

# APOCALYPTIC ANXIETIES: FIFTIES BOMB SCARE FILMS

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When Robert Oppenheimer, a scientist working on the Manhattan project, witnessed the first detonation of an atomic bomb during the Trinity Test at Los Alamos, New Mexico on July 16, 1945, he recalled a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (Kovel 7, Lotto 198, Segal 44). As this quote from an ancient religious text remembered in the context of an atomic bomb test clearly indicates, the end of the world has been a human preoccupation since ancient times, but apocalyptic narratives have proliferated since the end of World War II. As many scholars note, this is because we are now in a position to actually destroy all life on earth (Lotto 191; Segal 44; Wanhg, “The Nuclear Threat” 253 and “Psychological Fallout” 321). That the turning point was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 is indicated by Joel Kovel in *Against the State of Nuclear Terror* (27). Similarly, psychoanalyst Martin Wanhg argues that modern society lives in a state of heightened anxiety due to the fear of nuclear apocalypse, and he cites Anna Freud, who “in the post-Hiroshima world...placed the fear of annihilation at the baseline of all anxiety” (“The Nuclear Threat” 253, 260-1, 263-4). Psychoanalyst John E. Mack also sees the fear of nuclear war as a condition of contemporary life (196-7). Nor do anxieties about nuclear war affect only Americans. In Britain, as historian Matthew Grant shows, the initial response to the use of the atomic bomb on Japan was to represent nuclear war apocalyptically (9).

During the 1950s in the United States, a number of bomb scare films were made in response to fears of nuclear war. These films were often based on novels or short stories, but the films themselves have had a greater influence on popular culture because of their wider audience compared to what was still a relatively pulpy literary genre. Bomb scare films attempted to evoke anxieties about nuclear war in order to prevent it. In this paper, I will take a psychoanalytic approach to show how two bomb scare films from the fifties attempted to raise anxiety concerning nuclear war, providing both historical background as well as textual analysis for each film.

As the premise for this paper, I am taking Freud’s definition of anxiety as outlined in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. As both Wanhg and David Lotto point out, anxiety,

according to this conceptualization, is a signal of danger (Wangh “The Nuclear Threat” 262 and Lotto 194). Lotto goes on to say that “anxiety is seen as resulting from a danger situation that is seen as being related to a past situation of helplessness” (Lotto 194). In other words, in order for the ego to internalize an external danger such as the threat of nuclear holocaust, it must recognize the danger as being related to something that it has experienced, and, yet, nuclear holocaust is by definition unlike anything we have ever experienced. Indeed, the mind balks at the task of even imagining the results of nuclear war. The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry’s Committee on Social Issues also concludes in their report *Psychiatric Aspects of the Prevention of Nuclear War*, one reason that people may not be aware of the threat of nuclear war is because “the human imagination may be too limited to imagine death on such an enormous scale” (224). Finally, David F. McMahon insists that because of the enormity of the concept, many people are unable to imagine nuclear war in any way other than unrealistically as a repetition of World Wars I and II (288).

Compounding the weaknesses of human imagination, we also employ various psychic defense mechanisms against the anxiety of nuclear apocalypse. Many scholars describe the dehumanization of others and of the self that occurs in order to justify the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons (Lotto 195-6; Wangh, “The Nuclear Threat” 254-7; Committee on Social Issues 245-56, Segal 45). Others describe the projection of one’s own aggressive instincts onto an other (Segal 44-6, Kovel 40, Meissner 93-4, Steinberg 154-6). Displacement of nuclear fears onto something more concrete and comprehensible may also occur (Meissner 105; Lotto 196; Wangh, “The Nuclear Threat” 260). However, everyone agrees that the most significant psychic defense mechanism in the face of nuclear anxieties is denial (Wangh, “Psychological Fallout” 321 and “The Nuclear Threat 253, Lotto 196-7, Kovel 40, Segal 46, Committee on Social Issues 241, Meissner 106-7, Steinberg 154, Mack 202). This includes both denial of the extent of the danger involved as well as acknowledgment of the dangers but a corresponding isolation of affect so that the accompanying fear is not felt. According to Lotto, such denial occurs because the issue exceeds our emotional capacities; it is simply too frightening for us to deal with (193). Likewise, Wangh proposes that the nuclear threat causes the breakdown of Freud’s three-part model of the psyche, which is replaced with the conflict between Eros and Thanatos, the life and death instincts. The resulting anxiety concerning

Thanatos, our aggressive and dangerous instincts, is so great that the only possible solution is denial (“The Nuclear Threat” 252 and 261).

Both Mack and Wangh examine the lack of clinical literature relating to nuclear war. They report that while nuclear anxieties are there, just below the surface, and that it is easy to get people to talk about them in groups or individual interviews, most psychoanalysts do not report addressing fears or fantasies of nuclear war in analysis (Mack 190-3; Wangh, “Psychological Fallout” 309-17). This apparent lack of concern about nuclear war is contradicted, however, by journalist Alice Cook’s survey of the apocalyptic dreams of British women (16-8). Mack sees the omission of nuclear anxieties from clinical literature as a failure on the part of analysts to recognize the external reality of the nuclear threat for fear of forcing their own political opinions on their patients (203-5). This is exacerbated by the fact that nuclear anxieties often become compounded with intrapsychic conflicts (ibid 198-200). Kovel notices the same tendency to combine our nuclear anxieties with our psychic demons (12).

Yet, as Kovel persuasively shows, the arms race is not merely a psychological problem; it is a political one (16-30). As Wangh and the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry’s Committee on Social Issues both maintain, in order to avoid the very real danger of nuclear war, we must overcome our denial and face our anxieties (Wangh, “The Nuclear Threat” 265 and “Psychological Fallout” 321-2; Committee on Social Issues 282). This is precisely what bomb scare films attempt to do. As McMahon puts it:

“The psychosocial value of science fiction’s role, in helping to break through the mass psychological denial associated with nuclear weapons and war, cannot be overstated. In our civilization, the genre has served to raise anxiety on a global level and perhaps to compel some movement away from the nuclear abyss and toward a safer Earth” (290).

Two films from the fifties that raised anxieties about nuclear weapons in this way were *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *On the Beach*.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* is typically considered to be the first bomb scare film. It was directed in 1951 by Robert Wise from a screenplay by Edmund H. White and based on a short story from 1940 by Harry Bates called “Farewell to the Master.” In this film, an alien named Klaatu comes to earth with a robot named Gort to speak with the leaders of all the world’s countries. They have been sent by an organization of planets formed to protect all planets and completely eliminate aggression. Earth has recently come to the attention of the other planets both for the aggressive instincts of its people and because they have recently acquired atomic

energy. Klaatu warns that as long as human violence is limited to Earth, the other planets will not interfere, but if Earth threatens to extend its violence into the universe it will be unilaterally destroyed.

Five years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of World War II, in August of 1949 the Soviet Union too acquired nuclear weapons. On January 31, 1950, President Harry S. Truman approved the formation of the Atomic Energy Commission in order to develop the hydrogen bomb, a bomb 700 times more powerful than the atomic bomb (Maland 699). It was in this context of the early arms race that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was made. Both the US and the USSR had the atomic bomb, and they were working on creating ever more powerful and more deadly weapons.

Of the two films I will discuss, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is undeniably the more conventional science fiction picture, replete with its space ship, alien and robot. Yet, unlike many science fiction films from the fifties such as *The Blob* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* did not express a fear of Communism. This is made explicit by Klaatu's conversation with the President's secretary Mr. Harley at the military hospital where Klaatu is being held captive. Klaatu reveals to Mr. Harley his plan to meet with representatives of all the world's nations, but Mr. Harley explains that this is impossible due to Cold War tensions. The Russians will only attend if the assembly is held in Moscow, while the British will only attend if it is held in Washington, he relates. Thus, Klaatu's aim to prevent nuclear war and maintain peace is undermined by hostilities between Eastern and Western Bloc countries.

Rather than Communism, it is explicitly the aggressive nature of humanity combined with its advanced state of technology that represents the threat in the film. The threat presented by man's aggressive instincts is most clearly indicated in Klaatu's final speech before the group of international scientists assembled by Professor Barnhardt:

The universe grows smaller every day, and the threat of aggression by any group anywhere can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all, or no one is secure. Now this does not mean giving up any freedom except the freedom to act irresponsibly. Your ancestors knew this when they made laws to govern themselves and policemen to enforce them. We of the other planets have long accepted this principle. We have an organization for the mutual protection of all planets and for the complete elimination of aggression.

The test of any such higher authority is, of course, the police force that supports it. For our policemen we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets and spaceships like this one and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression, we have given

them absolute power over us. This power cannot be revoked. At the first sign of violence, they act automatically against the aggressor. The penalty for provoking their action is too terrible to risk. The result is we live in peace without arms or armies secure in the knowledge that we are free from aggression and war, free to pursue more profitable enterprises. We do not pretend to have achieved perfection. But we do have a system, and it works.

I came here to give you these facts. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet. But if you threaten to extend your violence this earth of yours will be reduced to a burned out cinder. Your choice is simple. Join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you.

Here it is apparent that man's aggressive instincts are what could lead to the destruction of the Earth, not the threat of Communism.

The other side of humanity's dual danger, technology, is addressed when Klaatu goes to visit Barnhardt earlier in the film. Klaatu tells the professor that the other planets began to take notice of Earth when man discovered atomic energy and began experimenting with rockets. He insists that applying atomic energy to spacecraft would be a threat to these other planets. Indeed, these two factors, the aggressive instincts of man and technology that has moved beyond man's ability to comprehend its effects, are common themes in the psychoanalytic literature on the nuclear threat.

In "The Psychological Significance of Science Fiction," McMahon asserts that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a special case in science fiction where anxieties concerning nuclear war were reduced rather than heightened by imagining powerful aliens who are the saviors of mankind, protecting us from ourselves (292). Yet, I would argue that rather than alleviating our worries about nuclear war, the aliens are a projection of our fears about our own aggressive nature and out-of-control technology. Although in the service of universal peace, the aliens are willing to obliterate earth to prevent the spread of violence to their own planets. Likewise, the aliens' powerful technology including their spaceships and especially their robots are parallel to Earth's own technology, which had become capable of destroying the planet. The instant and automatic response of the robot police to any sign of violence eerily prefigures the foreign policy of Mutually Assured Destruction and the doomsday device described by Herman Kahn in *On Thermonuclear War* and parodied in the later bomb-scare satire *Dr. Strangelove* (Kahn 144-55). Moreover, the description of the potential effects of the alien's technology on Earth, reducing it

to “a burnt out cinder,” is reminiscent of the effects of the atomic bomb, which would have been all too clear in the audience’s minds from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That the aliens serve to heighten anxieties rather than assuage them is supported by the fearful reactions to the aliens and their technology throughout the film. For example, when the flying saucer first appears, a radio announcer reports “anxiety and concern but no outward sign of panic” in the nation’s capital. When the saucer lands people run screaming from it, and when Klaatu emerges from the spaceship and advances a soldier gets scared and shoots him, resulting in Gort’s vaporization of all weapons with his laser. After Klaatu’s escape from the military hospital, anxiety heightens, as can be seen from a montage of people acting scared. There are images of soldiers running, a meeting of army officers discussing their plan, groups of people listening to the radio, radio announcers talking, a man reading a newspaper and a mother urging her two children to come inside all accompanied by discordant music with organ, Theremin and strings. At the boarding house where Klaatu appears, one of the boarders says over dinner, “Well, personally, I wouldn’t go out after dark these days,” and after Bobby follows Klaatu to the ship he tells Helen, “I’m kinda scared.”

The anxiety quotient is stepped up once again when Klaatu causes all electronic equipment on Earth, except that necessary for human safety, to stop working for half an hour in order to demonstrate his power. Informed of Klaatu’s true identity and mission on Earth, Helen goes to Tom’s office to try and prevent him from telling anyone about the extraterrestrial origins of the diamonds Klaatu gave Bobby. Tom’s secretary is talking on the telephone. “I’m so scared I can’t sit still. I’d like to run someplace, but I don’t know where to go,” she says. “Are you nervous too?” she asks Helen. “Yes, I am, Margaret,” Helen replies.

However, unlike Margaret, Helen is not afraid of Klaatu. She is afraid of what might happen to planet Earth. Klaatu has a premonition of his own death and he too is afraid of what Gort might do if Klaatu were killed. Riding in a taxi with him, Helen promises Klaatu that if something happens to him, she will say three words to Gort, “Klaatu barada nikto.” Shortly afterward, Klaatu is shot and killed by the military, leading to the climax and the most fearful scene in the movie, Helen’s confrontation with Gort.

When Helen approaches Gort she is physically overcome by terror. When he notices her, she backs slowly away from him. She screams and falls down but manages to relay her message before Gort locks her inside the space ship. When Gort returns with Klaatu and revives him,

Helen is so frightened that she must cover her ears and look away, a visual echo of denial. Shortly thereafter, an army colonel tells Barnhardt that he must call off the meeting because “[t]he robot’s on the loose now, and it’s not safe around here.” Finally, when the spaceship takes off following Klaatu’s final speech to the assembled scientists, people scream and run in terror again.

That the anxieties engendered by the aliens are supposed to be therapeutic is indicated by Professor Barnhardt, according to Bobby the smartest man in the world and the person Klaatu turns to for help in achieving his goal after being brushed off by the government. Barnhardt is in a sense the human mouthpiece of the film. After, Klaatu has come to visit him and warned that the Earth will be eliminated if his message is not heeded, Barnhardt asks his assistant, “Tell me, Hilda, does all this frighten you? Does it make you feel insecure?” “Yes, sir, it certainly does,” she says. “That’s good, Hilda. I’m glad,” Barnhardt replies. Thus, as Barnhardt believes, in order to save ourselves from self-destruction we must overcome denial and face our anxieties.

In 1959, *On the Beach* was directed by Stanley Kramer from a script by John Paxton based the 1957 novel by Nevil Shute. This film takes place in the aftermath of World War III. Radiation has killed everyone in the Northern Hemisphere, and survivors in Australia are waiting for the nuclear fallout to slowly reach them. The main plot is a love story between American submarine captain Dwight Towers, who has lost his family in the war, and alcoholic party-girl Moira Davidson. There are several other sub-plots, however, that concern how various people react to the impending death of themselves and their loved ones.

In late 1952, the United States acquired the hydrogen bomb, and by August 8, 1953 the Soviet Union had one too. However, as Grant points out, it was the American bomb test in the spring of 1954 that captured the global imagination. Radioactive debris from the test was found on a Japanese fishing boat about eighty miles from the test site, and Lewis Strauss, head of the United States Atomic Energy Authority, admitted that a hydrogen bomb could destroy New York City. In the UK, at least, after this the idea that a nuclear war could be survived was increasingly suspect, despite the government’s claims otherwise (Grant 13-4). Although geographically larger and therefore offering a better chance of survival in areas remote from bomb targets, the power of the weapon and the extent of its fallout no doubt had an effect on ideas about the survivability of a nuclear war in the United States as well.

Indeed the idea that nuclear war could not be survived is the very premise of *On the Beach*, and to those who realized this the pursuit of ever larger and more dangerous weapons must have seemed sheer madness. In this sense, the character expressing the message of the film is Julian Osborn, a British scientist who worked on nuclear weapons. Julian makes two speeches about the folly of atomic weapons, the first at a party given by Australian naval officer Peter Holmes and his wife Mary in Dwight's honor and the second on Dwight's submarine the USS Sawfish when he accompanies Peter and Dwight on a mission to the United States to see if there are any survivors in the Northern Hemisphere following a mysterious telegraph signal coming from San Diego.

When at the party Julian is blamed as a scientist for the creation of nuclear weapons he responds:

Every man who ever worked on this thing told you what would happen. The scientists signed petition after petition, but nobody listened. There was a choice. It was build the bombs and use them, or risk the United States, the Soviet Union and the rest of us would find some way to go on living...They didn't think we'd fight, no matter what they did, and they were wrong. We fought. We expunged them! We didn't do such a bad job on ourselves with the interesting result that the background radiation in this room is nine times what it was a year ago, nine times! We're all doomed, you know, the whole silly, drunken, pathetic lot of us, doomed by the air we're about to breathe. We haven't got a chance.

Here Julian implies building nuclear weapons in spite of knowledge about their destructive capacity amounts to mass suicide. He further suggests that it was denial about this destructive power that allowed people to go on building nuclear weapons nevertheless.

Julian's speech to the sailors on the submarine is even more to the point:

Who would ever have believed that human beings would be stupid enough to blow themselves off the face of the Earth? I don't believe it even now. We didn't want a war. We didn't start it. How did it start? The trouble with you is you want a simple answer, and there isn't any. The war started when people accepted the idiotic principle that peace could be maintained by arranging to defend themselves with weapons they couldn't possibly use without committing suicide. Everyone had an atomic bomb and counter-bombs and counter-counter bombs. The devices outgrew us. We couldn't control them. I know. I helped build them, god help me. Somewhere some poor bloke probably looked at a radar screen and thought he saw something. He knew that if he hesitated one thousandth of a second, his own country would be wiped off the map, so he pushed a button, and, and the world went crazy...



Here Julian directly attacks to policy of deterrence, defined by diplomat and political scientist Henry Kissinger in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* as “the attempt to keep an opponent from adopting a certain course of action by posing risks which will to him seem out of proportion to any gains to be achieved” (quoted in Maland 709). In the case of nuclear weapons, this meant obtaining so many and so powerful weapons that any attack would be prevented by fear of retaliation. Like Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Julian also maintains that our technology has gotten out of our control.

Nor is Julian the only character to express disillusionment with the outcome of the war. At the Holmes’ party, Moira asks Dwight, “If everyone was so smart, then why didn’t they know what would happen?” “They did,” he replies. A little later Moira says, “It’s unfair. It’s unfair because I didn’t do anything, and nobody I knew did anything.” Here Moira reveals her awareness that the war was not prevented because everyone was in denial about what would happen. It is not, as Dwight says, that people did not intellectually grasp the danger that they were facing but that they failed to react in a way appropriate to the extent of the danger. In other words, they were not sufficiently anxious.

Even after the worst has actually happened, many characters in the film display the very denial that Moira and Julian critique. Foremost among these is Mary. The very first scene in which she appears, she asks Peter why he has to pick up their infant Jennifer’s milk from the station, and she seems surprised that it will no longer be delivered. She also asks Peter to meet her at their club for a swim after lunch, as if nothing has happened. Later, when Peter tells her that he wants to throw a party for Dwight, Mary insists that there be no “morbid discussions,” and after Julian’s outburst at the party she runs into their bedroom crying. Peter, however, is more accepting of what is happening, so when he finds out that he is being sent away on the *Sawfish* he manages to acquire suicide tablets for Mary and Jennifer in case the end comes before he returns. When he confronts Mary about what she must do when the time comes, a fight ensues with Mary first refusing to kill their daughter and then suggesting that the radiation may not be coming after all. On the submarine, Peter tells Julian that he is worried about Mary because she won’t face up to reality, and asks him for his advice. When the fallout finally comes to Australia, it seems that Peter’s worries have been founded. Mary completely loses touch with reality and begins packing for a trip back to England, where she is from, with Jennifer. Ultimately, however, Mary accepts both her fate and Peter’s suicide pills.

Similarly, Dwight is also in denial about the loss of his wife and two children. When he first tells Moira about them at the party, he speaks of them in the present tense, as if they are still alive: “My wife’s name is Sharon. I have a couple of kids: Richard, eight; Helen, five. Dick is the real sailor of the family. He is going to Annapolis. Oh, that is to be expected. He’ll probably change his mind.” Needless to say, Dwight’s son will never go to Annapolis *or* change his mind because he is dead, killed by either an explosion or, more likely, nuclear fallout. When Moira goes to visit Dwight on the submarine to ask him why he put her to bed after she passed out at the party, she finds a picture of his kids. Again, Dwight refuses to acknowledge that his children are dead: “Regular fish these kids. I’ll have to get them a boat of their own one of these days.” Moira looks discomforted by Dwight’s blatant denial.

As the relationship between Moira and Dwight grows, he begins to mix Moira up with his wife. This first time this happens is when they are on the beach with Peter and Mary. The two are playfully wrestling and bantering when suddenly Dwight calls Moira Sharon. The mood becomes somber. However, Moira is so infatuated with Dwight that she does not even mind being a replacement for his lost wife. After a night of dancing, she confronts Dwight about confusing the two of them and asks him to pretend like she *is* Sharon. This, though, is too much for Dwight, who explains to Moira the reason for his denial:

You see, in the navy, during the war, I got used to the idea that something might happen to me, I might not make it. I also got used to the idea of my wife and children safe at home. They’d be all right, no matter what. What I didn’t reckon for was that in this, this kind of monstrous war something might happen to them and not to me. Well it did, and I can’t, I can’t cope with it, my kids, all the planning since the day they were born. Sharon, Sharon and I, we, well, see, we were the sort of people who, we would have been happy to grow old together. I, I can’t accept it. I can’t.

Dwight is in denial about his loss because it is simply too much for him to bear. His grief is beyond language, and his syntax literally breaks down as he attempts to express it.

After being rejected by Dwight, Moira runs off and goes to Julian to ask him if he is still in love with her. She relates what has happened between her and Dwight, and she says, “I can’t pretend anymore, Julian. I’m afraid.” Unlike Dwight and Mary but like Julian, Moira is not in denial about what is happening. Ironically, it is the least well-adjusted characters, Dwight and Moira, both alcoholics, who are most able to face reality. Perhaps this is because the psychic defense mechanisms such as denial, which would allow people to cope with anxiety in normal circumstances, are much weaker in them.

Several minor characters also evidence symptoms of denial in *On the Beach*. The gentlemen at the Pastoral Club who lament the fact that they have 400 bottles of vintage port in the cellar and only five months left to live are two of them. Unable to accept the enormity of the end of the world, they instead fixate on the loss of costly fortified wine, which no one will be able to enjoy. Dwight's crewman Ackerman, the first person to get sick with radiation poisoning in Australia, also evidences denial, saying that he must have drunk too much the night before. Even the decision of the crewmen at the end of the movie to go back to America to die, though they will never make it that far, displays a reluctance to face the facts. The final image of the film, a banner left over from a prayer meeting in front a church reading "There is still time, brother" seems a not-so-subtle warning to the audience to overcome denial, embrace anxiety and confront the dangers of nuclear war before it is too late.

As a story that explores something that *could* happen in the near future, *On the Beach* is more speculative fiction than conventional science fiction like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which tends to be set in the distant future or feature alien life. Because of its focus on interpersonal relationships, *On the Beach* can also be classified as a melodrama, something that is supported by the presence of big-name stars such as Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Anthony Perkins in the cast. Although the melodramatic quality of the script is criticized by literary scholar Steven Morrison, I would argue that it is this very quality which makes the film so effective (378). By realistically imagining how people would react while waiting for nuclear winter, the film conveys intense pathos and anxiety.

The effectiveness of the film in generating anxiety is evidenced by reactions to the film in Wanh's clinical work and further psychoanalytic research on the nuclear threat. He reports an instance in which the psychoanalytic situation was interrupted when, after describing a dream with nuclear themes that occurred "on the beach – like the title of the movie," the patient sat silently staring at the analyst ("Psychological Fallout" 318-9). Furthermore, in individual interviews with people who were children at the time of surface nuclear testing from 1945 to 1963, one woman recalls being scared by the movie *On the Beach* (ibid 313). Finally, in group discussions with his psychiatric colleagues who were young at the time, one man remembers reading the book *On the Beach* for sexual content, and another woman remembers other girls reading it for the same reason (ibid 315-6). These examples indicate that the film *On the Beach*, as well as the book, contributed to the atmosphere of fear and anxiety accompanying surface

nuclear testing. However, despite its ability to raise levels of anxiety about nuclear weapons in the context of the Cold War, even *On the Beach* was unable to address the much more frightening prospect of what life would be like for the *survivors* of a nuclear holocaust.

Although the Cold War is now over and nuclear disarmament by the United States and Russia has largely been achieved, the nuclear threat still persists. At the time of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970, five states were known to have nuclear weapons: the US, the USSR, the UK, France and China. However, since then three states have tested nuclear weapons: India, Pakistan and North Korea, with North Korea withdrawing from the NPT in 2003 (“Global Nuclear Weapons”). Israel is also widely believed to have nuclear weapons, and the US has provided weapons to Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Turkey under NATO weapons sharing (ibid, Murphy). Estimates of the number of nuclear weapons still in existence number over 20,000, and what are these weapons for if not to be used (“Global Nuclear Weapons”)? Therefore, bomb scare films from the fifties still have relevance today. They remind us of a moment in time when we nearly blew ourselves off the face of the Earth so that we do not do so in the future, and their cultivation of anxiety is key.

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