American Science Fiction and the Cold War

Literature and Film

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Introduction

(I)

The Cold War was a metaphor. As soon as the label was applied to material conditions it carried entailments for subsequent designations of the postwar scene. Generally dated from a 1947 speech by Bernard Baruch ('we are in the midst of a cold war') and then popularised by the journalist Walter Lippmann (see Goldman 1960: 60), the phrase had been used as early as October 1945 by George Orwell whose article 'You and the Atom Bomb' foresaw a situation of armed paralysis, of hostility that could never develop into overt combat with a superstate 'at once *unconquerable* and in a permanent state of "cold war" with its neighbours'. Orwell mistakenly assumed that the atomic bomb would stay too costly to mass-produce, but shrewdly found early signs of a *status quo* that could only be described paradoxically as a 'peace that is no peace' (Orwell 1970: 26). Once put into circulation the two terms in 'cold war' came to imply that 'two mutually exclusive political systems were frozen in ideological place' and that politics could only be conducted as conflicts where victory became the 'only means of resolution' (Hinds and Windt 1991: 219).

Examination of political speeches for covert messages has led one commentator to argue that the US perception of the Cold War was structured around key metaphors, like the analogy between the Soviet Union and 'dangerous predators' (Medhurst et al. 1990: 74). Such metaphors carried their own narrative with them – here primarily of attack – which postwar science fiction repeatedly actualised. The 1954 film *Them!*, for instance, picks up the double metaphor of ants-as-monsters and ants-as-people to dramatise the unpredictability of the Bomb and fears of Communist attack. Radiation from the White Sands testing ground has produced gigantic mutant ants who threaten centres of civilisation like Los Angeles. They are thus 'spawned' by the Bomb but also embody a

perception of Communist society. An expert in the film virtually draws the analogy for us when he explains: 'Ants are the only creatures on Earth other than man who make war. They campaign; they are chronic aggressors; and they make slave labourers of the captives they don't kill'. So when the military moves into action against the ants it is no surprise that a journalist asks 'has the Cold War gotten hot?' The question opens up one way of viewing the narrative as a battle between the USA and Communist aggressors encoded as a monster fantasy, and the film was no isolated instance. The novelist Poul Anderson figured the Communist millennium as 'humanity turned into an ant-hill' and Norman Spinrad concluded *The Iron Dream* (1972) with a description of an empire resembling the Soviet Union as the 'end-product of Communist ideology – an anthill of mindless slaves presided over by a ruthless hierarchy'.[1] These examples, taken from fictional and non-fictional sources, suggest that science fiction novels and films are not producing arbitrary fantasy but rather reworking key metaphors and narratives already circulating in the culture.

Hayden White has argued that historical and fictional discourses have common aspects in narratives that transmit 'messages about the nature of a shared reality'. At any given historical moment there exists an 'enormous number of kinds of narratives that every culture disposes for those of its members who might wish to draw upon them for the encodation and transmission of messages' (White 1987: 41). These narratives are formed through a process White labels the 'tropics of discourse', by which he means the metaphorical and related strategies employed by historian and novelist alike to fashion a 'comprehensible totality' from their materials (White 1978: 2, 125). White's argument is broader than that of Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) on metaphor, although both coincide in demonstrating that metaphor and other rhetorical devices play an integral part in how we structure our concepts. Being less tied to prescriptive conventions of representation than realism, science fiction can defamiliarise metaphors of the times by rendering them as concrete metonyms. Thus Bernard Wolfe depicts the arms race as a bizarre form of athletics in *Limbo* and Nick Boddie Williams transforms the Iron Curtain metaphor into an atomic curtain in his 1956 novel of that title, a curtain which now screens postholocaust America, not the Soviet bloc.[2] In these and similar cases the fiction uses narrative to interrogate the key metaphors within Cold War discourse.

White bridges the gap between factual material and fiction by arguing that both draw on a common pool of narratives and images

circulating in the culture. For example, in February 1957 James W. Deer addressed the controversy on civil defence in the pages of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* where he extrapolated a sequence of races from 1945 into the near future of fission (A) bombs, fusion (H) bombs, ICBMs, and finally an 'international race for shelter'. Deer foresaw the construction of self-sufficient underground 'city-states' which would house most of the population. His account did not demonstrate planning so much as a confirmation that humanity was performing to a script:

> The play has begun, and we are the actors. The end is implicit from the nature of the beginning. Within the framework of fusion bombs, guided missiles, and shelters, there is nothing we can do but go ahead and play out our part in the preordained ritual. (Deer 1957: 67)

The following year James Blish's novel *A Case of Conscience* incorporated Deer's propositions. Here an arms race has indeed led to a shelter race and massive underground complexes. However, Blish makes explicit what is only a suggestion in Deer: that these complexes resemble tombs not refuges: 'the planet would be a mausoleum for the living from now until the Earth itself perished' (Blish 1963: 97). Secondly Deer's fatalism is explicitly protested, but by a figure from another planet who renounces the 'Shelter state' declaring his right to be a 'citizen of no country but that bounded by the limits of [his] own mind' (Blish 1963: 168). Blish applies Deer's perception of ritual through a party (performance) where the guests travel around on trains (i.e. according to preordained 'tracks'). And lastly, Blish exploits the traditional topography of the unconscious to demonstrate a collective neurotic unrest simmering 'underneath the apparent conformity'. Blish's novel supplies an unusually direct instance of non-fictional debate feeding into fictional imagery but such connections will recur throughout this period. The one overriding issue was that of nuclear war which raises particular difficulties of realisation as a subject.

(ii) Derrida and the Nuclear Subject

In the summer of 1984 the journal *Diacritics* brought out a special number designed to found a new school of post-structuralist analysis called 'Nuclear Criticism', which was to examine 'all the forms of nuclear discourse'. A start was made on this programme

with discussions of the contradictions within deterrence and the relation between the nuclear and the tradition of the sublime (Fergusson 1984), but the centrepiece of the issue was an essay by Derrida ('No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives')) in which he bombards the reader with a number of propositions, the most important of which for present purposes are three dealing with the nuclear referent, specialism and literary representation.[3] Derrida argues that nuclear war would be an event without precedent bringing the 'total and remainderless destruction of the archive'; and then he puts forward his central point: 'the terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text' (Derrida 1984: 23). Nuclear war thus takes on a 'fabulous textuality' since it only exists 'through what is said of it' and, since they cannot be known in advance, the views of 'experts' become merely opinion. Derrida carefully retains the real as the starting point for his formulation, but runs the risk of substituting one kind of specialism for another. Ken Ruthven has accordingly insisted that it is crucial to 'preserve the nuclear referent and to resist efforts to textualise it out of existence' (Ruthven 1993: 174). More elaborately J. Fisher Solomon has argued for including the process of becoming within referentiality, proposing an 'objective reality of empirical potentiality' (Solomon 1990: 63) to counter Derrida's stark opposition between science and belief.

If Derrida is redefining rather than denying the nuclear referent, one effect of his argument is to raise the status of literature.[4] For if nuclear war can only be approached speculatively, then literature – and particularly science fiction – can occupy a space equal to sociological, strategic and other modes of speculation. Paradoxically, even as he is opening up a literary subject, Derrida turns his back on nuclear fiction in a gesture of conservatism by citing Modernists like Mallarmé, Kafka and Joyce as being more relevant to the nuclear age. He thereby ignores the massive corpus of fiction listed in Paul Brians's pioneering and indispensable *Nuclear Holocausts* (1987), for if nuclear war is as important as Derrida recognises, then this fiction should be attended to and the literary canon re-examined (cf. Zins 1990). In fact this very fiction confirms Derrida's thesis on the unusually elusive nature of the nuclear subject by showing again and again a collective suppression of the dreaded event which is often signalled pronominally quite simply as 'it'. The recurrence of secret underground locations suggests a representation through images of the suppressed. James Agee's 1946 sketch 'Dedication Day' (Agee 1972), for example, describes a

surface celebration of technological triumph while beneath the surface workers, including survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, labour over the 'Eternal Fuse'. This topographical separation has been read as spatialising the same ambivalence of American attitudes to the Bomb (Boyer 1994: 244) which informs Nick Boddie Williams's *The Day They H-Bombed Los Angeles* (1961). Here the 'they' of the title proves to be the USA itself and the true enemy other Americans who are being transformed into predatory animals. The agent of this change is a giant, expansive protein molecule created by the Pacific H-bomb tests and washed on to American shores as plasma. The narrative therefore has a circularity in so far as H-bombs are being used to eradicate the mutants caused by the bomb in the first place and not, as one character assumes, by 'them damned dirty Commies'. The bomb's value as a weapon is counterbalanced by the threat of its effects getting out of control.

Granted that nuclear war poses a special problem of expression, Derrida's insistence on foregrounding the 'strategic manoeuvers' of discourse to 'assimilate that assimilable wholly other' (Derrida 1984: 28) rightly directs us to pay attention to the narrative and stylistic procedures followed in attempts at describing such an event. Peter Schwenger's *Letter Bomb* (1992) follows this lead in skilfully demonstrating the twists, turns, and deferrals of nuclear texts which, for example, follow a circular time-sequence: 'Predicting a future, we ... find ourselves turned back to the past, which is our present, and our present task to interpret' (Schwenger 1992: 10). Derrida's warning of the elusiveness of the nuclear subject can already be seen in H. G. Wells's *The World Set Free* (1914), a precursor narrative which both alarmed physicist Leo Szilard with its depiction of nuclear war and also suggested to him the possibility of a chain reaction he was to apply in the planning of the first atomic bomb (Lanouette 1992: 107, 134). Wells's account of nuclear attack is problematised at its centre: 'It is a remarkable thing', the narrator reports, 'that no complete contemporary account of the explosion of the atomic bombs survives. There are of course innumerable allusions and partial records, and it is from these that subsequent ages must piece together the image of these devastations' (Wells 1988: 137). The result is a patchwork of speculation and rumour because Wells shrewdly notes that survivors' trauma would lead them to suppress memories of their experience.

Wells sets a pattern which will recur throughout the Cold War where representational difficulty regularly makes the nuclear subject metafictional. We can see this process at work in Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley* (1969) where a major textual disruption

temporarily suspends the narrative of a journey across post-holocaust America made by an alienated lone biker as he takes medical supplies from California to Boston. The landscape he traverses confronts him with increasingly fabulous monsters (mutations, giant bats), but before he reaches his destination Zelazny suspends the narrative to describe a 'setting without plot or characters', inviting the reader to 'frame' it with a chosen title. Through a single sentence extending for more than two pages Zelazny evokes a nuclear apocalypse written across Nature where the transformation of elements expresses itself through alternative propositions ('perhaps it takes fire from the hot spots where the cobalt bombs fell and, of course, perhaps not also') which ultimately elude coherence: 'it just doesn't seem that any name will fit'.[5] As language slips off a stable referent it seems that the subject escapes.

(iii) Nuclear Ultimacy

Derrida installs his discourse of ultimacy ('absolute', 'irreversible', 'total', etc.) through the premise of the 'uniqueness of an ultimate event' whose very uniqueness collapses the distinction between belief and science. It makes no sense to Derrida for anyone to claim any special expertise on nuclear war because no precedent exists which would underpin such expertise. What about Hiroshima and Nagasaki? one might object. Not so, Derrida replies: 'The explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a "classical", conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war' (Derrida 1984: 23). In this amazingly categorical statement Derrida ignores the continuing debate over how to 'narrativise' these two events (to speed Japanese surrender or to warn the Soviets of America's new technology?). These events are used throughout the postwar period to measure the possible destruction of a nuclear war. The latter's grim iconography (clothes patterns imprinted on bodies, eyes turned to jelly, the shadows of atomised victims imprinted on walls, etc.) all derives from 1945, particularly from John Hersey's reportage narrative *Hiroshima* (1946).[6]

The 1984 issue of *Diacritics* devotes considerable space to Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) which attempts to describe a full-scale holocaust and attacks the Reagan administration's nuclear brinkmanship. There are, however, important differences between Schell and Derrida which emerge if we backtrack to a key contribution to the nuclear debate, Herman Kahn's *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (1962), which set out to attack the pessimism of

Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*. His declared target was fear: 'Either they ["many people"] are afraid of where the thinking will lead them or they are afraid of thinking at all' (Kahn 1962: 27). Kahn confronted this situation with a determination to introduce an analytical rigour which would have been congenial to Derrida. In practice this resulted in an abstracted emphasis on technology and international politics, so Kahn's claim of strategic expertise then would be part of the 'science' which Derrida rejects as spurious. In contrast, both Kahn and Schell view nuclear war as a variety of scenarios, not a single instance (Kahn discusses 'war surviving' situations); and Schell further describes nuclear war as a process not a discrete event. Admittedly taking the worstcase scenario, Schell argues from a premise of ecological and social holism that the Earth and human society form a single system whose delicate balance will be unpredictably disrupted by a nuclear war, constructing an argument from scientific reports and speculation which exemplifies before the fact Derrida's blurring of science and belief. But if nuclear war is the unknown limit case, then the proposition itself that it is a total unique event becomes a matter of belief, a conviction of probability.

Derrida's insistence on ultimacy forms part of his view of nuclear war as an ending, but here again Cold War narratives problematise the concept and make it into part of their subject. Thus an early film of the making of the atomic bomb was entitled *The Beginning or the End* (1947) while a later pulp movie about radiation producing gigantic grasshoppers was called *The Beginning of the End* (1957). The eschatology of science fiction narratives of the period (contextualised in W. Warren Wagar's *Terminal Visions*, 1982) revolves around the possibility of survival of course, but also around the story of that survival. The narrator of Stuart Cloete's 'The Blast' (1947), for instance, begins his account of nuclear attack after his assumption has passed that he is the sole survivor. The attack 'was what might be called the last real event in history. I seem to be in the interesting position of having survived history, of being history itself' (Conklin 1954: 12). The temporary impression of being history collapses together his self-perceptions as subject and object. Only the discovery of other survivors gives him an impetus to narrate and in the process changes his subject. When he is taken up by a band of American Indians he reflects that he has completed his 'story of the end of the white man's world'.[7] Cloete's awareness of what sort of narratives might articulate the nuclear aftermath is echoed much later by Bernard Malamud's Robinsonnade *God's Grace* (1982). This time the sole survivor is one Calvin Cohn, his

name combining ironic suggestions of predestination and priestly election, who attempts to reenact stories from Western culture on an island where his sole companions are apes. The latter perform – literally 'ape' – the role of humans in recapitulating the story of Abraham and Isaac, even simulating human speech. The apes' final loss of speech seems to indicate the end of civilisation (Schwenger 1992: 80), but here again the ending is not final. Though the novel closes with Cohn's impending death, a chronological beyond has been opened up, albeit tentatively, by the line 'maybe tomorrow the world to come?' and in the non-specific other presence implicit within the third-person narrator.

It seems then that nuclear narratives refuse ultimate endings. As the novelist Algis Budrys states, 'even its [science fiction's] most dedicatedly ingenious tales of apparently unremitting cataclysm must, by the nature of the prose, include a narrative presence of some sort – an actual character, or at least the author's voice' (Budrys 1986: 45). Richard Klein does not express this issue as a question of voice but rather locates a 'ghostly survival' in the 'position from which one anticipatorily contemplates the end, utter nuclear devastation, from a standpoint beyond the end, from a posthumous, apocalyptic perspective of future mourning' (Klein 1990: 77). Such narratives might play with contradiction like the 1955 film *The Day the World Ended* which opens with the 'Total Destruction' day of nuclear war, proceeds to reduce the term 'total', and concludes with a shot entitled 'The Beginning' as a man and woman straighten their rucksacks and march into the post-holocaust future.

(iv) Science Fiction as Social Criticism

The unique urgencies of the Cold War, and particularly fear of nuclear war, affected writers' perceptions of the changed status of science fiction. Asimov dated the shift precisely: 'The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable'. Similarly James Gunn: 'from that moment on thoughtful men and women recognised that we were living in a science fiction world'. Indeed by the mid-1960s news reports of rockets and nuclear weapons had become so routine that for James Blish they challenged the novelist's imagination.[8] Certainly science fiction was so quick to engage with nuclear war that by 1952 H. L. Gold, the editor of *Galaxy*, was complaining about how many stories 'still nag away at atomic, hydrogen and bacteriological war, the post-atomic world, reversion to barbarism, mutant children ... world dictatorships, problems of

survival wearily turned over to women, war, more war, and still more war' (Gold 1952: 2). Despite the stifling effects of the McCarthy years many novelists took justifiable pride in the way 'science fiction became the vehicle for social criticism' (Davenport 1964: 102). So declared Robert Bloch in a lecture series on this very topic delivered at the University of Chicago in 1957.[9] This study will contend throughout that science fiction novelists made constant interventions in the debates that were raging throughout the Cold War on such matters as civil defence, foreign policy and internal security. Above all these issues loomed the threat of nuclear war which gave an added urgency to this fictional representation. Here, paradoxically, the latter's power is deployed towards a realisation which will 'put off the day' (Dowling 1987: 86). These narratives perform a role of negative prophecy where dreaded outcomes are envisaged and therefore hopefully deferred, in such a way that the reader is induced to ponder on present signs of disaster.

How to decipher such signs can be a complex problem. Murray Leinster's *Operation Terror* (1962) appears to be using the time-honoured narrative of alien invasion when reports start leaking out of a 'paralysis beam' from a landed UFO, operated either by monsters or by men.[10] If men, it must be a 'cold war device'; and if it is not the Americans, there is only one other conceivable country responsible. But there is a third possibility, only discovered at the end: the United States knew the Soviets were finalising such a weapon and manufactured the UFO story so that the Americans would be seen as protectors. 'This was an attempt to fight the last war on earth in disguise' (Leinster 1968: 147). The 'theatre of war' revolves around not combat but the circulation of information. The wartime restrictions on any material relating to the Bomb which had led to the arrest of the writer Clive Cartmell in 1944 (see Berger 1984) had if anything become even tighter as the postwar security state took shape. Kris Neville's 'Cold War' (1949) defines the *status quo* through an absolute imperative of secrecy. When a journalist stumbles across a story about the neuroses of Space Station commanders he is gunned down by the secret service because the issue was 'too big to protect by normal, democratic procedures' (Campbell 1952: 411). In a lighter vein William Tenn parodies institutional secrecy in 'Project Hush' when an army team land on the Moon and discover a dome built – not by aliens – but by the 'goddam United States Navy' (Tenn 1956: 219). Secrecy often legitimates the reification of characters so that they become indistinguishable from the information they carry. So C. M. Kornbluth's teenage physics genius in 'Gomez' (1954) is classified as a 'weapon'

by Atomic Energy Commission Intelligence.[11] The restrictions on information explain the intended appeal of the stories in William Sambrot's *Island of Fear* (1963) which purport to be secret reports from different government agencies, giving the reader an illusion of insider knowledge on the space race and nuclear research laboratories.

Postwar science fiction demonstrates again and again the ways in which secrecy becomes institutionalised in mechanisms of control. Two of the most powerful treatments of this issue, Wilson Tucker's *Wild Talent* (1954) and Algis Budrys's *Who?* (1958) dramatise the failure of the state to contain its subject. In the first, a telepath Paul Breen is brought in by the American secret service to detect espionage routes. Finally shot because uncontrollable, Breen's treatment by the authorities is a 'mixture of exploitation and anxiety [which] mirrors reactions to the A-bomb itself' (Shippey 1979: 106). *Who?* pursues the logic of security processes to their ultimate impasse. Lucas Martino, an American scientist working on a top-secret project, is taken to an East German clinic after a near-fatal accident at his plant near the border. The novel opens with Western agents awaiting his return. To their amazement Martino has been rebuilt so extensively that he resembles a robot with an all-metal head. From then onwards his identity becomes an open enigma. Every hypothesis can be reversed: a recurring nightmare might show memories of what 'they' did to him, or anticipate his fear of the Americans. In other words, Martino might be a 'plant'. The tropes of physical investigation ('dig deeper', 'pull this thing apart', etc.) lead nowhere. As in Curt Siodmak's science fiction thrillers, like *Hauser's Memory* (1968) where the RNA of a defecting scientist is used to access his memory, the human subject and information become identified, while the latter remains elusive. In Budrys's novel we are told: 'The war was in all the world's filing cabinets. The weapon was information' (Budrys 1964: 6).

The narratives just considered do not fit the label of science fiction as 'futuristic' in any straightforward way and most of the works discussed in this study will turn out to be set in comparatively near futures with some internal examination of what changes brought about the new state of affairs. These futures, in Fredric Jameson's words, 'serve the ... function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come' (Jameson 1982: 152). Whether the narratives estrange the reader from the present by the introduction of 'novums' or whether they use a chronologically more distant method of 'future retrospect', the focus here will fall primarily on how American science fiction

deals with the overlapping issues of nuclear war, the rise of totalitarianism and fears of invasion.[12] The result will demonstrate the fine responsiveness of fiction and film to a whole range of social, technological and political changes taking place during the Cold War.

(v) Cold War Criticism

Although the special number of *Diacritics* hardly triggered a new critical school it did help to develop 'nuclear criticism', in the lower case, to adopt a distinction by Ken Ruthven whose own *Nuclear Criticism* (1993) remains an excellent introduction to the subject. The earliest monograph in this area was David Dowling's *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (1987) which gives priority to the apocalyptic paradigm and opens a discussion of how writers 'attempt to locate the experience of nuclear disaster by surrounding the inexpressible with verbal strategies' (Dowling 1987: 13–14). Special issues on nuclear war were produced by the *Northwest Review* (1984) and *Science-Fiction Studies* (July 1986), the latter edited by H. Bruce Franklin whose *War Stars* (1988) remains an invaluable history of the superweapon in the American imagination. Martha A. Bartter's *The Way to Ground Zero* (also 1988) provides a useful thematic survey of treatments of the atomic bomb in American fiction. 1988 finally saw the foundation of the journal *Nuclear Texts and Contexts* which continues to provide a crucial forum for critical debate. Thomas Hill Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) proposes a paradigm shift from thirties radicalism to a postwar 'liberal narrative' of disillusionment where writers shy away from partisan politics. Schaub limits his discussion to realist fiction, but his study reflects a general critical revision of writers like Flannery O'Connor and Sylvia Plath. Even literary criticism itself has been historicised by Tobin Siebers who accuses critical schools of shadowing the policies of different US administrations and who argues that the Cold War has 'introduced a model of the self-conscious critic whose greatest desire is to deny his or her own agency in the world' (Siebers 1993: 34).

In addition to booklength studies two further collections have been published on nuclear literature. The Winter 1990 special number of *Papers on Language and Literature* focuses more tightly on literature than the comparable issue of *Diacritics* but adopts a critical pluralism since, in the words of the editor William J. Scheick, nuclear criticism is a 'polymorphous ethical mode of

critical enquiry' based on the imperative to preserve life. Scheick and other critics figure also in Nancy Anisfield's 1991 collection on nuclear war literature, *The Nightmare Considered*. Arne Axelsson's *Restrained Response* (1990) surveys post-1945 American war fiction but uses a constraining realist model, whereas Patrick Mannix (*The Rhetoric of Antinuclear Fiction*, 1992) applies the Aristotelian modes of rhetorical appeal – ethical, rational, and emotional – to produce an account valuable for identifying spokespersons and the nature of debate in the fiction. Of the two more recent studies, Albert E. Stone's *Literary Aftershocks* (1994) discusses clusters of works including children's fiction and poetry to demonstrate 'literature's power as social instrument of information and indoctrination' (Stone 1994: xvi), whereas continuing the line of post-structural analysis Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture* (1995) cross-relates an impressive range of cultural texts from *Playboy* to diplomatic dispatches. Subjecting these works to sophisticated scrutiny, Nadel focuses his study on the trope of containment which is shown to conceal a duality of perspectives towards the bomb and related issues.

To conclude this brief survey, two works deserve special mention for the breadth of their scholarship which makes them essential reading for Cold War culture. Paul Boyer's *By the Bomb's Early Light* (1985, 1994) gives an astonishingly thorough 'thick description' of American responses to the Bomb within the first postwar decade and has been consulted at every stage of this study. And Spencer R. Weart's *Nuclear Fear* (1988) documents the whole postwar period, examining its topic through 'images', a notion broad enough for Weart to negotiate between motif and discourse. Like Paul Brians, Weart demonstrates that fear of doomsday, superweapons, etc. predates 1945 and that the Cold War was reinforcing already existing imagery.

This study will attempt a balance between close textual analysis and the historicism proposed by Hayden White and others. It will examine primarily US science fiction from 1945 up to the 1980s in a series of chapters which focus on individual authors or themes and which follows an approximate chronology up to the period of the Star Wars controversy. Each chapter will raise issues – the role of the home, operative metaphors, and so on – which are not unique to that material but which could be applied to the fiction discussed in other chapters. Space limitations have inevitably restricted coverage of topics like Vietnam, as well as the number of films covered.[13]

Notes

1. Anderson 1972: 89; Spinrad 1974: 252. In *Thermonuclear War* Anderson described the aim of Communism similarly: 'man is to be turned into a kind of ant' (Anderson 1963a: 111). Cf. Biskind 1983: 123, 132.
2. Cf. the author's note: 'It was written at the time we were debating the setting up of a fixed line far out from our shores (the Taft plan, the Hoover idea)' (Williams 1956: I).
3. For a point-by-point discussion of Derrida see Ruthven 1993: 71–8.
4. Christopher Norris glosses Derrida as follows: he recognises 'that nuclear "reality" is entirely made up of those speech-acts, inventions and projected scenarios which constitute our present knowledge of the future (unthinkable) event' (Norris 1995: 241–2); and continues that literature preserves its value by being performative (ibid.: 246). Jean Baudrillard's related diagnosis of the 'hyperreality' of nuclear culture is discussed in Messmer 1988b: 399–402.
5. Zelazny 1973: 145. For critical commentary on Zelazny see Morrissey 1986: 182–91.
6. For discussion of Hersey see Nadel 1995: 53–67 and Ruthven 1993: 35–40.
7. Conklin 1954: 64. Cloete anchors his narrative to the 1946 Bikini tests: 'it was, if one had been clever enough to see it, the beginning of the end' (ibid.: 26).
8. Asimov 1970: 93; Gunn 1975: 174; Blish 1965: 184.
9. The other speakers were Alfred Bester, Robert Heinlein and C. M. Kornbluth.
10. Leinster published one of the earliest accounts of a nuclear attack on America (*The Murder of the USA*, 1946), the reprisal for which establishes a Pax Americana. Leinster's 1945 story 'First Contact' about an encounter with an alien spacecraft achieved the rare privilege of being critiqued in Soviet science fiction. Ivan Yefremov described it as exemplifying a 'war ideology' in 'The Heart of the Serpent' (1961).
11. It was exactly this use of youth which John Hersey's *The Child Buyer* (1960) protested. The panicky search for potential scientists in the wake of the 1957 Sputnik launch 'as if children were to be somehow instruments of our power' led Hersey to construct a narrative as a hearing into this conspiracy against the nation's youth (Hersey interview. Columbia, MO: American Audio Prose Library).
12. The 'novum' is a term denoting a deviation from the reader's implied notion of reality applied in Suvin 1979.
13. For discussion of Vietnam see Franklin 1998; 165–86; for film criticism see Biskind 1983, Sayre 1982 and Shaheen 1978.

1 Postwar Jeremiads: Philip Wylie and Leo Szilard

The blame for Armageddon lies on man (Philip Wylie 1942)

(I)

All the narratives examined in this volume are warnings, envisaging a future whose imaginative representations, it is hoped, will prevent it from materialising. This chapter will examine primarily the works of the best-selling author Philip Wylie (1902–71) viewed as an example of the jeremiad genre which by the modern period had become inverted into an 'anti-jeremiad', which deploys a 'doomsday vision' through the 'denunciation of all ideals, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie' (Bercovitch 1978: 194, 191). Such a description fits Wylie's *oeuvre*. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Wylie rejected orthodox Christianity in favour of the role of spokesman for cherished national ideals which he felt were lapsing. He described his wartime indictment of the national character, *Generation of Vipers* (1942), as a 'miscellaneous Jeremiad', attacking American materialism, hypocrisy and – most importantly as a prediction of postwar developments – the creation of a dictatorship in the USA (Wylie 1942: 305). Wylie first achieved fame through two collaborations with Edwin Balmer, *When Worlds Collide* (1933) and *After Worlds Collide* (1934). The first of these describes the discovery of two planets hurtling towards Earth, the one set on a collision course, the other offering a chance of salvation in appearing habitable. The novel combines the story of Noah with apocalypse so that the old world is destroyed and a saving remnant is conveyed by spaceship (the 'Ark') to the new planet in a combination of spiritual will, national destiny and technological know-how. The sequel, however, brings this triumph into question when the pioneers discover that another rocket from Earth has landed with a band of Russians, Germans and Japanese determined

to set up a Soviet. The new planet now becomes the site for an ideological and territorial struggle between freedom and despotism, a clear anticipation of Cold War rivalries. As one character explains, 'they were sworn ... to set up their own government – to wipe out all who might oppose them. It is not even a government like that of Russia. It is ruthless, inhuman – a travesty of socialism, a sort of scientific fanaticism' (Wylie and Balmer 1970: 92).

From the end of the war up to the mid-fifties Wylie was involved with government nuclear policy in a whole range of areas. After serving with the Office of War Information he was invited to report on the Hiroshima bombing, a report which in the event was carried out by the journalist William L. Laurence. He served as special adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Committee for Atomic Energy and was given a Q (i.e. maximum) security clearance so that, again at government request, he could attend the Desert Rock A-bomb tests and brief publishers on the implications of the atomic age.[1] And finally he served as consultant to the Federal Civil Defence Authority whose perceived inertia led him to write the novel *Tomorrow!*. All of these roles were related to each other by the looming shadow of the Bomb, which Wylie was convinced had induced a national neurosis of suppressed fear. He revelled in the charge that he was an alarmist, claiming: 'I have done my best to create alarm about the Atom Bomb – a *certain kind* of alarm'.[2] Wylie fought consistently against a superficial optimism over the nuclear age and polemicised on behalf of supplying the public with information, however unwelcome. One of his more extreme proposals was to mount a series of public displays to acquaint the public with nuclear casualties from burns to decapitation. There is no evidence that this suggestion was acted on.

The Cold War then for Wylie was defined through one prevailing emotion. 'We live in a midnight imposed by fear – a time like all dark ages', he declared in his memoir *Opus 21* (Wylie 1949: 256). And four years later he stressed the unique capacity of science fiction to engage with that fear. In 'Science Fiction and Sanity in an Age of Crisis' Wylie railed against pulp science fiction for producing 'wild adventure, wanton genocide on alien planets, gigantic destruction and a piddling phantasmagoria of wanton nonsense' (Bretnor 1953: 234). It was only a few writers like Wells, Olaf Stapledon and Aldous Huxley who address the reader's mind. Science fiction should incorporate 'logical extrapolations from existing laws and scientific hypotheses' into tales 'with the hope of a subjective integration to match the integrated knowledge we have of the outer world' (Bretnor 1953: 239).

Throughout his postwar career Wylie attempted to realise this role by attacking two targets: national self-delusion and Communism. His unwavering hostility to Communism had an unusually personal basis. With his stepbrother he visited the Soviet Union in 1936, travelling as far as the Caucasus where they both rashly expressed their determination to report on the repression, poverty and suffering they had witnessed. During their return via Poland their railway carriage was left for hours in a siding. Wylie drank from a bottle of water and promptly fell seriously ill, possibly from cholera or plague. In the meantime Wylie's stepbrother was thrown to his death from a Warsaw hotel room, probably by Soviet agents. This information was made public by Wylie in *The Innocent Ambassadors* (1957), a narrative of a journey round the world framed as a report on the Soviet plan to dismember the world. 'What the cold war concerns', he declares, 'is *human belief*: primarily *your* belief!' (Wylie 1957: XIV). Wylie's conclusion to *The Innocent Ambassadors* resembles the 'application' which might close a sermon. Like Robert Heinlein (who read *The Innocent Ambassadors* before his own visit to the Soviet Union), Wylie calls on his readers to respond to a common danger by embarking on a mission to preserve freedom. Ironically, he takes John Foster Dulles to task for irrelevantly attacking Soviet atheism, although both writers applied a discourse of moral absolutes to contemporary politics. Wylie's jeremiads regularly promote a sense of crisis and envisage disasters as a means of testing American values and morale. Whatever narrative means he adopts, there is usually a single voice which expands, sometimes stridently, the author's convictions. Narrative and polemic often pull against each other, as they do in the works of the writer Wylie most admired at this time: Aldous Huxley.

In his 1946 tract *Science, Liberty and Peace* Huxley inveighs against nationalism as the root of all evil:

> To be a worshipper of one of the fifty-odd national Molochs is, necessarily and automatically, to be a crusader against the worshippers of all the other national Molochs. Nationalism leads to moral ruin because it denies universality, denies the existence of a single God, denies the value of a human being as a human being.

The 'natural reaction' of the nationalist to the atomic bomb is to 'make use of the new powers provided by science for the purpose of establishing world dominion for his particular gang' (Huxley 1947: 34, 37). Huxley embodied this bleak vision in *Ape and Essence* (1948) where the contemporary frame-narrative establishes nationalism as