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Prosperity and Paranoia. Engineering Atomic Fear with Cold War Images

Prosperidad y paranoia. Diseñando miedo atómico con imágenes de la Guerra Fría

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the way in which certain moving images were used to engineer atomic fear into a manageable emotion in the U.S. during the early Cold War Era. A time of political, technological, economic, and social transformations, which were met with an extensive public relations campaign that relied heavily on the creation and dissemination of tightly controlled images of nuclear tests and models of civic virtue. It focuses on a selection of ephemeral productions to offer a view of the different ideologies at work in early Cold War American propaganda and its dialectic of prosperity and paranoia.

Resumen: Este texto reflexiona sobre cómo ciertas imágenes en movimiento se usaron para transformar el pánico provocado por la bomba atómica en una emoción manejable en Estados Unidos durante los primeros años de la Guerra Fría. Una época de cambios políticos, tecnológicos, económicos y sociales en la que tuvo lugar una intensa campaña de relaciones pública basada, en gran medida, en la creación, distribución y control riguroso de imágenes de pruebas nucleares y modelos de virtud ciudadana. El artículo analiza una pequeña selección de producciones audiovisuales efímeras, en las que se pueden observar distintas ideologías implicadas en la propaganda de los primeros años de la Guerra Fría, así como la dialéctica de prosperidad y paranoia que permeaba estos discursos visuales.

Keywords: atomic fear, propaganda, Cold War, television, prosperity, paranoia.

Palabras clave: miedo atómico, propaganda, Guerra Fría, televisión, prosperidad, paranoia.

I. INTRODUCTION

ATOMIC FEAR IS by no means an obvious or simple concept. One might immediately think of the bombs discharged over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the iconic mushroom cloud, bomb shelters in suburban settings, or radiation-mutated creatures haunting the sci-fi genre. These referents stand out for a reason, and the awe and terror they were capable of inspiring is no minor matter. However, atomic fear is so much more than just the panic inspired by the bomb. The aim of this paper is twofold, on the one hand, it sets out to elaborate on why certain images from the early Cold War Era (1945-1963) are linked to atomic fear; and, on the other, it intends to offer a wider context of how, in the United States, this fear traversed a series of aspirations and anxieties, of desire for order and dread of chaos, of looking forward and a particular way of understanding the past.

This paper will focus on a selection of ephemeral moving images produced in the U.S. between 1945 and 1963. The selected works include three short instructional films created, or backed by, government agencies, *Duck and Cover* (1951), *Let's Face It* (1954) and *Operation Cue* (1955); and a television ad for one of the largest companies in the United States hosted by a popular actor soon to be politician, the "Live Better Electrically" campaign of the *General Electric Television Theatre* (1953-1962). The pairing of instructional films with advertising might seem far-fetched, however, consumerism was becoming the engine of a new kind of militarized geopolitics (MASCO 2008, 363-4); and, in addition, GE was not just any company, it had produced promotional short films such as *A is For Atom* (1953) and *The Atom Goes to Sea* (1954) singing the virtues of atomic science and its potential for producing energy. However, when it came to promoting its products in the 1950s, it pioneered the strategy of hiring a celebrity as the corporation's spokesperson. What these visual products make clear is that a total mobilization of American society is taking place, and the discursive landscape to which they pertain is exemplary of a dialectic of power and paranoia (POLAN 1986, 15) that rested not only on the fabrication of a devious enemy that could attack at any time, it was also based on a media representation of 'America' "as a culturally specific domain of family values, democracy, and free enterprise with the small town and suburban nuclear family as its focal point" (RUSSELL 2009, 242).

The timeframe is based on three factors. In first place, these are the years of above-ground nuclear testing. Starting with the first atomic detonation, the Trinity Test in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, and ending with the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, after which atomic testing went underground

and, consequently, the production of nuclear visual records came to a full stop, freezing the visual representation of the bomb in time (MASC0 2004). In second place, these years also represent the coming of age of television as a medium of communication. During the early 1940s, most Americans followed the war via radio broadcast and printed press, and experienced it visually through eagerly anticipated newsreels projected in movie theatres. Television started invading American homes after the war and its presence grew exponentially during the 1950s. The coverage of John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, and the around the clock coverage it inspired, can be described as the event that signaled television's maturity as a means of communication (BARFIELD 2007, 81). And, in third place, these years also see an intense reordering of social life, with the country's biggest baby boom in its history from 1946 to 1964 (ROSEN 2012). This baby boom took place in the midst of a rapid transformation from a war economy to a postwar spending boom, during which "many Americans both literally and figuratively bought their way into a new world" (BELTON 2012, 325). All these transformations go hand in hand with dramatic political shifts, both on an international scale and regarding domestic security policies.

These years are marked with a proliferation of pamphlets, films and other materials created by government agencies, which explained the steps to take in order to survive an atomic attack. The message was you could survive if you took the correct actions, but what was really implicit was the opposite: "The hyper-vigilance demanded by these survival instructions communicated that nuclear war was not only inevitable – it was imminent" (JACOBS 2010, 26). To better understand this monumental undertaking, the paper starts by detailing the importance of visual media in the ideological battle taking place on the home front, and how this visual battle created symbols, which carried tightly controlled messages and deflected attention from issues deemed too sensible for the public, of which the mushroom cloud is the paramount example. Next, we shall see how these symbols, together with a particular style of voice-over narration, are used in three different government sanctioned short documentaries, which would soon start to be broadcast on television. Leading to a reflection on the spread of television and the new media personalities and tropes that emerged from this medium, such as amicable television hosts and blissful nuclear families, redundantly present in both television programming and advertising, starting in the postwar years "when advertisers were in the midst of their reconversion campaigns, channeling the country back from the personal sacrifices and domestic upheavals of World War II to a peacetime economy based on consumerism and family values" (SPIGEL 1990, 77).

2. THE BATTLE ON THE IMAGE FRONT

During these years, the government treated the nuclear threat as a public relations problem, controlling the atom politically meant controlling information about atomic science. What we find in the years following World War II are two approaches to scientific information: the first, a defensive attitude that created a heavy censorship, and the second, a proactive approximation as witnessed by the proliferation of public relations activities and education policies (LAFOLLETTE 2008, 199). An important part of this strategy was played out via images, and it leaned on two complementary discourses, America's victory and ever-growing prosperity, on one hand; and the "Red threat," which according to the image making of the time was its biggest peril, on the other. Both of these discourses sunk their roots in World War II, the "Red threat" soon replaced the Nazi menace, using the same mechanisms to represent the former as they had represented the latter during the war (BOYLE 1982, 39). And the victory discourse had a direct link to the propaganda efforts of the war and its outcome, the prosperity it proclaimed was part of an effort to re-conduct life in a time of peace. The war had posed new needs for American representation, and the post-war moment would be represented alternatively as a continuation of these needs and as an abandonment of the wartime way of life (POLAN 1986, 8). What it all came to was a growing understanding of the fabrication of visual evidence as a tool in ideological warfare. The enemy had changed but fear and its discourse would be maintained. In Tom Vanderbilt's words (2010, 15-6), "The country was on a war footing and simultaneously awash in peacetime prosperity. Both conditions were upon each other, a contradictory existence that played itself out in everyday life".

WWII had worked as a catalyst minimizing difference and rewriting American social life within the limits of an ideology of unity and commitment that a number of discourses worked to prescribe sharply. Dana Polan (1986, 76-7) speaks of a "science of home front fighting," of how "through the mediation of shared concern, the home front becomes another version of the war." The 1950s continue this discourse of war as well as this instrumentalization of the media, which is writing reality within the framework of a singular, closed set of values (POLAN 1986, 46). The fear that communism generated was bound up with the population's deep desire for postwar stability and prosperity (SCHILLER 1991, 14).

The image bank of this period shows as much, as television and film were deeply implicated in the network of new technologies and fears (RUSSELL 2009, 242). The channels that inform regular citizens of this alleged threat and disseminate civic models of grace are the same channels used for publicizing

consumer goods. They are not only linked through their means of communication, but one also seems to involve the other. They seem to suggest that if you do not believe the official message and measure up to the models being set in them, you are not worthy of the beautiful glossy products advertised; what is more, you can even put that entire lifestyle in jeopardy.

In the transition from wartime to a time of peace, one of the most noticeable mutations was the change of the everyday landscape, from “small-town America” to suburbia. Polan (1986, 48-9) noted the importance placed on small-town America during the war effort, he argues that it functioned formally as a vast source of semantic elements, such as hamburger joints, pets, and the girl left behind. It is a mythology of sorts that counts with various rhetorical strategies that work to make those meanings appear as the inevitable sense of things, by using the logic of appearing to have no overriding logic at all; there is no explicit enunciation of a message of propaganda, just the chronicling of everyday life in small towns. A narrative that would be integrated in its own way into suburban life. The suburbs came to represent something new, something that was created in body and mind after World War II. For Jerry Mander (1978, 125), the suburbs are “capitalism’s ideally separated buying units” and are built profitably. For Margaret Morse (1990, 196), the freeway, the shopping mall and television constitute the realms of everyday life that are a part of a socio-historical nexus of institutions which grew together after World War II. She sees them as analogues, in the sense that all three are modes of transportation and exchange in everyday life. They imply a partial loss of touch with the here and now, in the sense that they imply practices and skills that can be performed semi-automatically; driving, shopping, and watching TV are the “barley acknowledged ground of everyday experience.” They imply a “dreamlike *displacement*”, a separation from their surroundings. “Suburbia is itself an attempt via serial production to give *everyman* and *everywife* the advantages of a city at the edge of the natural world” (MORSE 1990, 197). Another determining factor in the conceptualization of suburban living was that the idea of the city, perhaps more than the actual condition of the city, was profoundly affected after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (VANDERBILT 2010, 57). Suburbia was not only a consumerist haven, but a strategic habitation mode defended by military strategists and urban planners, since high concentration of population was now viewed as the city’s greatest liability (VANDERBILT 2010, 75).

The idealization of this new way of life is interwoven with the idea of it being in danger. However, there had not been any kind of incident to inspire such fear, it all stemmed from a discursive experience. Something similar had occurred with the attack on Pearl Harbor, which had come to most Americans

already shaped as a representation. Except for a few people, it took place as a symbol, and it is precisely its force as a symbol that brought about a sense of unity to a then divided nation. What is more, it was an event in the past that seemed to continue to live as a unifying force in the present and future (POLAN 1986, 60). This idea of threats that are experienced on a discursive level is key to understanding the propaganda of the Cold War era, which started in 1946 with the newsreel coverage of “the media event of the year”, i.e., Operation Crossroads in the Bikini Atoll. While it was announced as a technological and historical milestone, its representation was a clear continuation of the institutional relationship between the military and newsreel studios established during WWII. The resulting moving images, disseminated in newsreels around the country, were to establish the basis of the nuclear test film as a weapon to win public confidence and compliance (ATKINSON 2011, 70-1).

3. THE NUCLEAR ICON

Within this visual landscape, the image of nuclear blasts, and more specifically the distinctive mushroom cloud rising from atomic explosions, would come to take center stage in all visual depictions of nuclear power. It is a crucial image, for it is the most recognizable symbol of the atomic bomb, yet it shows practically nothing. The cloud was almost immediately recognized as a symbol of US power, and not surprisingly “the government quickly promoted it to instill awe and fear in the citizenry and thereby build support for Cold War defense policies” (TITUS 2004, 102).

After the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first pictures that appeared in American newspapers and magazines covering the event were tightly controlled, they were images of the mushroom cloud, not of the destruction on the ground in Japan or of the bomb itself (TITUS 2004, 105). From the outset, descriptions of the detonations focused on the impressive clouds and were filled with theological references and aesthetic impressions. These images were also published in magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *New Yorker*, and *National Geographic*. The journalists of these stories focused on the visual effects of the blast with vivid descriptions of the mushroom cloud and eschewed the dangers that resulted from it, especially those related to fallout (TITUS 2004, 106-7). Hariman and Lucaites (2012, 137-8) point out how the very first images to be published were framed within a rhetoric of ambivalence, they were artistically modest, tilted toward abstraction and not yet anchored in one medium or image. The key moment of visual condensation would be the result of the tightly controlled photographs of the explosions in the Bikini Atoll in 1946.

Although the recourse of treating the bomb as an aesthetic experience is present since the very first detonation with the Trinity Test, it was the media coverage of Operation Crossroads that consolidated the iconic image and the evocation of a sense of awe (HARIMAN and LUCAITES 2012, 140), what Joseph Masco (2004) and Peter B. Hales (1991) term “the nuclear” or “the atomic sublime,” that is, a way of positioning the bomb as an intellectual project that stimulates the imagination, rather than one that threatens the body. A position that is vocalized in instructional and nuclear documentary films with countless descriptions of the explosion as a “beautiful sight.” The symbol of the mushroom cloud was perfectly suited to this purpose, as a visual shape it is easily recognizable and as a term it reduces a terror inducing and awe-inspiring massive ball of fire into an unthreatening fungus, while not revealing any specific information.

The mushroom cloud was not the only symbolic representation of the atomic bomb, there were others, as there were other terms to describe the resulting clouds¹. However, it was the stylized image of the mushroom cloud that invaded popular culture during the late 1940s and 1950s. It materialized in the shape of commercial objects, and it appeared in album covers, postcards, books, comics, sale notices, hats, cakes, and neon signs. It became “the quintessential virtual symbol of the new era” (BOYER 1985, 8). Its importance in the 1950s cannot be overstated. The media coverage “facilitated the mass distribution of this emotion-laden symbol but also drew on the awesome beauty of the fireball to enhance the message. Spectacular imagery, poetic references, and colorful hyperbole focused the public’s collective eye on the aesthetics of the mushroom cloud and glossed over the dangers that resulted from radioactive fallout” (TITUS 2004, 107).

The image of the mushroom cloud seemed perfectly suited to civil defense’s mission “to produce fear but not terror, anxiety but not panic, to inform about nuclear science but not fully educate about nuclear war” (MASCO 2008, 368). This emotional engineering of atomic fear, as Masco puts it, responds to the need to manage the fear of complete annihilation, of a kind of destruction so vast and so new that could be paralyzing. Because of the government’s insistence on the need to further develop weapons of this nature, the threat of the bomb itself was displaced towards the threat of it falling into the enemy’s hands. This made the mushroom cloud a contradictory symbol, in the sense that it came to represent everything good about America and, simultaneously, everything that was evil about the Soviet Union (TITUS 2004, 109).

¹ Such as the Genie, the Giant, and the ball of fire, multi-colored surging cloud, giant column, chimney-shaped column, dome-shaped column, parasol, great funnel, geyser, convoluting brain, raspberry, pillar of smoke shaped like a parachute, and cauliflower cloud (WEART 1988, 402).

The ubiquitous images of mushroom clouds, together with the public spectacle of drills, were installing a specific idea of the bomb in the American imagination (MASCO 2008, 370). One that did not leave room for the real devastating effects of atomic warfare and nuclear testing, such as radiation. Anxiety towards the effects of radiation were present practically from the get-go, but it was considered too sensitive to be shared with the public. Radiation “symbolized the special horror of the new weapon and introduced an element of moral ambiguity. It seemed comparable to the effects of poison gas, which warring nations had stockpiled but generally refused to use” (LIFTON and MITCHELL 1996, 44). Lifton and Mitchell (1996, 79) also mention “fear psychosis” in reference to the fact that Americans remained deeply worried about the atomic bomb after Hiroshima. However, regular U.S. citizens did not fully know what the atomic bomb did to the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this was partly due to psychological resistance, but mainly it was the result of secrecy, distortion, and suppression that would persist, and have profound effects, for decades (LIFTON and MITCHELL 1996, 40). Medical experts and others began to worry about a new phenomenon that they would refer to as an “unreasoning fear” of radiation. This fear could have started with some of the initiatives of the scientists of the Manhattan Project who, as soon as the war was over, intended to instruct the world on the dangers of nuclear power and argued for a full exchange of information and an international policy to hold the proliferation of nuclear armament at bay. Civil defense propaganda was a massive effort to engineer public opinion, and the control of nuclear energy was turning out in practice to mean control over secrets, in the name of “security” (WEART 1988, 119). However, the unveiling of the civil defense program also spurred the first powerful antinuclear protest in the United States (Garrison 2006, 10).

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was determined to let nothing impede its tests. Thus, it opted for a policy of reassurance, developing a public relations campaign to insist that there was no chance of harm in Nevada and the press repeated these reassurances (WEART 1988, 184-5). As a result, in the 1950s the concerns regarding the effects of radiation if mentioned in government sanctioned films were ridiculed, shaken off with outright false information, which was intended to reassure American citizens.

4. NUCLEAR MOVIES

Regardless of the reassurances directed to the public, fear persisted and it made itself abundantly present in popular culture, both in literature, with novels such as Peter Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) George’s

Red Alert (1958), and Eugene Burdicks's *Fail Safe* (1962); and in film, with movies such as *The Beginning or the End* (1946), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *On the Beach* (1959). The most obvious reference to nuclear fear can be found science fiction films produced in the 1950s, which were the one channel where the anxieties provoked by the fear of nuclear testing could find an outlet in the shape of stories about radiation-produced monsters such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) and *Them!* (1954) (EVANS 1998, 75). In addition to these, another common theme in 1950s science fiction can be found in films about extraterrestrial invaders such as *The Thing* (1951), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which spoke to concerns about a communist takeover of the United States (BELTON 2012, 289-90). However, concerns over nuclear destruction were also present in *film noir*, with films such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The Prowler* (1951), and *In a Lonely Place* (1950) that were full of a lyrical fatalism that certain critics link to a national zeitgeist, where the fear posed by the threat of total annihilation, the red scare and McCarthyism can be felt (NAREMORE 2008, 130). For Mark Osteen (1994) this grim ambiance in certain films stems from the effects of Hiroshima over the American psyche and are manifested indirectly in the pervasive pessimism and paranoia of *film noirs* and thrillers such as *Notorious* (1946), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), and *White Heat* (1949).

However, Hollywood, which had enjoyed the status of the quintessential mass entertainment medium for decades, was on a downfall. The dramatic fall of movie theatre attendance from 1946 onwards, the antitrust suit against the majors in 1948, and the spread of television sets among American households dethroned movie-going as the number one national pastime and newsreel as the primary source of visual information. As a result, "the nature of moviegoing in America had evolved from the status of ingrained habit to infrequent diversion" (BELTON 2012, 322). Thus, to get a better picture of the kinds of moving images that were regularly consumed by the American audience we must turn our sight to what we could call ephemeral productions, such as instructive films distributed by governmental agencies and television broadcasts. Although it is hard to fully assess the way in which they were received, one thing is clear, these images were pervasive and ubiquitous and were intensely fetishized at the time, by filmmakers such as Bruce Conner and decades later, with what Russell (2009, 241) terms a "revival" in the 1980s of "collage forms of filmmaking" that recur to the imagery of the 1950s. For Russell, the 1950s was the decade in which that the use of television and film archives became apocalyptic, "It is the collage style of the age of television that renders history and memory unstable and fragmentary" (RUSSELL 2009, 241). This "Atomic Ethnography" manifests how the 1950s were a key cultural site for collage

filmmakers working in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Craig Baldwin, Leslie Thornton, Abigail Child, Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty (RUSSELL 2009, 246). In the words of filmmaker Abigail Child: “My generation of filmmakers, people born after World War II – we are TV kids. We were easily influenced by media and by how the media influenced our worlds. (...) Now what I think a lot of us are doing: we’re using emotional images, images that mean something to us, powerful, resonant images – not taking just anything, but being attentive to what images say and mean and how they can be read, actually approaching the flow of image-meaning, representation.”²

The instructional films, of the nature we are going to see, tried to convey two essential messages: one, the need to fully research nuclear weapons, no matter the expense; and two, that to survive a nuclear attack, it was necessary to take a series of specific actions. They also exuded a sense of imminent danger, no matter the efforts invested in normalizing the threat of nuclear warfare. In these movies, Americans were taught to see themselves as the good guys, fighting wars fairly for noble and progressive causes. Children learned in school that they were part of a tradition that had fought against a corrupt monarchy in the Revolution, that had fought to free the slaves in the Civil War, and that had fought against fascism in World War II. This is what Tom Englehardt called the heritage of a triumphalist *victory culture*, endlessly re-played in movies, comics, and television (JACOBS 2010, 27).

Most of these productions can be linked to the AEC, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) and the US Armed Forces (MIELKE 2005). The films produced by these agencies included military training and debriefing films, public service instructional films broadcast on television, educational films screened in schools, and informative films projected in workers reunions and church gatherings. The objective of governmental issued films was to “unify all U.S. citizens via a relationship to the bomb by scripting specific roles” (MASCO 2021, 201). To get a better picture of how this was done, we are going to focus on three instructional films, all directed to a civilian public, but each targeted to a specific demographic: *Duck and Cover* was directed to schoolchildren, *Let’s Face It* was produced with an adult audience in mind, and *Operation Cue* was primarily addressed to women.

4.1 Duck and Cover (*Anthony Rizzo, 1951, 9 minutes*)

Perhaps, nowadays, the most shocking examples of these instructional movies are those made for schoolchildren. Among these educational films,

² Quoted in Wees, W. C. 1993, *Recycled Images. The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film*, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 71.

Duck and Cover holds a special place due, on the one hand, to its wide distribution in the 1950s and, on the other, to the controversy it created in the early eighties, when it was reintroduced to the world with the 1982 compilation documentary *The Atomic Café* (1982) directed by Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty. This short film was meant to teach children how to survive a nuclear attack without adult assistance. The most recognizable and, for some, the most unsettling scenes were those of an animated turtle, Bert, who was shown together with a catchy jingle, written by the same team that were behind the immensely popular song “See the USA in a Chevrolet” sung by pop star Dinah Shore (JACOBS 2010, 28).

The film’s message is clear from the start, in words of its cheerful narrator: “We all know the atomic bomb is very dangerous. Since it may be used against us, we must get ready for it, just as we are ready for many other dangers that are around us all the time.” The voiceover glibly compares the perils of nuclear explosions with fires, automobile accidents, and even run of the mill sunburns, albeit noting its effects would be much worse – while we see a montage of mundane images of domestic accidents. And, in order to prepare for the bomb, as one prepares for fire with fire drills and minimizes automobilist risk by following traffic rules, one must know what happens when an atomic bomb explodes. We are told there are two kinds of attacks, with and without warning. The former is regarded as most likely, will be signaled by sirens, and managed by civil defense workers, whose orders must be obeyed. The latter will strike without any prior hint and the first thing one will observe is a bright flash of light followed by a great explosion. In this scenario it is of the essence to react quick, to duck and cover fast, with whatever is at hand. According to the voice over, even a thin cloth helps protect the skin, “even a newspaper can save you from a bad burn.”

The message is straightforward, “We must all get ready *now*, so we know how to save ourselves if the atomic bomb ever explodes near us.” Since an attack might take place at any time, it is crucial that you know what to do. In fact, this “knowing what to do” is insistently repeated throughout the film, together with another clear message “there might not be grownups around.”

Films such as *Duck and Cover*, distributed to schools all over the United States, portray children as “vigilant Cold Warriors” (JACOBS 2010, 27). They show the high-water mark of the militarization of American culture, in the sense that the military and its policies served as template for conducting domestic life (MIELKE 2005, 35). As Bo Jacobs argues, the fact that films such as *Duck and Cover* were shown in classrooms in elementary schools served to give these messages a unnerving authoritativeness; and, at the same time, this critical element of American Cold War society – the fact that educators,

government officials and parents felt the necessity, the urgency, of preparing the country's youth for atomic warfare – conveyed the message that their own Cold War government was unreliable.

The prospect of war fought with nuclear weapons pervaded American culture even when the United States was the sole possessor of such weapons. The fear and anxiety intensified after 1949, when the Soviet Union acquired its own nuclear weapons and the Cold War began in earnest (JACOBS 2010, 25). However, this kind of discourse did not start with the Cold War, it stems from the Second World War narrative as represented in cinema, which relished in a mythology of the strength of the ordinary person, of the “average American.” There had been, according to Polan (1986, 67-8), “an increasing investment in Willys and Joes (...) of the war, an image that sings the ostensible quiet virtues of everyday people, people who are special because they are typical.”

4.2 Let's Face It (1954, 13 minutes)

This treasured typicality of the ordinary person would continue in the visual representations of idealized American life. The emphasis on the importance of average people implied that everyone had some role to fulfill, which is one of the basic premises of *Let's Face It*. This short film fits neatly into another subgenre, that which Bob Mielke (2005) has termed the *nuclear test documentary*. Although every single detonation was covered extensively, starting with the Trinity Test in 1945 (BOYLE 1982, 39), it was not until 1947 that this subgenre gained momentum, when the Air Force created a special film studio at Laurel Canyon for the sole purpose of conveying the need to document nuclear testing. It became “the government's largest film studio during the Cold War and among Hollywood's most comprehensive ones, producing over eighty-seven thousand hours of film footage” (HAMILTON and O'GORMAN 2019, xiii).

It might be helpful to point out some basic characteristics of this subgenre, singled out by Mielke (2005). In first place, their style is simple and functional. The camerawork is austere, the storytelling is straightforward, linearly progressive, except for the occasional use of flashbacks. A central element is the use of voice-over narration, which is often relentlessly cheery trying to naturalize the uncanniness of these weapons and their testing. The aim is to reassure the viewers that they are not in a completely new and incomprehensible situation here – such had also been one of the key arguments of *Duck and Cover*. Second, testing is “a date with destiny,” the workings of fate, not human agency, which seems to contradict another of their common characteristics: the emphasis placed on the operations as scientific experiments and the importance placed on “American know-how” (WIENER 1989, 125). And third,

what can be called the “Janus-faced aspect” of the bomb, that is, a weapon of death that might end war. However, there is a tension between the proclaimed safety of bomb testing and its unpredictable effects. All of these are features could already be seen in the newsreels covering atomic testing in 1946, as described by Atkinson (2011). These films, like the newsreels before them, rarely acknowledge radiological dangers in the voiceover (MIELKE 2005, 31). An omission that should come as no surprise, since the U.S. government was adamant on keeping the effects of radiation, if not secret, to a minimum, even though the perils of radiation were nothing new. In this sense the government was purposefully misleading.

While the opening credits of *Let's Face It* unfold, we hear dramatic music, the kind of soundtrack that was common to melodrama or film noir. The first image to be seen is that of an expanding white mass, slowly outlining the distinctive shape of the mushroom cloud, on top of which we see the front page of a newspaper with the headline: “RUSS EXPLODE H-BOMB.” This soon becomes the backdrop to a chilling statement: “Let’s face it. The threat of hydrogen bomb warfare is the greatest danger our nation has ever known. Enemy jet bombers carrying nuclear weapons can sweep over a variety of routes and drop bombs on any important target in the United States.” Not only that, the public is told how this has also affected “our entire way of life.” The pressing question becomes what will *you* do? What will happen to *you*? Roughly one and a half minutes into the film, we are assaulted once again with a shocking statement: “Let’s face it! Your life, the fate of your community and the fate of your nation depends on what you do when enemy bombers head for our cities. And that is why civil defense was organized. To teach you how to survive in the thermal nuclear age.” The narrator contends that even though civil defense will teach you how to survive, guide you to shelter, manage evacuations, and organize assistance and radio communication, training and preparing is fundamental for *everyone*. The image track shows us as much with sequences depicting local civil defense agents directing traffic, cars supposedly withdrawing from cities, civilians and soldiers observing the skies, as well as men and women in some sort of military drill.

In case it is not abundantly clear, the narrator states: “The instinct of survival is inherent in all of us. And national survival requires that each one of us assume his share of the responsibility. There is work to be done and each must cooperate.” A discourse that is directly related the Second World War narrative of the strength of the ordinary person, of the “average American” described by Polan. What is essential here is how the threat posed by the possibility of nuclear war was constructed as everybody’s business and not just the government’s responsibility.

The film introduces us to the idea of constructing an entire city and dropping a bomb on it to study the effects and plan accordingly. However, it deems such an endeavor as unfeasible, in its stead we are introduced to a series of constructions that are representative units of a test city, in the narrator's words, "a weird, fantastic city." These units include basically furnished homes, bridges and railway tracks leading nowhere, a synthetic forest, as well as underground structures. Among all the elements put in place for the test, one type of device stands out, the high-speed cameras, which will visually register the effects of the detonation with an unprecedented accuracy. The resulting images will figure heavily for decades in the American imaginary.

The morning of the test we see a multitude of people and cars, military personnel and defense officials. Just as announced in *Duck and Cover*, first we see a bright flash, which is followed by a cloud adopting the distinctive silhouette of a mushroom. We see the houses being struck, towers of smoke and flames rising in the air, we are told that "every bit of twisted steel makes its contribution", that we are getting the "hard-to-come-by knowledge of modern warfare." For that purpose, troops are let in, allegedly, "safely and confidently" to analyze and study, in order to make "survival facts" available to *you*. It is a clear example of how these films imply the idea that "conducting and observing nuclear explosions is really a scientific endeavor, not geopolitical saber-rattling" (MIELKE 2005, 29).

Over images of spectacular mushroom clouds and their observers, we hear triumphant music and the concluding remarks: "In the thermonuclear age civil defense, like military defense, must be flexible. It must develop and grow, even as those forces threaten our existence. And so, until men of good will have turned this awesome power to peaceful uses, let us recognize the threat to our way of life, the threat to our survival, and let's face it."

4.3 Operation Cue (1955, 16 minutes)

Operation Cue holds several points in common with *Let's Face It*, the most obvious being that it can also be classified as a nuclear test documentary directed to a civilian audience. However, there are several interesting developments that set it apart. For one thing, it was shot in color and broadcast on national television. For another, it was narrated by a female voice-over, that of a fictitious journalist named Joan Collins, as to imply that we are listening to a civilian's account of the test, and not just any civilian, but a woman who self-describes as a wife and a mother, which is an unveiled interpellation to mothers and wives across the country. *Operation Cue*, as newsreels covering Operation Crossroads nearly ten years before, can be classified as what Shawn

Parry-Giles termed “camouflaged propaganda,” which in the U.S. often took the form of journalistic coverage. Regardless of how obvious the propagandistic nature of this short film might seem to us, the recourse to use a narrator (supposedly) from the press was an attempt to demonstrate good faith to make the public witness to these momentous events. Choosing to use a journalistic format is no minor matter in a context where the ideology of a free press disposed audiences to perceive material circulated in news media as objective and free from governmental influence, even when it was far from it. (ATKINSON, 76). What is more, that the journalist at hand was a wife and a mother was an eloquent detail, since, at the time, housewives in the United States were defended as “managers of destiny perfectly positioned to fight socialism.”³ And, lastly, what had been declared an unfeasible ambition in *Let's Face It*, to build an entire city and drop a bomb on it, is the declared objective of Operation Cue, an extensive test program conducted by the FCDA that included 40 separate projects. Among this program, we find nuclear test “Apple 2”, a 19-kiloton device detonated on May 5, 1955, which is the subject matter of the film *Operation Cue*.⁴

The fact that the explosion and its effects were broadcast on national television makes it necessary to look at the medium itself. Television, to a great extent, was responsible for how the atomic bomb was conceived by regular Americans in the 1950s. The kind of emotional engineering that took place during these years is unconceivable without television and the place it held in American households. Although the device itself was invented in the 1920s, television did not exist for any practical purposes until after World War II. According to Jerry Mander (1978, 134), what would finally kick-start the spread of television sets was the need to find a vehicle for the advertisement of new commodities, which would be essential in the transition from a war economy to an economy of peace. Reportedly, in 1947, Americans regarded radio as their most trustworthy source of information about the bomb and during the five years following the war, hundreds of radio documentaries about atomic energy were broadcast in the United States (LAFOLLETTE 2008, 205-6). But radio would be gradually displaced as the primary source for entertainment and news by television. In 1946, there were only six commercial television stations and approximately 8000 households had sets. Between the years 1948 and 1955 more than half of all US homes installed a television set. And by the end

³ Warren Kinsman, “The Responsibility of Women in Today’s World,” an address before the Wilmington City Federation of Women’s Clubs and Allied Organizations. Quoted in Rosen, paragraph 2.165.

⁴ “Civil Effects Tests Fact Sheet” DOE/NV - -714 – REV 1, published by the Nevada National Security Site History, August 2013, https://www.nnss.gov/docs/fact_sheets/DOENV_714.pdf (Last accessed October 29, 2021).

of the 1950s there were over 400 stations and 90 per cent of US households had television sets (SPIGEL 1990; LAFOLLETE 2008, 214). Thus, television became the main source of shared images, and this would have a deep impact on the formation of public opinion.

Television itself was a staple home fixture in US ads in magazines, even before most Americans could receive a signal. More than reflecting a social reality, it preceded it. Television became the central figure in images of the American house and the cultural symbol of family life. Television was seen as a kind of household cement which promised to reassemble the lives of families who had been separated during the war. It was also meant to reinforce the new suburban family unit which had left its extended family behind in the city (SPIGEL 1990, 76).

The image of the perfect housewife on television, as well as in ads for TV sets, would obscure a radically different reality, where many women were remiss to give up the terrain gained in the job market. In fact, according to Ruth Rosen (2012) the influx of American women into paid work really began in the late 1950s.⁵ However, the discourse of the blissful housewife would prevail, and would come to be politically significant, as it was seen as a distinctive American trait and was defended as a capitalist feature. Rosen argues that the belief that American superiority rested on its booming consumer culture and rigidly defined gender roles became strangely intertwined with Cold War politics. A discourse that became crystal clear when in 1959, at an American National Exhibition in Moscow, Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Khrushchev engaged in a bizarre exchange that has come to be known as “the kitchen debate.” They argued over the relative merits of American and Soviet domestic appliances. Nixon boasted of the laborsaving devices that gave American women time to cultivate their charms as wives and to care for their children, and Khrushchev responded that the Soviet Union had little use for full-time housewives, its women workers were busy building an industrial society.

Therefore, the fact that certain nuclear test documentaries were specifically targeted to women, as can be clearly appreciated in *Operation Cue*, must come as no surprise. The expressed aim of the film was to understand the effects of an atomic blast on the things we use in our daily lives. Although this female narrator declares that it is her duty to see *Operation Cue* through the eyes of the average man and woman – an average man and woman that are notoriously white and middle-class –, the narration makes it painstakingly clear how relevant it is that she is a wife and a mother, by having her voice specific concerns about the food, and the fact that most of the everyday objects she will

⁵ According to Rosen (2012), between 1940 and 1960, the number of working women doubled. By 1955, more women worked in the labor force than had during World War II.

later examine for the camera pertain to the domestic realm. The day before the test, she guides the audience with her homey tone through the shelters, radio towers, energy facilities and houses, complete with furnishings and inhabitants, that is, fully clothed mannequins.

The morning of the explosion she introduces us to “Media Hill”, the mound where we find reporters and commentators, as well as military and civil defense observers. A mile from Media Hill there is a small group of volunteers that are to occupy a trench relatively close to ground zero. Those on Media Hill prepare to behold the awesome site of the bomb’s intense flash and resulting mushroom cloud through their goggles. We are shown scenes of the houses, towers and mannequins hit by the bomb’s shockwave. However, Joan Collins and her fellow observers must wait 24 hours before they are permitted to see first-hand the effects of the explosion. The narrator confirms the degree to which different structures have sustained the explosion and effects of the blast on textiles. All in all, if we are to follow her pleasant recounting of the event, it seems that nuclear attacks might be manageable. An insidiously comfortable outcome that reaches its peak with a picnic for the test observers and volunteers, where the main dish consists of meat roasted in cans salvaged from the blast. However, the public should not become overconfident, as Joan says, “This time it was only a test.”

Once our female narrator has done her duty, the film closes with a masculine voice-over musing over the lessons learned and the need to “plan for the survival of our homes, our families, and our nation in the nuclear age.” This gender switch seems to imply that the woman who has guided the audience throughout the film, while informative and relatable, lacks authority. The final words are pronounced by a man. Housewives might have been the “managers of destiny” but television constantly reminded its audience that “father knows best.”⁶

5. NUCLEAR HOSTS, NUCLEAR FAMILIES AND ADVERTISING

Among the most beloved TV dads to grace the screens of the 1950s we find Ronald Reagan in his dual role of host of *The General Electric Television Theatre* and as head of his household in the ad campaign of the show’s sponsor. It is important to note that Cold War propaganda in mass media was not simply the expression of official ideology, it involved a *range of different ideologies*, discourses, and institutions (SHAW 2007, 302). Reagan and his family, as

⁶ This is a reference to the immensely popular television series *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960).

presented in these commercial segments, were the perfect incarnation of these multiple ideologies.

To better understand the importance of Reagan's tenure in television, it might be necessary to see in some detail what characterized this new kind of media personality: the television host. Naturally, there were many kinds of hosts, for instance, LaFollette (2008, 212) takes special interest in science popularizers, people who were not scientists but were professional and relaxed on camera, "hosts who projected a well-mannered image of pleasant amateurism, almost as if too much sophistication might render the science suspect." For LaFollette, the matter of amateur yet charismatic hosts as scientific communicators is far from banal, it signals a shift that helped to loosen the scientific community's control over its own public image and offer uncritical perspectives on science. An excellent example of this pleasant amateurism applied to scientific content is the character Joan Collins in *Operation Cue*, not only is she not a scientist, but also her role as a journalist seems to be the least meaningful of her attributes, whereas the fact that she is a mother and a wife is insistently present. However, this placid amateurism is not limited to science programming or factual content, it seems to be extensible to television hosts in general. A role that seemed tailor-made to Reagan's natural talents, in the sense that his highest praised virtues were his likeability and charisma as a skilled speaker, which were never encumbered by intellectualism or highbrow knowledge.⁷

Reagan's role in the campaign manifests another key characteristic of mass communication media of the 1950s, which was also present in *Operation Cue*, the fact television was shaped by entertainment values and corporate interests (LAFOLLETTE 2008; SCHILLER 1991; and MANDER 1978). These corporate interests clearly permeated instructional films such as *Operation Cue*, where the home furnishings and clothes worn by mannequins had been donated by 150 industry associations (MASCO 2021, 206; MASCO 2008, 376). A clever strategy of product placement and a sign of how the interests of big business and propaganda were becoming increasingly aligned. In Mander's (1978, 30) words, "Everyone with a message to deliver – government, corporations, the military, community groups, gurus, teachers and psychologists – began drooling at the possibility of gaining access to this incredible machine that could put pictures into millions of people's heads at once." What is more, broadcasting derived its income from advertising, which required networks to sustain the status

⁷ In the words of Joan Scott: "He was an actor who made a good speaker, but talking with him before and after events, this was a man who simply was not well informed, not very knowledgeable. He was a kind of personable performer." Quoted in Freedland (2009, 106). It is worth pointing out that the statement is made by the wife of blacklisted film producer Adrian Scott and therefore far from neutral. However, it is not an uncommon description of Reagan.

quo, thus, to avoiding whatever deviated too sharply from what the audience already accepts (LAFOLLETTE 2008, 243).

Advertising, at least on the scale it would be developed from the 1950s onwards, barely existed before then either. A symbiotic relationship developed, by which advertising financed television's growth and television served as the upmost delivering system for advertising. The fact that it was so effective also had to do with the specific historical moment. As Mander (1978, 135-6) recounts, after the Second World War, Americans were relieved that the war was over and was expecting things to get back to normal, but what exactly was normal? Memories of the hardships of the 1930s persisted, and many ordinary people were aware that the war had alleviated the Depression; it had given men jobs as soldiers and women jobs as factory workers. In 1946 government and industry started making pronouncements about "regearing" American life to consume commodities. Thus, a new vision was born, one that equated the good life with consumer goods. People had to be convinced that life without all these new products was undesirable and unpatriotic, they had to forget the rationing of the war years. Television was the perfect means to deliver the lifestyle that advertising promoted. It was in this frame that the "nuclear family" was idealized to a greater extent than ever before (MANDER 1978, 137). One specific embodiment of this ideal suburban life was the Reagans' home in Pacific Palisades, as can be seen in the *Live Better Electrically* campaign.

Ronald Reagan had been a popular actor in B-movies and counted with a loyal fan base in the early 1940s. However, it was the Cold War that made his reputation and shaped his media persona. Behind closed doors he proved to be a loyal collaborator to the House Un-American Activities Committee and the FBI since 1947, while maintaining a liberal easy-going and well-wishing façade during his own public declarations before the committee as president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) (DOHERTY 2018, 166-9). By the early 1950s his film career was in decline, however, in 1954, after a series of television cameos and Las Vegas gigs, he received a lucrative offer to serve as program supervisor, host and occasional actor for *GE Theatre*, an established but under-performing anthologies series on CBS (RAPHAEL 2009, 120).⁸ Reagan managed to turn it into a resounding success thanks, among other things, to his Hollywood connections (EVANS 2006, 57-8). Of relevance to us are the *Live Better Electrically* publicity segments, dedicated to the promotion of the program's sponsor. In these short clips the Reagans were portrayed as the ideal nuclear family en-

⁸ For an in-depth study of this period of Ronald Reagan's career, see EVANS, Thomas W. *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

joying all the benefits of GE electrical appliances. For this very purpose, GE equipped the Reagans' home with their latest technology, enabling Ronald to offer viewers a tour of his "Total Electric" house, showcasing the benefits of the new suburban lifestyle with Nancy as the ideal housewife. These ads were inserted in the intermission between the two acts of the weekly drama, starting in 1956, and demonstrated how "total electric living provided the utopian resolution to the ideological tensions of American Exceptionalism represented in the teleplays" (RAPHAEL 2009, 130).

As an example, we can single out an ad aired in 1957, which consisted of a scene starting with the Reagans at the breakfast table. Ronald marvels at Nancy's homemaking skills, Nancy cheerfully boasts of all the "many electric servants" that make her life so much easier, and a lisp-ridden Patti is puzzled by the term "electric appliance," which inspires Ronald to devise a game consisting of identifying electric appliances. They start in the kitchen, where the clock, the mixer, the vacuum cleaner, "mommy's iron," and the grill are conveniently pointed out. We have already heard wonders of the toaster, automatic skillet, and coffee maker. Nancy speaks to camera, stating what a difference they all make "in the way we live, that's why every housewife wants them." Once again, we have a female guide, a wife and mother, walking us through domestic items, as Joan Collins did in *Operation Cue*, only this time it is side-by-side her husband, who has come to represent a new kind of celebrity peculiar to television, the corporate icon (RAPHAEL 2009, 133).

It could be argued that it was this image of Reagan that made his political career. Giving speeches in the name of industry – the GE deal also included a tour of power plants and other facilities – and projecting the image of perfect TV dad of a happier and simpler time. A career that culminated in 1982, when he became president of the United States, after a campaign in which he presented himself as a small-town American who could restore common decency to a corrupt government, appealing to an ideological faction whose views had not been substantially represented in Washington since the 1950s (SHAW 2007, 267-8). Reagan, in the 1980s, not only recurred to the rhetoric of prosperity and paranoia, he himself represented a revival of that rhetoric (POWASKI 2000, 15). Albeit with a modification, Reagan's administration came in "on a platform of restoring the dream of abundance without any necessity for sacrifice on the part of the population" (RIESMAN 1981, 292). Reagan also stood out for his hard-line rhetoric and his vast investment in the arms build-up, which included the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly known as "Star Wars" (BROWN, 476-7) and derided by scientists as a "Buck Rogers fantasy" that, nonetheless, was a brilliant political move "shifting the debate from *eliminating* nuclear weapons to defending *against* them" (BOYER 2016, 83).

6. FINAL REMARKS

In this paper we have seen how atomic fear was managed on a discursive level, specifically with moving images, to direct the population's fears towards an enemy, which had never perpetrated an attack on American soil, in an effort to suppress resistance to further nuclear testing. The aim was to convert the anxiety the existence of the bomb could inspire to regular citizens into an anxiety based on the idea of it falling into "the wrong hands." Something that would not only threaten the physical safety of the population, but that would also threaten the newly gained order, expressed in modern suburban living and consumer goods. The nation's prosperity was on the line, even if this prosperity was more aspirational than real.

In order to garner public support, or minimize resistance, it was essential to create shared concern and responsibility. For that purpose, governmental agencies continued the discursive tactic that had been so effective during WWII, mythologizing everyday life and the strength of the ordinary person, ultimately making the bomb everybody's business in regard to survival, but nobody's business when it came to policy making and information sharing. The mushroom cloud epitomized this paradoxical maneuver. Its ubiquitous presence made the fact that this was a nuclear era an unescapable reality, however, awareness of the existence of the bomb did not necessarily mean knowledge of its real effects, costs, and perils.

The maneuver was more effective in bringing this new Cold War in line with a historical national discourse in which the Americans were always the good guys, from the American Revolution to the Second World War, than in creating widespread trust in the government's nuclear policies. For some, civil defense was an absolute failure, Garrison's (2006, 13) states that "the vast majority of the American public either ignored civil defense or treated it with derision." Still, civil defense was a massive undertaking, and to better understand how it operated on a visual level we have analyzed three films issued by governmental agencies. They share a sense of imminent danger and the need to prepare to defend this world of dainty houses, pristine schools, and newly paved roads, where kids ride their bicycles to cub-scout meetings and families enjoy picnics. Such are the scenarios of *Duck and Cover* and *Let's Face It*, suburban bliss only threatened by the bomb in the enemy's power. In *Operation Cue* we see something different, this time the suburbs are the subject itself, not the people that inhabit them, but the many objects that furnish them. For this is not a real community, it is the simulacrum of a typical American city. Here the alleged purpose is to understand what would happen to buildings, shelters, communication infrastructure, power sources, cars, clothes, food, everything

but the most important element of a city. Nowhere is there a hint to what might happen to human bodies.

The tests and drills, as shown in the instructional films, always seem to conclude that nuclear attacks are survivable, and are so thanks extensive research and testing. However, there are two aspects that are worth pointing out when considering “the service” nuclear testing and nuclear propaganda were touting. In first place, they do not offer any useful information for survival, in the sense that ducking and covering will do nothing if one is close to a nuclear explosion and much less if we are to believe that a thin cloth or newspaper as improvised shields will make a difference. In second place, what was happening was that the government, not a devious and conniving enemy, was in fact bombing its own ground in Nevada and putting its population in danger knowingly.

We have also seen how television was largely responsible for how the atomic bomb was conceived by regular Americans in the 1950s, and how the attempt of emotional engineering that took place during these years is unconceivable without it. With this new medium came new communicators and new visibility to sponsors. In TV programing in general, as well as in instructional films, what we see is a closed set of values, expressed through visual models of civic bliss with clearly outlined gender roles and white middle-class aspirations. An ideal image that was embodied to perfection by the Reagan family in GE’s *Live Better Electrically* campaign. The ad, in contrast to the films, does away with all menacing elements and presents a dream home inhabited by celebrity family the Reagans. There is a strange reversal taking place, while nuclear test films and instructional movies work by simulating a speculated reality, this ad works by showing an intervened reality, that is, the Reagan home adapted to television standards.

Another important development is in place, Reagan’s media persona and his education in political branding is beginning to take shape, this was “a pivotal moment in the relationship between corporate capitalism, popular culture and electronic media” (RAPHAEL 2009, 121). The lesson learned in advertising would be essential to his communication strategy as president, best exemplified in his administration ability to craft a popular media image of the president, to such an extent that general approval for Reagan’s presidency (between 60 and 70 percent for large extensions of time) was consistently and strikingly superior to the approval for his policies (rarely higher than the low 40th percentile) (RAPHAEL 2009, 117). This can also be seen as symptomatic of the times, Raphael (2009, 115) argues that the efficiency of political branding in the U.S. during the 1980s resulted from the systematic application of the techniques and technologies of electronic media to time-tested practices linking performance forms and players to political movements and audiences.

In a sense this is nothing new, images have always carried the potential of becoming tools for legitimization, as well as tools of resistance. But the mechanical production of images has come to represent in many ways the 20th century. Alain Badiou (2005, 17), when reflecting on what could define this past century, argues that we could term it the Soviet century, the century of totalitarianism, or the century of the triumph of capitalism and the world market. But, in fact, the century has been made of the crossings of all of the above, and all have been encompassed by intense visual representation. He also states that one of its main characteristics was how it was not the century of “ideologies” in the sense of the imaginary and the utopian, instead its main determination was the “passion for the real” (BADIOU 2005, 83). It is my contention that this “passion for the real” is intimately intertwined with a redefinition of the real influenced by the development of cinema and notions of photographic ontology (BAZIN 1960), and what Mary Anne Doan (2002) calls an anxiety of “total representation” that came with the invention of cinema.

I believe these materials are particularly interesting now, decades later, because they have outlived their purpose, becoming waist, audiovisual ruins of the atomic age, in contrast to the images that have been deemed worthy of conservation and hold a high place in film and television history. Despite their ephemeral nature, the images are highly recognizable because the propaganda of the atomic era in the United States was highly coded, and it was shaped in by the same means and professionals than the publicity of consumer goods.

The dominance of the recourse to simulation played a crucial role in films issued by governmental agencies for educational purposes, as it does in publicity in general. There are no attacks in these films, only images of attacks, reality is displaced with simulation. Thus, the images are not only representative of a battle taking place on the image front, but of a particular way of imagining the battlefield (GRANT and ZIEMANN 2016, 6). However, they are not the only images that work through simulation and displacement, to a certain extent, most images broadcast on television are full of simulation and displacements. It is in this sense that Baudrillard (1993, 62), writing of the Revolution in Romania and the First Gulf War, defends that when television claims to present reality as reality, it is in fact presenting fiction as fiction, which would be the field of virtuality. Meaning that the media coverage had nullified the event, that in the end this was lived only through the simulacrum. In his words “television abolishes all distinction and leaves no place for anything other than a screenlike perception in which the image refers only to itself”. For Derrida (2002, 6) on the other hand, virtuality, or what he terms “actuvirtuality”, is one of actuality’s traits. His understanding of virtuality is not in opposition to actual reality, “it makes its mark even on the structure of the produced event. It

affects both the time and the space of the image, of discourse, of ‘information’, in short, everything that refers us to this so-called actuality, to the implacable reality of its supposed present”.

What this makes clear is that it has become increasingly difficult – perhaps impossible – to separate historical events from their media representations and, thus, it is of the essence to think images through. In a time when film and television have substantially changed and the latter seems prone to lose its primacy, what remains is the moving image. But it does so in a mutated form, on multiple and ubiquitous screens streaming fragmented messages from increasingly polarized outlets, towards which people’s attitudes alternate between the two myths of photography as describe by Allan Sekula, according to their emotional alliance to what is being shown, “the old myth that photographs tell the truth” and “the new myth that they don’t”⁹ (SHABTAY 2015, 273). In such circumstances, I believe we cannot afford to simply label images as true or false without further reflection, just as we cannot afford to disregard our audiovisual past, particularly of what comes to be deemed obvious and outdated, and castoff the lessons they might hold.

⁹ Allan Sekula concluded his speech at the Graz symposium on photography in 1996 with this statement.

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