situation dramatic enough to change our day completely, thus transporting us to this foreign, parallel world that we seem to crave. Whilst many revelled in the tragedy of Princess Diana's death, still more enjoyed the feeling of strangeness that passed across the country during the immediate aftermath. For those people it was natural to be drawn to television, to fastidiously observe the new sobriety of the be-suited *Big Breakfast* broadcasts and to experience how the event was able to totally transform *This Morning*. As an interested observer, such moments brought back for me the nagging nuclear paranoia that seemed to build and then subside during the early years of the 1980s.

"These were the days before détente," remembers *Edge of Darkness* writer Troy Kennedy Martin, "when born-again Christians and cold-war warriors seemed to be running the United States. It was the time when the White House changed its nuclear strategy from the 30 year old notion of mutually assured destruction (MAD) to an idea that a nuclear war was winnable." Whilst the threat of nuclear conflict had existed in the public mind for some time (perhaps since the Cuban Missile Crisis) the appropriation of the presidency of the USA and premiership of the United Kingdom by the self-mythologizing and larger-than-life duo of Reagan and Thatcher, seemed to bring a heightened piquancy and plausibility to talk of our absolute destruction. As a subject there are perhaps few more engaging than the topic of our own demise. As such a lot of contemporary television in the early 1980s positioned itself squarely within the shadow of the nuclear cloud.

On 10 March 1980, *Panorama* aired an edition entitled "If The Bomb Drops ..." This disturbing programme considered the effects of a nuclear confrontation, and in particular the provisions that had been made to accommodate the general public. Unsurprisingly, the broadcast provoked strong reactions ranging from the "truly appalled" through to those who felt that the programme should have been "shown on all three channels. It was surely more important than Party Political Broadcasts". Viewer WGA Watson recalled for readers of *Radio Times*, that "we were given a glimpse of what is in store for the ordinary people when the 'deterrent' breaks down, with little Hitlers in their underground nerve-centres exercising unlimited power over their unprotected fellow citizen-refugees." The debate that the programme provoked allowed viewers to engage head on the prospect of their own absolute destruction, and through this it became apparent that this was an issue that demanded sustained television exposure. Roger Bolton, editor of *Panorama* was at pains to explain the programme's rationale: "We were concerned when making 'If The Bomb Drops ...' not to unnecessarily frighten or upset viewers. At the beginning of the programme we made it clear that we did not believe a nuclear attack is imminent or indeed very likely. On the other hand, we felt we must show what civil defence

provisions had been made for the general public as opposed to government. Knowledge in this case could prevent death. Some people will survive. As long as we are committed to the potential use of nuclear weapons we will remain a target for nuclear attack. Whether such policies are the correct ones is not for *Panorama* to say, but the public have a right to know the possible consequences of such policies for them."

Rather than providing the public with all the knowledge they required, "If The Bomb Drops ..." seemed to provoke a broadening of the debate on the coverage of the nuclear issue on television. Central to this was to be the BBC's continuing reluctance to screen the controversial 1965 film *The War Game*. Made by Peter Watkins, its graphic depiction of the aftermath of a nuclear attack became all the more frightening due to the film's pseudo documentary style (including employing non-professional actors to heighten the drama's realism). Commissioned as a production for the *Monitor* series, Alasdair Milne, the BBC's Director General for much of the 1980s recalls that the decision was made at the time of the film's completion that "the responsibility for its showing was too great for the BBC to bear alone", and as such on its original release the film was confined to cinema screenings only. Through the pages of *Radio Times* the call to finally screen the production gained fresh impetus in the wake of the *Panorama* report. Whilst, Milne would later describe himself as the man who ultimately made the decision to screen *The War Game*, in the 3 May 1980 edition of *Radio Times*, he commented: "I continue to share the opinions of my predecessor and of Sir Hugh Greene when he was Director General, that *The War Game* certainly has some brilliant film sequences. But it is now 16 years since the film was made, in black and white, of course, and both Brian Wenham, Controller of BBC2 and I find that it is dated."

This notion of the film's relevance unsurprisingly provoked a derisory response from *Radio Times*' readers. Dr Nigel Young concocted one of the most lucid replies. "The reason given by Alasdair Milne and Brian Wenham for not showing *The War Game* that the film is dated appears astonishingly specious. Given that this brilliant film's reconstruction is of a future nuclear attack on Britain one is forced to ask what 'dated' in this context means. I assume that it refers to the fact that the film draws on experience from World War II, that it shows the political leaders and flashpoints of 1966 (when the film was made) and that since then nuclear warheads have increased in size and numbers, and new delivery systems have evolved ... The cinematic qualities of sombre realism in *The War Game* are reason enough for showing it. It is also a historical document; we should ask why it wasn't shown when it was made. But more important is that the film is still relevant as public information in today's debate on civil defence, the cruise missile, fallout shelters and the so-called deterrent. The film remains the best attempt to imagine the unimaginable – to depict what the result of certain military policies could be ... "

Once again, it's perhaps worth reflecting on the context in which this debate raged. In the late '70s and early '80s, it was not uncommon for local councils to act out simulated nuclear attacks from their purpose built bunkers; such was their fear of an imminent strike. Writer Jim Aitken recalls that at one time "it had descended so far into farce that the Kingston-upon-Hull EPO (Emergency Planning Officer) is alleged to have asked the Home Office to 'bomb' Grimsby instead because Hull had been bombed in 1978 and 1980 and were thus unable to 'play'". Support for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) reached its peak in 1981 and was viewed by the Government as "dangerously strong". In the midst of all of this, the Prime Minister's time was spent discussing whether or not there should exist a "dual key" between the United States and Great Britain (thus necessitating the agreement of both countries before a nuclear strike could be initiated). This debate eventually found its way on to the front page of the *Daily Mail* as SDP leader David Owen claimed "British public opinion will simply not accept any longer the Prime Minister's refusal to insist on a dual mechanism."

Wherever you turned the threat of nuclear conflict seemed to be, if not looming then at least, lurking in the early 1980s and this was reflected in a 1982 Gallup poll in which 38% of respondents declared that they believed a nuclear war to be inevitable. The following year added more fuel to the fire. East-West relations became dangerously chilled when the Soviets shot down a South Korean civilian airliner, killing 269 passengers. Then, on 25 October, the United States invaded Grenada (the subject of a pro-Soviet military coup just six days earlier). Meanwhile, during their 1982 Party Conference, the Labour Party had secured the necessary two-thirds majority from their members to declare unilateralism as their official standpoint on the nuclear issue, and as such many Labour councils declared themselves "Nuclear Free Zones" during 1983, earning the epithet of "Looney left" in the process. Some years later Margaret Thatcher remembers that Labour's policy "had an appeal in the universities and among some intellectuals and" she adds "received a good deal of covert support from those in the media, especially the BBC." Regardless of the accuracy of her last statement, it is evident that the nuclear debate was preoccupying us to a degree that is difficult to imagine today.

Perhaps, the government's own preparation for a nuclear strike – and the BBC's part in it – ensured that the issue was never far from the minds of those who worked for the Corporation. Certainly radio and television was deemed by officials as the most effective medium in which to broadcast information in the event of a nuclear strike. It was also seen as the favoured tool of pacification and reassurance. Jim Aitken records that dotted around the country there were Sub-Regional Control (SRC) stations designed to house the "regional seat of Government" during an attack.

These SRCs would co-ordinate all regional post-strike activity and each "had a small studio which was linked to BBC transmitters by audio-quality phone lines ... It would appear that 100 days' comedy, drama and religious programmes were distributed to these studios, including *Round the Horne*, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, *Hancock's Half Hour* and repeats of the *Afternoon Play*". In addition, Aitken notes that "attack warning tapes were distributed during the 1980s to every radio and TV station in the UK, with Peter Donaldson providing the voice-over. This was accompanied by strong flashes of light on screen and 'dalek' music." The 19 October 1984 edition of *Broadcast* went so far as to include a two-page article on the provisions made by the Government and broadcasters to accommodate a nuclear strike. Sue Lloyd Roberts' investigations revealed that during the "pre-strike, preparatory phase, the Home Office aim is to keep broadcasting 'looking and sounding as normal as possible'" with transmissions only switching to a "war footing" 72 hours before the anticipated strike.

On 9 February 1984 Soviet President, Yuri Andropov died. On 6 November of that year, Ronald Reagan was re-elected as President of the USA, and on 15 December Mr and Mrs Gorbachev visited Chequers (their first visit to a European capitalist country). At the conclusion of the visit Margaret Thatcher pronounced to the press that Gorbachev was "a man with whom I could do business with". Meanwhile, Reagan was sticking to his Strategic Defence Initiative (announced in March of the previous year) and as a consequence made a lot of people very nervous with his belief that – as Kennedy Martin recalls it – "a nuclear war was winnable." British television's response was to intensify the coverage of the nuclear issue, bringing with it a conclusion to a long-standing debate.

The cover to the 22 – 28 September 1984 edition of *Radio Times* proclaims "Picking up the threads: BBC2 screens two visions of life after the bomb: *Threads*, a drama-documentary, examines the effects of a nuclear attack on Sheffield, while *On the Eighth Day* predicts a freezing twilight world. The programmes are followed by a *Newsnight* Nuclear Debate".

First broadcast on Sunday 23 September 1984 at 9.30pm, the fact that *Threads* was able to achieve BBC2's highest ratings (6.9 million) of the week and – as – reported in *The Listener* – was watched (after the *ITV News* finished) by "the biggest audience for any channel for the rest of the night, with a remarkable 40% share" was symptomatic not only of the advanced publicity that the drama had generated, but also of the public's desire to stare into the apocalyptic abyss that they half-believed lay in wait for them. Writer Barry Hines recalled during an interview with Paul Binnion that *Threads* "wasn't propaganda. It was even handed. You can't take politics out of it, but it was showing the dangers of (nuclear war), showing what could happen if things got out of hand, and it was a time when people thought it could get out of hand". Like the *Panorama* report of four years earlier, Hines viewed television as an opportunity to communicate an important message to the British people. "Our intention in making *Threads* was to step aside from the politics and – I hope convincingly – show the actual effects on either side should our best endeavours to prevent nuclear war fail". It is generally agreed that, if not wholly impartial (Sheffield was chosen as the drama's setting due to its pronounced "Nuclear Free Zone" policy), *Threads* was certainly the most unremittingly, devastating depiction of a nuclear attack that had ever been screened and unlike the *Panorama* report, seemed to provide the last word on what it would be like to live in a post-nuclear world. Similar in scope to the American production of the year before *The Day After*, the key difference here lay in the familiarity of *Threads*' locales and of its main characters.

Reviewing the programme at the time, writer Patrick Stoddart identified precisely why *Threads* had been able to shock us so completely. "What Hines did" he began "was rehearse the old kitchen sink theme of the middle-class girl who falls pregnant by her working-class boyfriend ... It could have been *Coronation Street* or *Play For Today*. What Hines did next of course changed all that. For the young couple, together with everyone else in Britain, the future never comes ... Presumably that was what (Mick) Jackson (director) and Hines had in mind – not *Happy Families Go To War* but an effective way of showing that such conventions as family life, human dignity and community spirit would simply evaporate at the moment of nuclear impact, and that the ragged remnants of mankind would be reduced to uncaring animalism by the need to survive". Naturally, the programme produced a strong response with Binnion recounting that "of the approximately 100 calls received by the BBC regarding the film, 'more than 70% were glad that the BBC had shown the programme, but many found it disturbing.'" *Radio Times* own letters page echoed these sentiments with one writer commenting that "this vision of our possible future was more chilling than any science fiction and completely believable when supported by so much scientific fact". Yet there was little or no debate in the House of Commons as a result of the broadcast. That is not to say that there was no palpable political reaction: The CND in particular used *Threads* almost as a recruitment film, whilst journalist Sue Lloyd Roberts speculated that the huge under-subscription of Government civil defence exercises could be attributed to the broadcasters: "After watching *The Day After* and *Threads*" she commented "anyone might be forgiven for taking the 'better to die than to survive' attitude. So why bother?"

On the Eighth Day was broadcast the following night and was "a charts and talking-heads affair about nuclear winter which on its own would have been terrifying, but which after *Threads* seemed merely anticlimactic. That, and the inconclusive *Newsnight* which followed were almost comforting" commented Stoddart, "if not in content then because we were once again seeing a television style we recognised and took for granted." Having inflicted the full brutality of

Threads upon us, there seemed little real reason to withhold *The War Game* any longer, and as such it was announced in 1984 to be finally "cleared for screening". Its eventual transmission on 31 July 1985 (to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima) was preceded by an introduction from Ludovic Kennedy, in which he estimated that, by then, the film had already reached as many as six million viewers.

On 11 March, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Soviet Leader (succeeding the late Konstanin Chernenko) and by November was attending meetings with Reagan in Geneva. Whilst this was to be the beginning of seismic changes in East–West relationships, the early stages of the process developed slowly. Meanwhile television had one final dramatic nuclear warning to convey. Troy Kennedy Martin's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (broadcast on 15 September to 13 October 1982) had been an adaptation of Angus Wilson's satirical novel, in which keepers of London Zoo are used as a metaphor for government. Whilst witty and wicked, Kennedy Martin's drama also cast a disturbing reflection on the current political climate. As effective as this was though, *The Old Men at the Zoo* would forever remain in the shadow of Kennedy Martin's most famous work. First broadcast on 4 November to 9 December 1985, *Edge of Darkness* is still well remembered and highly regarded (indeed, the character of Darius Jedburgh was voted the 84th best television character of all time in a poll carried out by Channel 4 in 2001).

Edge of Darkness is famous for many things, not least achieving an audience appreciation index of 86, and for securing one of the fastest repeats in BBC history. However much of the appreciation seems to centre on the drama's tight editing, wonderful direction and superbly haunted lead performance from Bob Peck, and as such the drama's political commentary seems often overlooked. That the story develops from a "TV thriller" into a mythic representation of the "Gaia hypothesis ... usually separated the men from the boys at Television Centre", recalls Kennedy Martin. The viewer is able to enjoy *Edge of Darkness* on many different levels, and unlike most other television that engaged with the nuclear issue, it is not an all–encompassing component within the drama. It's to Kennedy Martin's great credit that the spectre of Armageddon is treated as an issue in itself, but also as a thematic representation of a more mythic struggle between humans and the planet. Unlike his contemporaries Kennedy Martin seemed able to see beyond the horror of a nuclear strike and create a dramatic narrative that is both a humanist story of a father's grief over the death of his daughter, and a political examination of the paucity of the then current nuclear strategy.

Real life too, had one further trick up its sleeve, and for many the horror of a nuclear strike became a brief reality at 1.23 am on 26 April 1986. Writer John Greenwald recalls that "the first warning came in Sweden. At 9 am on Monday 28 April technicians at the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant, 60 miles north of Stockholm, noticed disturbing signals blipping across their computer screens. Those signals revealed abnormally high levels of radiation, a sure sign of serious trouble. At first suspecting difficulties in their own reactors, the engineers searched frantically for a leak. When they found nothing, they lined up some 600 workers at the plant and tested them with a Geiger counter. This time the signals were even more alarming: the workers' clothing gave off radiation far above contamination levels. Outside, monitors took Geiger counter readings of the soil and greenery surrounding the plant. The result showed four to five times the normal amount of radioactive emissions. Clearly, something was wrong – terribly wrong."

The explosion at the Chernobyl power station seemed for a time to take the exposition and debate of *Panorama* and the horror of *Threads* and translate it into the real world. Here at last was our nuclear "strike". Moscow radio and television waited for almost four days, or to be precise 92 hours and seven minutes before confirming reports flooding out of the area. Finally, the Russian television news programme *Vremya* broadcast the following statement: "There has been an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power generating plant – one of the reactors was damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Those affected by it are being given assistance, and a government commission has been set up." These 23 words represented the sum total of Russia's initial concession that something serious and tragic had happened.

Writing in *The Observer* just a couple of months later, Neal Ascherson remarked that "the release of radioactive material into the environment is a crime against humanity ... for a population showered with deadly radiation, instant information is a matter of life and death". Meanwhile, in Britain, a media panic ensued. Initially fuelled by the conflicting information being produced by the Russian and Western media, concerns turned closer to home as television reports morbidly tracked the progress of a radioactive cloud making its way across Wales, infecting livestock in the process. Living in rural Scotland at the time, panic infected our family much like any other. My father attempted to gain assurances from the Scottish Office that our water supply (a local lake) would still be safe for consumption, but his enquires were met with an uncertain and dumbfounded reaction – as if those people who had spent so much of their time enacting pretend evacuations could not really believe that their imagined role–plays were now a reality. I suspect, ours would have not been the only home in which all water was boiled before consumption, this very action, provoking fearful connotations in the mind of the now literate would–be nuclear survivors. We had seen all too many times the families in *Threads*, or *Panorama* undertaking this very same ritual and it seemed somehow a portent of worse things to come.

Of course, recent history tells of a retreat from the fear of a nuclear holocaust. "Today we have the beginning of a new

world in Europe and the missiles are going from Greenham" wrote Kennedy Martin in November 1989. The closure of the Chernobyl power station in December 2000 seemed to signify the final deactivation of the nuclear threat, and the nullification of the issue in the mind of the British media. The most recent Emergency Planning Review discussion document from the Cabinet Office (released in August 2001) focuses on the need to review the current emergency plans in the light of "the fuel crisis and severe flooding in the autumn and winter of 2000" and does not contain a single reference to a nuclear attack. For a time, the media – and television in particular – seemed intent upon finding a new apocalypse to replace the vanishing nuclear threat. AIDS, the environment and even the Ebola virus fed our darkest imaginings during the '80s and the '90s, yet none of these have developed to threaten life on this planet in the way a nuclear attack had, and today the world seems a safer, but more pedestrian place than it has been for a generation. Chernobyl has been happily forgotten. It was not the type of nuclear disaster we were expecting anyway. Unlike bombs, depletion of the ozone layer, and man-made viruses (the genesis often attributed to both AIDS and Ebola), accidents do not have the human interest of motivation underlying them. Therefore, until we can construct a new terror, underpinned with evil human intent, the best we can do is watch and wait for our State Leaders and Royalty to grow old and infirm.

We know one day, someone will hit a button and then – for a time – we can all panic.

WITH THANKS TO MIKE KIBBLE-WHITE AND ROSE RUANE

offthetelly.co.uk