Desired Ground Zeroes: Nuclear Imagination and the Death Drive

Calum Lister Matheson

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Approved by:
Carole Blair
Ken Hillis
Chris Lundberg
Todd Ochoa
Sarah Sharma
ABSTRACT

Calum Lister Matheson: Desired Ground Zeroes: Nuclear Imagination and the Death Drive
(Under the direction of Chris Lundberg and Sarah Sharma)

A wide variety of cultural artefacts related to nuclear warfare are examined to highlight continuity in the sublime’s mix of horror and fascination. Schemes to use nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes embody the godlike structural positions of the Bomb for Americans in the early Cold War. Efforts to mediate the Real of the Bomb include nuclear simulations used in wargames and their civilian offshoots in videogames and other media. Control over absence is examined through the spatial distribution of populations that would be sacrificed in a nuclear war and appeals to overarching rationality to justify urban inequality. Control over presence manifests in survivalism, from Cold War shelter construction to contemporary “doomsday prepping” and survivalist novels. The longstanding cultural ambivalence towards nuclear war, coupled with the manifest desire to experience the Real, has implications for nuclear activist strategies that rely on democratically-engaged publics to resist nuclear violence once the “truth” is made clear.

This dissertation uses examples drawn from imaginations of nuclear warfare and its aftermath to explore how the desire for unmediated experience and its attendant mix of horror and fascination constitutes a death drive that should be a problematic for communication studies. The unprecedented power of the Bomb witnessed first at the
Trinity test provided new urgency for ultimate questions about human existence and the failure of language. Discourse surrounding the Bomb is an effort to reestablish a sense of predictability and order threatened by the disruption of the Bomb while still maintaining the sense of contact with its overwhelming power. I relate this operation of the death drive to the tradition of the sublime in rhetoric, an effort to recapture what lies beyond mediation. Instead of a discrete style, the sublime is the aspect of a signifier that permits an affective connection as it stands in for the Real, as also evident in other forms of mediation besides language. The capacity to enjoy control over the conditions of presence and absence is central to this process.
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The problem was simple and terrible: I enjoyed the book. I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. ...I liked to think of huge buildings toppling, of firestorms, of bridges collapsing, survivors roaming the charred countryside. Carbon 14 and strontium 90. Escalation ladder and subcrisis situation. Titan, Spartan, Poseidon...I read several chapters twice. Pleasure in the contemplation of millions dying and dead. I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. Pleasure in these words...A thrill almost sensual accompanied the reading of this book. What was wrong with me? Had I gone mad? Did others feel as I did? I became seriously depressed. Yet I went to the library and got more books on the subject...I became more fascinated, more depressed, and finally I left Coral Gables and went back home to my room and to the official team photo of the Detroit Lions. It seemed the only thing to do. My mother brought lunch upstairs. I took the dog for walks.

--Don DeLillo, *End Zone*

**Why the Bomb?**

I attended my first debate tournament as a sophomore in high school. For two days, I argued with other kids, uncomfortable like me in ill-fitting formal clothes, our resolution pertaining to juvenile crime in the United States. When not discussing it, we performed it in clumsily conspicuous smoke breaks outside the suburban Grand Rapids public school where our competition was hosted. I had been trained to negate this resolution by highlighting its negative consequences for states’ rights and the economy. These things mattered, I was told, because the instability attending to a breakdown in federalism or dip in the economy might cause a nuclear war. A nuclear war would be so awful that it should never be risked, however improbable. I was given Jonathan Schell’s *Fate of the Earth* as a resource. I did as I was told and invoked the threat of atomic
attack in every debate. After one round, a young debater from Detroit approached me in the cafeteria. “Are you the nuclear war guy?” he asked. I supposed that I might be. “I heard about you. You’re crazy, man. That’s awesome.”

Although too young to really be a child of the Cold War, I had dim memories of Reagan-era fear. My father once presented me with a toy plastic battleship and explained that “we” had won the Falklands War. Because I am both American and Scottish, I was not certain who exactly “we” were, but I was too young to make a distinction. “We” was the West, was NATO, was the English-speaking world; and I was informed that “we” possessed the means to obliterate humanity, as did “they:” the Soviet Union. My father insisted that I watch news coverage of the Gulf War and the 1991 August Putsch. I would be glad someday that I witnessed this phase of history, he said. Besides, they might blow up the world. I had already been fascinated in school by footage of grey-clad Soviets marching through Red Square with menacing MAZ missile carriers rumbling beside them. I liked the Soviet aesthetic and wasn’t scared, but now I learned that Saddam Hussein had missiles too. Fine distinctions of range were lost on me; Circular Error Probability, the limitations of TEL reliance and the inadequacy of Iraqi GCI/EW were unknown unknowns. I worried that Saddam would kill my parents. For reassurance, I was given a glossy chart comparing Coalition and Iraqi military equipment. It didn’t really work. Soon after, I learned that there were good Russians and bad Russians. The one who rode a tank and shelled the Parliament was good. One of the bad ones hanged himself in his office, but there were always more.

The apocalypse has taken on a diminished form of late. Although they would continue to interest me, nuclear issues became gradually less important in American culture more generally. As CIA Director James Woolsey said, once the “dragon” of the
Soviet Union was slain, the United States found itself in a “jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes,” and of course, “the dragon was easier to keep track of” (Woolsey). Ten years after the Cold War’s end, popular and academic attention would come to focus more on the Bush administration’s War on Terror, continued by Barack Obama’s UAV campaigns and the ongoing bloodshed that has resulted. Just a few decades ago, nearly every public intellectual and prominent academic had something to say about the arms race and the prospect of nuclear extinction. An immense amount of scholarship was produced on all aspects of nuclear weapons and their military, cultural, and philosophical import. With the dragon of nuclear violence apparently slain, dull serpents have occupied its lair in the cultural imagination. Global warming has supplanted nuclear winter as a trendy environmental concern. Non-state nuclear terrorism has replaced the once-anticipated Armageddon of Soviet wrath. *Mad Max*’s marauding, leather-clad Australians have been eclipsed by zombies. A succession of horrific possibilities still parade, but this circus is an awfully ramshackle apocalypse, lacking the combination of plausibility, omnipresence, and finality that once made nuclear war so enthralling. So why write about nuclear weapons now?

It is tempting to answer this question as many disarmament advocates are wont to do by citing the folly of ignoring ongoing dangers of nuclear war. Indeed, some persistent nuclear threats which have the potential to kill millions, or perhaps billions, of people were a few things to go quite wrong. Russian-American nuclear tension is rising sharply after recent violence in Ukraine, and there is talk of a “new Cold War.” Nuclear weapons are still maintained in a state of readiness that increases the chance of an “accidental” nuclear war. While safeguards are supposedly in place to reduce the chance that such a catastrophe might occur, there are reasons to doubt their efficacy. It
has come to light that the codes for U.S. Permissive Action Links (PALS) were set to a string of zeroes by the Strategic Air Command (SAC) to circumvent the safety measure, while personnel and safety problems continue to plague nuclear forces (Blair 2004; Hoff 2014). Meanwhile, tensions with North Korea, ongoing disputes in South Asia, and the increase in Chinese military might has some Pentagon analysts thinking again about just how fiery the Pacific Rim might become.

The argument has been made that the public must be reminded of nuclear horror for only the immediacy of danger conveyed in lurid descriptions of societal destruction can turn us away from our impending doom and encourage us to demand democratic oversight. In communication studies, the peak of nuclear weapons scholarship occurred in the 1980s following Jacques Derrida’s call for “nuclear criticism” and the psychological work of Robert Jay Lifton (Derrida “No Apocalypse;” Lifton). Although not universally present, much of this work exhibits a concern with accountability and democratic responsibility, assuming that it is ultimately more deliberation that will curb the excesses of nuclear warfare. A number of rhetoricians participated in this debate by emphasizing their field’s traditional concern for public deliberation, although often in novel ways. David Cratis Williams attempted to combine Derrida’s approach with the insights of Kenneth Burke (Williams). Barry Brummett relied on Burke’s language of perfection and motives to explain several nuclear debates current in the decade (Brummett). Bryan C. Taylor is one of the few scholars of rhetoric who has continued to write about nuclear weapons (“‘A Hedge Against the Future;’” Nuclear Legacies; “Nuclear Weapons and Communication Studies;” “Our Bruised Arms;” “Radioactive History”). Outside the field of rhetoric, Carol Cohn’s work on the language of defense intellectuals has significant affinities with these pieces (Cohn). William Chaloupka’s
book *Knowing Nukes* also treats the rhetoric of nuclear weapons from a poststructuralist standpoint (Chaloupka). These various works tend to focus on the rhetoric of nuclear weapons as an instrumental concern. They focus primarily on organization for political action, the formation of public attitudes, or the content of specific metaphors, as in Ron Hirschbein’s *Massing the Tropes: The Metaphorical Construction of American Nuclear Strategy*.

More materially-oriented work has also been done to expose elements of the nuclear complex, even as the topic has increasingly been eclipsed by the study of newer technologies (drones, surveillance, and so forth). Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves’s work on the SAGE nuclear warning system, for example, compares it to increasingly automated drone warfare to locate a logic of anthropophobia (Packer and Reeves). Peter van Wyck has studied the attempt to communicate the danger of nuclear waste at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (Van Wyck). Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target* uses the atomic bomb to examine a larger epistemological shift in relation to visual mediation, an argument which I will expand in Chapter 3 to note the Bomb’s differential effect on the dynamics of race and class across space. Explicitly or subtly, the implication of much of this work is that criticism should aim at uncovering the logics, artefacts, and ongoing consequences of nuclear war preparations, if not as a solution, then at least as a necessary precursor to one, and therefore resembles the more rhetorically-oriented work of the 1980s and after.

Although this work is important and helpful, I will argue that much of it downplays the very attributes that make nuclear war unique. It is unsurprising that scholarship in communication studies tends to focus on the potential for political awareness and change based on language or symbolic action. Rhetorical criticism has
roots in the deliberative discourse of ancient Athens and emphasizes the important link between rhetoric and democratic change. To call for more public deliberation or transparency on nuclear war is to treat it like any other issue of national politics that can be studied, debated, and ultimately addressed as rhetoric motivates political action. Indeed, a great deal of media exists to make meaning out of the Bomb, organize its potential use, and describe its political significance.

In the Bomb’s inaugural moment at Trinity, however, the immediate reaction was silence, followed by a conviction that language was an inadequate tool to convey the experience. The “unthinkable,” “unspeakable,” and “unsayable” qualities of nuclear war have since been repeatedly affirmed. The Bomb seems to escape symbolization, to gesture towards something beyond mediation. Many commentators struggle to speak at a limit where “language no longer acts as currency,” to borrow from Georges Bataille (Erotism 276). What happens when the crisis in which we must intervene is one defined in part by the failure of the symbolic efficiency of language? How can we communicate a political response when the advent of the Bomb is understood to sunder mediation itself? The awesome power of the Bomb reveals the fundamental inability of language to fully capture the universe beyond human reality, the precariousness of our existence, and the arbitrariness of our beliefs. But with all the horror of the unknown, there is also an unmistakable fascination with the promise of unmediated continuity with reality.

My argument here is not that communication inevitably fails, although certainly it often does. Language is not too small for the task. Reality is too big. Sometimes, especially when we attempt to understand something that threatens human extinction, we are confronted with the fact that the universe far outstrips our capacity to understand, that the world we build for ourselves does not exhaust all chance and
possibility but sometimes appears to teeter on the edge of the meaningless chaos
intimated by a universe in which we are the center only for ourselves. There is an excess
that is understood as beyond mediation, but our efforts to communicate continue. The
awestruck silence of the Bomb still works on the language that we do produce as we
attempt to find the means to describe it.

For Bataille, there was continuity—the unmediated world without distinctions
imposed by human classification, the world we seek in love and death (Bataille, Erotism
12-13). For Heidegger, what lurked in the shadow of human artifice was the “gigantic”
(das Risige), an intimation of some incalculable greatness (135). For Longinus, the
sublime was the force of “greatness” that made language overwhelm rather than
persuade, the power beyond language that could only be partially intimated by its
skillful use (4). These concepts all dovetail with Lacan’s Real, delineated more
completely in Chapter 1. The Real is not the world of non-human objects and forces but
the eruption of that world into the mediated world of human society constructed and
maintained by our communication with one another.

Excess, whether approached through the language of the Real, the sublime,
continuity, or Heidegger’s “gigantic,” shapes the field of language around it like the
gravity well of a black hole observable by its distortions. These distortions guide our
investments in some tropes over others and shape the economy of affects1 that animate
meaning and create the durable constructs through which we attempt to connect with
one another. We cannot respond to the Bomb by exposing its “reality” in writing,
speeches, films, or any other media without implicitly playing its game by insisting that

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1 Although I have used the term occasionally, I have generally preferred “cathexis” to “affect” here to avoid
debates over the meaning of the latter term, which although assuredly important, are not necessary for me
to engage here.
language can accurately convey the excess of the Real because the question is not one of
greater precision in language but whether any medium is capable of assimilating the
Real, a task which is impossible by definition. In acting as if this was not the case, we
participate in the desire for unmediated access to reality that maintains the Bomb’s
power in the first place. Too much debate over nuclear policy sidelines this sense of the
Bomb as infinite, focusing on the techniques of organization and persuasion to the
detriment of the ultimate questions that make the Bomb so powerful and creating a
linguistic framework in which these questions are written off, or at best appended as
“useful embellishment,” only “received into mainstream discourse when presented as
appendages to currently debated political options” (Chernus, Nuclear Madness 59).

The Real of the Bomb reveals the incompleteness of this world and motivates
attempts to find what we imagine is concealed beneath it. Nuclear obliteration is to its
devotees perhaps even a promise of divine Truth that offers transcendence of the fallen
world of mediation in which reality is never complete. With such a contradictory set of
attachments, it is hard to imagine that efforts to think about the Bomb can achieve their
goals—while they might demonstrate their own consistent logic, the rationality of
nuclear politics is warped by the intrusion of the Real and the desire to commune with it
directly. Communication studies is full of cogent analyses of instances where language
or other media worked very well indeed to organize political responses, persuade
audiences, bind people together around texts, and change attitudes, but these accounts
are incomplete without attention to the Real.

The subject of nuclear war challenges how we think about communication itself
and demands new thinking on the limits of mediation. The central question of this
dissertation is not how should we talk about nuclear war, but what can nuclear war
show us about how we attempt to mediate that which we understand to exceed the limits of mediation itself? For attempt we do. The vertiginous hole in the whole of reality is only the first part of the Bomb’s relationship to desire. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does the symbolic order through which the human world is built. The Symbolic, as Jacques Lacan styles it, cannot tolerate the revelation of its inadequacy in the Real, the tears left in our map by the inhuman world. We endlessly attempt to heal the rifts of the Real, to feign unicity where it has failed (Lundberg 2-3). The response to chaos is control; order is imposed against contingency in an effort to re-impose coherence. This dynamic of automaton (order) scripted over tuché (contingency) is developed in Chapter 2. When these attempts fail—and because the Real by its nature cannot be assimilated, they must—we simply try again. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this dynamic is the repetition compulsion, in which the subject tries again and again to control the conditions for presence and absence, enjoying not the outcome but the exercise of subjectivity itself in the capacity to act and to choose. Subjectivity requires the sacrifice of continuity through the formation of the alienating identity of the mirror phase, a process explained more in Chapters 1 and 2. Discontinuous subjects are organized in part around the lack—something that would make them whole again, represented in an object that is never more than a partial stand-in for this missing completion.

Frustrated in the quest for something outside, we enjoy our own subjectivity.2 In the context of nuclear war, this meant ever more sophisticated simulations of a phenomenon about which we remained basically uncertain. This is the second movement of desire in (or for) the Bomb. The enjoyment of our reasserted control over

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2 “Enjoyment” is meant here in the Lacanian sense of jouissance, not as happiness or fulfillment, but as an attachment to something that often exceeds pleasure and manifests in quite harmful ways.
the Bomb manifested in the repeated attempts to simulate its use and predict its aftermath. The *fort-da* game described by Freud and explained here in the first two chapters is an important tool for unpacking this dynamic because it posits a sense of control over presence and absence as the condition for a subject’s enjoyment. *Fort-da* refers to the game in which a child makes an object disappear and reappear in succession, simulating her or his mother’s coming and going and the possibility of her eventual disappearance. Enjoyment comes from the subject’s control over these states of presence and absence, a small example of imposing order in a world of seeming chaos (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 13-17). Understanding this is necessary to draw the common threads between the cold-blooded excesses of Pentagon nuclear plans, the compulsion that leads survivalists to stockpile rooms full of MREs, and the appeal that apocalyptic videogames hold for millions of players. In all of these pursuits, the world is made absent in the fantasy of destruction and present again in the myth of reconstruction, survival, and rebirth.

Nuclear weapons scholarship evinces its own compulsion to repeat: myriad investigations of nuclear texts are done, but each leaves something unanswered. The movements of desire are incompletely by scholarship on nuclear weapons concerned only with exposing the truths of nuclear danger, analyzing specific instantiations of nuclear rhetoric, or developing a vocabulary for democratic political resistance. While the instrumental and political aspects of language are important, to focus too narrowly on specific discourses threatens to neglect the forest for the trees. The political movements that attracted great attention in the 1980s—opposition to the Strategic Defense Initiative, the Nuclear Freeze Movement, and the radical disarmament movement—were at best partial successes. This is not to say that these movements or
their scholarly treatments are unimportant—they are certainly helpful for those concerned with nuclear activism and decisionmaking. Still, even if we slowly trace an asymptotic relation to the zero of nuclear desire, part of the process is recognizing the pull this unattainable zero has on our efforts to track it and how those investments sustain the larger discourse of nuclear warfare. That larger system persists almost unchanged, with thousands of weapons prepared for launch on short notice, an endless profusion of war plans, an official policy to secure peace through the threat of genocide, and almost complete public ignorance that the sword of Damocles still hangs from its slender thread. The primary difference between nuclear awareness in 1985 and 2015 as it relates to their own weapons is that ever fewer citizens of the nuclear states even bother to check how much the rope is fraying. In other words, the material artifice of nuclear warfighting persists despite repeated attempts to understand its persuasive elements. Existing attempts to study nuclear weapons could benefit from the concept of the death drive as a problematic for communication studies.

**The Bomb and the Mustard Pot**

To situate the death drive in this way requires some discussion of communication itself. The sense of this word has changed over time. Before it came to refer to the transfer of meaning, especially through technological apparatuses, communication had a sense of material transfer, as retained in the contemporary military phrase “lines of communication.” John Durham Peters, in noting the mutability of the word, understands communication to be the “project of reconciling self and other,” stressing the importance of material signifying media, as opposed to the dream of “wordless contact” through the otherworldly means of angels, telepathy, and spirit mediums (9). From a Lacanian perspective, communication might be better understood as a project of
reconciliation between self and Other. Entry into the Symbolic order means identification with a signifier that can be recognized by others. The unified identity developed in the mirror stage (see Chapter 2) is a signifier among others, which permits the subject to participate in the economy of the Symbolic. As Lacan defines the concept, a signifier is a subject for another signifier (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 207). Prior to communication with specific others, where we indeed often do not find reconciliation anyway, is integration with the Other. This logical priority is acknowledged by Peters himself when he argues that communication between individuals becomes thinkable only in the “shadow” of mediated communication, or as he puts it, “Mass communication came first” (6).

Peters argues that communication with others, understood as an exchange of ideas or meaning, is never perfect because we are discontinuous beings limited by our physical differentiation. “Our sensations and feelings are,” he writes, “physiologically speaking, uniquely our own. My nerve endings terminate in my own brain, not yours. No central exchange exists where I can patch my sensory inputs into yours, nor is there any sort of ‘wireless’ contact through which to transmit my immediate experience of the world to you” (4). This fundamental separation is resonant of the sacrifices necessary for the emergence of the subject in Lacan’s account and also in that of Georges Bataille. For Bataille, the fundamental act of human subject formation is a negation of our complete continuity, an act of negation that sets us apart from one another and requires language as a compensatory means (Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” 14-16). But if communication is a chasm, it is also a bridge, as Peters notes—despite our difference, we do, surprisingly, succeed sometimes (21-22). What limits our ability to commune is also what permits us to communicate: the necessity of using some medium to construct a
bridge, however tenuous, across the guls of our individuation. For me, this is what unites the disparate subfields of communication studies, from performance ethnography to quantitative interpersonal communication. Communication studies must be, at its heart, the study of mediation because mediation is the necessary and sufficient condition for all attempts at communication.

German media theorist Friedrich Kittler has focused on the condition of mediation itself, dubbed “the presupposition of mediality” by David Wellbery. Mediality is a generalized understanding of media, backing off from a specific medium such as film to recognize the condition of being mediated as such. For Kittler, technological possibilities of an era make possible specific media modalities, and these modalities in turn determine what can take shape. The condition of mediality entails a different understanding of literature, for example, because like other media, it is a means of processing, transmitting, and storing data (Wellbery xiii). Kittler posits quite simply “Media determine our situation” (xxxix). Here his message dovetails with Marshall McLuhan’s famous claim that “the medium is the message,” which he elaborated in Understanding Media: “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan 7). Kittler’s presupposition of mediality might be formulated as a more radical inversion of McLuhan’s statement: it is humanity which is the extension of media, in that the conditions of mediation determine the possibilities for human subjects. Lacan argued that the Symbolic requires a signifier around which the subject is organized, and with Kittler’s addendum, media produce the field of possible interactions for those subjects. In Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, Kittler links the eponymous
media technologies with the components of Lacan’s Borromean knot in the registers of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, respectively.

This focus on the materiality of media might be seen as an effort to finally banish the “ghosts” of unmediated contact that Peters identifies haunting mainstream notions of communication. It expands mediation (or mediality) to encompass nearly everything wrought by sapient hands, and in principle, a good deal more. It also demands a practice of criticism geared towards the specificity of media rather than a dematerialized meaning of text. This is a promising avenue of approach to the Bomb, which Peters pairs with the computer as a “spur to the imagination” evoking both excitement and anxieties for communication (Peters 28). The range of nuclear media I examine here differ meaningfully from one another in form. The nuclear simulations and games discussed in Chapter 2, for example, cannot be understood simply as texts because to do so ignores the agency of players’ (or simulators’) choices, and the enjoyment that results from them (Aarseth 4). It is precisely the danger that a textual approach might be applied wholesale to all media that lead Packer and Crofts Wiley to dismiss material rhetoric, which they claim “decenters texts” but also “runs the risk of turning everything into a text, potentially undervaluing the vital properties, potentials, and effects of materiality itself in favor of a hermeneutic interpretation that focuses entirely on the symbolic and the persuasive” (111).

It would be wise not to read this statement as a condemnation of rhetoric in its entirety based on the one edited collection cited to support their argument. In another context, Packer and Crofts Wiley quote Peters cautioning against “a kind of rhetorical blackmail in being more materialist than thou...a kind of bullying that goes along with claiming to be materialist” (108). Work that can be safely described as rhetorical
criticism (even if not “material rhetoric”) now exists focused on public monuments, museums, war memorials, videogames, films, and television shows (e.g., Gallagher and LaWare; Taylor, “Radioactive History;” Balthrop, et. al; Bogost *Persuasive Games*; Lundberg, “Enjoying God’s Death;” Cloud). While it would be a mistake to reduce all media solely to texts, that outcome is not inevitable, any more than the *reductio ad absurdum* that privileging material mediation at the expense of rhetorical valence makes *Sesame Street* and *Wonder Showzen* indistinguishable from one another. Ideally, textual and material approaches would be used together since there is no reason that they mutually exclude one another, thus Packer and Crofts Wiley’s reservations might be best read here as a warning against methodological fundamentalism as it might exist in material rhetoric today rather than an argument for the impossibility of harmony between different approaches.

Kittler writes that the “ur-media” of gramophone, typewriter, and film converge in fiber optic cables, a technology that can transmit any medium. Any medium but one, that is. As Kittler writes, “fiber optics transmit all messages imaginable save for the one that counts—the bomb” (1). Kittler is referring (incorrectly) to the immunity of fiber optic networks to electromagnetic pulse effects of nuclear explosions, something discussed at length by survivalist literatures analyzed in Chapter 4. But there is another reason that this message, “the only one that counts,” escapes most materialist explanations of media, rhetorical or otherwise. The Bomb’s awesome force derives originally not from the messages it sends in the Symbolic register but from its capacity to disrupt those connections, and worse, to expose them as meaningless. The Real for Kittler is embodied in the “nonsense” noises captured by the gramophone that “haunted” textually-based psychoanalysts (89-90). It is a remainder, waste, the disorder
of bodies that remain outside the Symbolic and Imaginary registers (16). But what, then, is outside mediation?

Kittler’s understanding of the Real positions it as what is left over when the Symbolic and the Imaginary are subtracted—the signals we receive that aren’t assimilated into these orders or that are cut up, mangled, and made unintelligible against the language for which we are “pets, victims, or subjects” (109). I propose to understand the Real in an additive sense, not a subtractive one. The Real is not the noise left outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Rather, the Real “doesn’t lack anything” (Lacan, Anxiety 185). It is not even the world of non-signifying things or the totality of Bataille’s continuity. The Real is the intrusion of a nonhuman world that it is wholly alien, forcing humans to confront the fact of our superfluity in the face of the universe’s lack of any lack, including us. As I will explore in Chapter 1, the most significant acoustic phenomenon of the Trinity test was not the “roar that warned of doomsday,” as one general put it, but the silence that followed it when mediation failed outright. Silence is not a lack, but an excess, an affirmative force that disrupts symbolic media. At the same time, it is by definition the absence of mediation. Nonsense sounds captured on a phonograph stand in for unthinkable rather than constituting it, and as such, they already gesture towards something else. They are part of the order that reasserts an intelligible world after its breakdown, but they do not impart it without their own mediation.

A parable might illustrate the relationship between material media and the rhetoric of the sublime. In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan indulges in a lengthy digression from his theme to discuss the collection of ceramic pots at his country house. Lacan illustrates his point further:
In all cultures you can be sure that a civilization is already complete and in place when you can find its first ceramics. Sometimes I contemplate a really very fine collection of vases I have in my country house. Evidently, for those people, in their time, as many other cultures show, it was their main asset. Even if we are unable to read what is wonderfully and lavishly painted on their sides, even if we are unable to translate them into an articulated language of rites and myths, one thing we do know—in this vase, there is everything. The vase is enough, man’s relation to the object and to desire is there in its entirety, tangible and enduring. (186)

The identity of the pots is defined in different ways. First, the materials from which they are constructed differ. All of them have their own unique designs, imperfections, and shapes that distinguish them from one another. Second, what unites them is their empty space—the “void” around which they are built. This void is not what is missing, but precisely what must be there. This void, he writes, is “what can be substituted between the pots, is the void around which the pot is formed.” In the third and final phase, human action begins when “the void is barred, in order to be filled with what will constitute the void of the pot beside it, when, for a pot, being half-full is the same thing as being half-empty” (Lacan, Anxiety 185-6). The labels between pots can be switched to mystify their contents such that the subject seeking redcurrant jam ends up instead with rhubarb. And of course, the mustard pot is always empty. “The only time there is any mustard is when it gets up your nose” (186).

How might scholars of communication studies profit from the insight that “in this vase, there is everything?” Recall that communication has the sense of “transport.” The vases or pots in Lacan’s parable are containers, and through them move a variety of substances. As he says, he is “not in the least bit fussy about how pots are used” (186).

I take “man” in this context to refer not to human subjects generally, nor to males, biological or otherwise specifically, but to subjects exhibiting a “masculine” form of jouissance, as Lacan labels it. This describes a desire for the lost object to fill the lack, as in the (arguably inappropriately named) “phallic” mode of jouissance. This theme is developed in detail throughout Seminar XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality.

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The pots are defined in their difference by their varied materials, which are therefore significant in and of themselves as markers of identity. These material traits are important even if we are unable to read the inscriptions on their sides. Pots are not texts, and they can’t necessarily be “read” this way. But the trait that unites them and justifies their inclusion in a single group is not their material, their shape, or even their function as glue pot, mustard pot, decorative vase, or rhubarb jars deceptively labeled redcurrant jam. The pot is defined by the space it encloses, the necessary condition for it to function as container. This space is not nothing, for the Real lacks nothing, but it is defined by its function as absence, or as a “void.” In this analogy, that void is the Real. It is what defies the substance of the pot itself, which through its shape around the void is equivalent to other pots and through its material characteristics is distinguishable from them—traits that describe the Symbolic. We place contents into these pots, investing them with what we imagine they must hold—an operation on the level of the Imaginary. And what makes the mustard pot a mustard pot, even when empty, is the accreted habit of putting mustard in that pot instead of another one which could equally well have held it.

The pot is a metaphor for metaphor, “the archetrope on the ground of which all the airy fabric of language has been constructed” (Miller 66). The pot holds something, keeping it together—as Lacan writes, “a pot is something that doesn’t leak all over the place” (186). The metonymy of spilling mustard on one’s shirt does not make it a mustard pot because the connection is accidental (in more than one sense). The word “metaphor,” like communication, has a sense of material transfer. Its Greek origin, *metapherein*, denotes transfer, literally “between containers.” What makes a pot a metaphor is its potential to contain something, as a trope “contains” meaning. That
potential is the empty space. I will argue in Chapter 1 that this Real aspect of trope is what allows us to cathect, or invest, in it, just as the void of the pot is what allows it potentially to be filled. For now, I want to observe that to describe the pot’s construction without accounting for this space is to miss something essential to its function. This is the cost of an excessive focus on materiality alone. Similarly, to see the pot only as a void without attending to the specificity of its shape, analogous to the impulse to reduce everything to text, is to forgo specificity in favor of describing a universal function that is not meaningful in the abstract because the pot defines the void, just as the void defines the pot. Both approaches are necessary. This is the kind of container that confronts us in all efforts to mediate: not just a vase, but a Rubin vase.

**The Sublime**

It is here that rhetoric usefully supplements the material sense of mediation understood by Kittler, McLuhan, and others in their camp. One part of Packer and Crofts Wiley’s objection to material rhetoric should still be parsed out. Rhetoric may not inevitably impose the framework of the text, but it still might overemphasize **persuasion**. A vision of rhetoric as persuasion exercised within a specific context ultimately describes operations in Lacan’s order of the Imaginary, as opposed to the Real and the Symbolic (Lundberg, *Lacan in Public* 39-43). Criticism in this vein focuses on the content of specific rhetorical expressions and effects at the cost of a more fundamental explanation of the underlying logic of the Symbolic which makes specific rhetorical expressions meaningful in the first place. In Lundberg’s words, “fetishizing persuasion as the primary means of rhetoric’s effectivity draws rhetoric’s attention away from the functions of trope and investment that constitute the subject and its discourses” (*Lacan in Public* 184). It is as if, given an equation with a variable $X$, we
focus all of our attention debating over what value we should assign to the variable at the expense of examining the equation itself. Persuasion is enabled by an economy of affect that provides the resources and structure for meaning to be expressed in any given act. In other words, every text, artefact, or sign related to nuclear weapons is a trope interpretable only with reference to a larger system of arbitrary tropes, a system held together by our repeated investments in the connections that bind it.

There is an alternative tradition in rhetoric that might help address the broader ecology of desire that underpins nuclear war, one at least as ancient as Aristotle’s famous emphasis on the means of persuasion. The sublime, best explained by Longinus but with roots that precede Socrates, has to do with the power of language to overwhelm, to jar us out of our comfortable subjectivity, to move audiences through splendor and revelation rather than rational persuasion. For Longinus, the sublime “does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself [sic]” (4). Sublime language is that in which a sense of the Real seems to shine through—not the unassimilable Real itself, but its outline, the enticement that it might be there even if we cannot capture it. It is artifice, but it evokes something more, leading us towards the edge of mediation and gesturing beyond. The sublime operates to conceal a trope “by its very brilliance. Just as dimmer lights are lost in the surrounding sunshine, so pervading grandeur all around obscures the presence of the rhetorical devices” (Longinus 29). Lundberg echoes this concept in his discussion of repression, arguing that raising one “insular metonymic connection to the status of a metaphor conceals or renders latent the other metonymic connections that also inhere in the accreted history of a sign. But the condition of this concealment is the whole field of latent connections that are both accreted and expressed in the social use of signs” (Lacan in Public 52). Thus the sublime powerfully
configures the unconscious through repression (in Lacan’s sense) by concealing the underlying networks of meaning in metonymic connection by hyperemphasizing one particular link through metaphorical condensation of meaning. I will argue that this hyperemphasis comes from the sense of the Real in sublime language, much as in the Freudian uncanny. As Bataille argues, instrumental language developed as a function of servile labor, to organize us for meeting basic needs, and thus only poetic words, limited to the level of “impotent beauty” can manifest what Bataille calls sovereignty (“Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” 16).

The rhetorical sublime is an ancient concept, but in the last few centuries it has been increasingly understood as a basically aesthetic attribute. Edmund Burke’s famous *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and *Critique of Judgment* discuss the sublime as a reaction to overwhelming experience, broadening it beyond language, a move that is also evident in more recent treatments by Jean-François Lyotard and others (Shaw 9). Although this expanding tradition might usefully extend the concept beyond written and spoken language, communication scholars should not surrender the sublime’s roots in rhetoric. The sublime for Longinus was first and foremost an aspect of language best examined with the tools of rhetoric. In abandoning the sublime as a specifically rhetorical concept, contemporary rhetorical theorists would be ignoring a vital counterpart to the persuasive tradition and foregoing an opportunity to provide their unique and vital perspective.

The sublime does have its opponents. Ned O’Gorman has argued persuasively against the concept on disciplinary and political grounds. There is a danger, he writes, in accepting the sublime because it threatens to expand the purview of rhetoric too far and
make the field difficult to define or defend against rapacious administrators. “How is a rhetoric brought into its own kept from being lost, memorialized, and monumentalized,” he asks (“Longinus” 85). O’Gorman’s concern seems to be that the sublime makes rhetoric all-powerful, vesting language with the ability to force and overwhelm, and neglecting the more utilitarian tradition identified with Aristotle’s focus on persuasion and its many modern derivatives.

This and allied criticisms treat the sublime as a style rather than an attribute of communication and pitch an unnecessary opposition with persuasion. Rhetorical attention to the sublime need not replace persuasion, identification, or any other instrumental concern. But if we focus on these things at the expense of the sublime, we offer latent support for the irksome popular sense of “rhetoric” as “false, ornamental words.” The sublime is the sense of truth in language—it is what beckons beyond our unreliable means of mediation to a Real which we cannot translate perfectly, but that we nonetheless encounter as the limit of language. The sublime should be understood not as a style of language, as it is sometimes translated from Longinus, but as an attribute of communication, the degree to which it gestures towards something beyond mediation. The sublime expands the purview of rhetoric no more than other approaches that have already usefully expanded its reach to material objects, practices, and so forth. Like psychoanalysis, the sublime is not the One Ring of theory: we do not need to understand it as the sole means of studying the world. Rather, it is an approach to language, and as the examples discussed in subsequent chapters show, one that we ignore at our own peril. To worry that the sublime is dangerous is to confuse the concept with its practice.

It is dangerous. The world is dangerous. We should pay attention to that fact. To be a critic of media or rhetoric is to be critical of media and rhetorical artefacts. To
acknowledge the sublime as worthy of study is not to make a normative judgment about its occurrence, but instead to study how it operates in language. As communication studies scholars, we should embrace this challenge. It reveals how important our lines of inquiry are and does not necessitate that we make everything reducible to communication. Concerned with the image of rhetoric, O’Gorman asks “Will rhetoric always be seen through a lack?” (“Longinus” 85). Perhaps the answer to O’Gorman’s trytophobia is yes, as long as it ignores the Real and its influence on the ways we communicate. Implicit in this argument is the idea that theory should be bounded—in other words, that it should display its own propriety.

Although the sublime should be recognized as a rhetorical tradition, its import extends to communication more generally. A kind of materialist sublime has been developed in Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*. Morton’s treatment of temporality links the sublime to other phenomena such as climate change and pollution. Material artifacts too can be attempts to mediate a sublime void that exceeds individual subjects, an approach consistent with material accounts of communication. The persistence of radioactive waste over vast periods of time, the monumental architecture proposed for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or the gorgeous, otherworldly devastation of a nuclear test crater all mean something sublime in the sense that they decenter humanity and disrupt the subject by revealing the vastness of the inhuman. Morton’s work suggests that the sublime does not preclude attention to the material specificity of mediation and also that those objects play a signifying function that potentially decenters the human subject.

I therefore mean mediation in the broadest possible sense: the effort to communicate with others, fated by the discontinuity of our electrical nervous systems to
involve translation, abstraction, symbolization, and reference through media, which are all of the bridges we try to raise over the chasms of our separation (Peters 4). Language is the media I focus on the most partly because its failure is most conspicuous, but it is only one of the resistors used to make manageable the vast superfluity of meaning. Film, architecture, television, and simulations are all examples of mediation in that they attempt to translate human experience and in the process shape the subjects that they ostensibly serve. In this sense mediation is both the effort to communicate and the environment in which we do so. It is artifice so pervasive that it appears natural.

As the testimony of atomic test witnesses will show, the Bomb itself is a medium of sublime communication. For some, nuclear explosions roared of Doomsday and Almighty power, of Armageddon, the Fall, or sin. For others, perhaps they signal technological hubris, or the confirmation of a godless universe indifferent to the self-destructiveness of the puffed-up apes infesting a tiny isolated rock in the Milky Way. They might promise eventual human obliteration or change their witnesses’ lives forever. They might suggest perpetual peace. They might not. Even unexploded, the Bomb is still a currency of meaning constantly in use. The Soviet footage of weapons on parade that transfixed me as a child is nothing more than the use of the Bomb-as-medium, remediated through film. The arcane incantations of nuclear deterrence understand the Bomb as a means of persuasion: the Bomb convinces another party not to take a political or military action that it might otherwise take through the enthymematic hint of slaughter and ruin. Persuasion is not everything, but it is still important. Still, even nuclear planners recognize that the Bomb does more than persuade. Along with the more classical functions of nuclear arsenals, some defense intellectuals use language uncannily resonant with the sublime in stating that the
Bomb’s purpose is not simply to dissuade or deter, but to overawe, something that it has a unique capacity to do (Oelrich 46).

This is the central argument of this dissertation: the fascination and terror of nuclear destruction are essentially connected by their perceived reference to an unmediated Real. Because the Real cannot be perfectly represented, our efforts to mediate it necessarily fail to completely capture reality, but the investments that sustain our repeated efforts guarantee that they continue, for our very beings demand connection with the world and each other. That efforts to capture the Real do not succeed in that aim is not to say that they are not productive, that rich array of theoretical tools in communication studies should be abandoned, or that they are not important. Indeed, these efforts are quite literally our entire world. To square our existence as subjects marked off from the totality of the Real with our desire to experience it without mediation, we come to enjoy the illusion of control over the presence and absence of the world, as in Freud’s fort-da game. In the nuclear context, we repetitively simulate destruction and salvation, worlds without us and ones made present for our habitation.

Nuclear imaginations persist after the Cold War and their various tropes have metastasized into new apocalyptic imaginations: environmental destruction, terrorism, pandemics, even zombies. While the Bomb did not inaugurate apocalyptic fear, the tropes and habits developed by its mediation in the intense crucible of the Cold War influence the way these other crises are mediated. More fundamentally, the economy of cathectic investment that animates these cultural assemblages is a product of the death drive—perhaps unfortunately named because it is not a wish for death but a wish for unmediated experience evident only in the constant attempts to mediate that same
experience. As that drive has communication at its core, the tools of communication studies are the appropriate means to study it and the various discourses, material practices, and technological artifices that arise from its operation. To do so might reveal much about communication itself, along with the limits and possibilities of how we respond politically to the threat of human extinction. I do not intend to create a complete, self-contained system to schematize the Real. Such a thing is impossible because the Real is by definition that which escapes symbolic assimilation. In suggesting that the Real is the intrusion of the non-human world into the symbolic network of the social, I aim to explore how the perceived limits of communication inform what discourses develop to explain and order nuclear weapons.

This project should instill skepticism about the efficacy of current strategies meant to confront nuclear violence by challenging it discursively. A great deal of work about the Bomb, following Carol Cohn’s excellent article and the germinal work of Stephen Hilgartner, Richard C. Bell and Rory O’Connor in Nukespeak, has focused on the sanitizing effects of nuclear language. Barry Brummett, Daniel Zins, and Edward Schiappa have all published work in this vein. Schiappa criticizes terms like “Strategic Defense Initiative” and CORRTEX for “bureaucratizing” and “domesticating” nuclear issues. Through these verbal strategies, nuclear realities are “insulated from public inspection by acronyms or sanitized jargon” (253). Both Barry Brummett and Charles Kauffman use the work of Kenneth Burke to argue that naming practices constrain public knowledge and influence attitudes about nuclear weapons, either through perfecting “God terms” for Brummett or through reference appealing historical myths such as the American frontier for Kauffman (Brummett, 1989; Kauffman, 1990). Even David Cratis Williams, who combines a Derridean perspective to the more familiar
Burke, emphasizes that a chief goal of nuclear criticism is a “publicly accessible” language (Williams 202).

These are all advocates for what we might call the concealment thesis. The basic assumption for proponents of this idea is that nuclear terminology conceals the reality of nuclear warfare and thus makes it palatable. The nuclear thinking developed by RAND game theorists and others produced an arcane vocabulary for all aspects of nuclear conflict, much as academia has for its own concerns: “counterforce targeting,” “throw-weight,” “circular error probable,” “post-attack state,” and, of course, “countervalue” and “first strike.” These terms mystify and enchant the public, just as they did public intellectuals during the Cold War, the fictional narrator of End Zone, and legions of high school and college undergraduate debaters to this very day (myself included). The theories of language used in the concealment thesis draw from different sources (Burke, Derrida, and Aristotle, Orwell, just to name a few), but their least common denominator is a belief that nuclear metaphors and euphemism sustain the complex of nuclear destruction by concealing the horror of nuclear war. The implication of this idea is that providing a new vocabulary for public debate, such as the “devil terms” Brummett suggests, would enable democratic deliberation and therefore constrain the nuclear state. As Schiappa puts it, a “negative nukespeak would consist of linguistic strategies to portray nuclear weapons and war as dangerous and immoral” (268). Such a strategy might “salvage” debate over nuclear weapons in the public sphere (Schiappa 254). Even outside communication studies, there is a broad consensus amongst critics of nuclear weapons that democratic debate is the key method for resistance to nuclear weapons and that concealing language stands as a barrier to it. Nuclear critique of all kinds has dropped off considerably since the end of the Cold War.
such that the concealment thesis, although advanced most comprehensively in the 1980s, remains the chief contribution of communication studies to the politics of nuclear warfare.

The central argument of this book suggests that this legacy needs revision. The economy of nuclear discourse since the day of Trinity has been driven by the attempt to get closer to the Real, to have the Bomb as it “really is.” Chapter 2 will suggest that nuclear simulations were presented as more real and more rational than the Doomsday imaginations of Curtis LeMay and the early Strategic Air Command. Jonathan Schell’s *Fate of the Earth* was another effort to bring Americans face-to-face with the reality of nuclear war, as were the more explicitly fictional novels churned out especially in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s. Underlying these efforts is the fact that nuclear war remains “fabulously textual” in Derrida’s terms (24-27). There have been atrocities related to nuclear weapons and their production—indigenous peoples subjected to uranium mining and nuclear testing, inner city populations confined and targeted in the name of the Bomb, “downwinders” exposed to radioactivity, U.S. soldiers made to witness tests with inadequate protection, and non-human animals subjected to cruelty in the name of understanding just what a nuclear war might be like. But there has never been a nuclear war in the sense that strategists, novelists, and survivalists imagined it. To imagine the graphic details of a possible nuclear war does not reveal the truth but instead relies on the same dynamic that makes the Bomb so fascinating in the first place: a sense of access to the Real.

My overall aim is to establish the death drive as a problematic for communication studies. I argue that it is a desire for unmediated experience spurred on by the Real, but because communication is always mediated, this desire is frustrated as soon as it is
expressed. The quest for the Real ends up mired in the Symbolic. Unable to enjoy the Real because its loss is the necessary condition for subjectivity in the first place, we invest in subjectivity instead, enjoying the perceived control over presence and absence demonstrated in the *fort-da* dynamic. In developing this argument, I hope to make a contribution to communication studies by showing that silence, omission, and lack do not just frustrate our effort to communicate, but partly determine the ways in which we do so. These unspeakable failures are not therefore purely negative—they are an excess beyond language, not a vacuum. Specific media artefacts, whether war games or literary texts, exist instead of others because they are animated by desire and the uncanny sense of the Real. Therefore, efforts to understand what we do communicate require attention to the larger economy of desire and that which we cannot mediate. For rhetoric, this means a new understanding of the sublime as an uncanny attribute of signifiers and media itself in relation to the Real, rather than simply a grand style of speech. For media and technology studies, it means acknowledging how the enjoyment of our power over presence and absence leads us to form attachments that sustain some particular technologies instead of others, making an account of desire necessary even for a truly materialist understanding of mediation. This also means rethinking the relationship between public discourse and political change since, as the example of nuclear weapons shows, horror and fascination are woven together such that exposing the potential for catastrophe does not translate into an effective response.

**Notes on language**

I have used the word “we” deliberately. Nearly everyone on Earth is implicated in the structure of the nuclear state and the cultural apparatuses that it gave rise to. If you have paid taxes in a state that possesses nuclear weapons or is part of a nuclear alliance
or bought anything from a company they tax, you have contributed in some tiny material way to the maintenance of nuclear arsenals. Most English speakers use nuclear-derived language without a second thought—blonde “bombshells” wear “bikinis,” named for the site of the first hydrogen bomb test. We “nuke” food in a microwave, hear pundits threaten to “bomb” our enemies “back to the Stone Age.” Nearly all of us can recognize a “mushroom cloud.” Some public issues are “radioactive,” like the “collateral damage” that “war games” should have predicted in various U.S. military interventions. We live in a narrative environment shaped by nuclear stories like The Road, Mad Max, Manhattan, Jericho, Dr. Strangelove, the Fallout videogame series, and so on. There is a good chance that you have used electricity partly generated in nuclear power plants, quite possibly from downblended Soviet nuclear warheads. The material traces of the nuclear complex are present as isotopes in our bones and background radiation in the air we breathe. That contamination helps track ivory poachers in Africa, provide isotopes for medical research, power space probes that reveal new reaches of the universe, and rework the DNA of almost everything living on Earth. For all of these categories, there are many exceptions. “We” should be an invitation to think about one’s relation to the Bomb, not an accusation of complicity. The Bomb is not something outside of us, either nature or technology: it is in our hearts and minds, the words we speak, the fantasies we share and the technologies we use, often in places where we do not expect to find it. Think of what threads bind you to this web of nuclear influence, because disavowal and separation only maintain the Bomb’s otherworldly appeal.
For the same reason, I have focused on an American perspective towards the Bomb. No doubt fascinating work could be done on Soviet and Warsaw Pact attitudes, and much has already been written about Japanese responses to Hiroshima, most notably in English by Robert Lifton. I have chosen the U.S. perspective for a number of reasons. Fascination with the Bomb is most evident there, as reflected in popular culture from the 1950s to the present, since exported around the world. Documentary evidence is most plentiful and accessible for the USA. The United States was the first country to develop nuclear weapons, and the disruptive shock of Trinity took place in New Mexico, not Novaya Zemlya, although it got there eventually. Strategic thinking about nuclear weapons was most intricate and most bizarre in the United States, and survivalism has an American frontier aspect that makes it especially potent as a cultural force in the USA. As possibly the most Bomb-obsessed of the nuclear states, the USA seems a fitting place to start. Because of this choice, I do not intend the arguments in this book to establish a universal theory of the Real that is applicable in all times and places. Lacan, writing about communication research in the United States, recognized that “c factor,” or culture, makes such a pretension unrealistic (“Function and Field” 204). I am examining how particular constellations of tropes became durable—not inevitable—in twentieth-century American culture and how they continue to reverberate today. Criticism must treat desire seriously, but not at the expense of specific, culturally-dependent ways that it is made manifest in the world. While some of these processes may be observable in other times and places, we would do well to remember rhetoric’s

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4 “American perspective” is not just perspectives of Americans, as a number of those who contributed to the Bomb’s development and use were immigrants, mostly European, or citizens of allied NATO countries. Much U.S. nuclear infrastructure has been maintained at various times with cooperation from the UK, Turkey, Germany, South Korea, Italy, Greece, and Canada.
grounding in contingency rather than claim that these dynamics reflect an immutable, structuring human nature.

I have also chosen to write Bomb, capital “B,” often replacing other terms like “nuclear weapons” which are mostly reserved for discrete material systems, the weapons themselves. The Bomb differs from just a collection of bombs, as Chapter 1 indicates. Weapons like the MX missile, SS-18, Fat Man, and so forth are synecdoches for something that is more than the sum of their parts: the Bomb as an organizing metaphor existing in a structural place once reserved for God. The Bomb is more than bombs; it is a figure imbued with its own agency, an existence transcending time, and a power to rework the Earth for good or for ill. In common usage throughout the cold war, “the Bomb,” served to collect a general sense of doom and threat, as it did for a young Todd Gitlin (“Some Reflections” 59-64). It is a completely artificial signifier but it reeks of the Real. A poem by Kenneth Burke helps to illustrate its importance as a singular entity:

If all the thermo-nuclear warheads
Were one thermo-nuclear warhead
What a great thermo-nuclear warhead that would be.

If all the intercontinental ballistic missiles
Were one intercontinental ballistic missile,
What a great intercontinental ballistic missile that would be.

If all the military men
Were one military man
What a great military man he would be.

If all the land-masses
Were one land-mass
What a great land-mass that would be.

And if the great military man
Took the great thermo-nuclear warhead
And put it into the great intercontinental ballistic missile,
And dropped it on the great land-mass,

What great PROGRESS that would be. (Burke, Language 22)

Ira Chernus had a similar vision of the united Bomb standing in for God in the Atomic Age:

If there is a single Bomb of which all nuclear weapons are a part, then there is also a single nuclear holocaust, a single cosmic mushroom cloud, one big whoosh in which all reality is returned to its primal state, in which all limits are instantly transcended. Just as God works his will instantly, having no limits upon his power, so does the Bomb, and so do we as masters of the Bomb. In manifesting our infinite power we find the only solution to the problem of our infinite power. Once the button is pushed, there may be no future solutions to our problems, but neither will there be any problems to solve. (Chernus, Strangegod 31)

This book is therefore primarily about the Bomb. It is about nuclear weapons in the same way that Moby Dick is about the Nantucket whaling industry—some concrete reference is important, but the objects of desire are more than they appear.

**Structure**

The central argument of this book creates a methodological quandary: how does one write about what is understood to be beyond mediation? Much scholarship in communication studies is written as criticism of a text, media object, or cultural practice with the purpose of applying some broader theory to explain it and in the process refining the theory through the example or case study. Karl Marx proposed in the Grundrisse to refine a concrete but “chaotic” category into simpler abstractions and then retrace the journey back to the initial category, now to be seen as a richer and more complex totality (100). This is closer to the approach here, but still complicated by the fact that I endeavor to explain how absences shape presences, and how this binary is in
fact a mutually-dependent whole. The concrete examples of nuclear technologies used here are products of an excess to which they cannot be reduced and can only hint at indirectly. While I will analyze a number of examples in detail, I will also supplement this direct engagement with something akin to the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius’s *The Divine Names*, in which the inexpressible can only be approached by studying the proliferation of symbols that circle around what must necessarily be a “wise silence” (Pseudo-Dionysius 50-53). For Pseudo-Dionysius, the inexpressible force that structured reality was God; for my purposes, it is the Bomb-Made-God, no less a fearful revelation of a hidden metaphysical order. Although the Real exceeds mediation, the profusion of attempts to describe the Bomb allow us to trace an outline for the lack. Fantasies about the Bomb abound, as do efforts to fill its void with meaning. These artefacts reveal something in what they do not say, and how they position themselves in relation to what cannot be otherwise mediated.

To seek the movements of desire, shaped by the limits of mediation, as they influence repeated, sometimes distant concrete instantiations in particular media artefacts and texts, I have chosen to include a large number of examples from nuclear imagination and technology. To read a small selection even more closely would undoubtedly reveal much that is omitted here, but it would also put my larger project in jeopardy. By its nature, this project demands a wide scope, although that decision is not made without cost.

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5 “Technology” as used throughout this work is meant to convey assemblage, connection, and betweenness; artifacts, practices and systems that constitute the ways humanity relates to, interfaces with, and manipulates its world beyond just the physical things of individual “technologies.” The word in this sense follows the definitional work of Slack and Wise (96-97). In this formulation, the practice of rhetoric traditionally understood as persuasion is an example of technology since it is one of the “ways of building order in this world” (Winner 28). Criticism too is a technology, but as explained in the conclusion, the concepts of the sublime and teratology suggest ways in which it can expose investments in disorder and contingency rather than the world that Bataille might describe as that of accumulation.
This study will proceed in four parts. Each pair of chapters establishes a relationship of *fort* (“gone”) and *da* (“here”). In Chapter One I will try to establish the fundamental importance of the Real in human communication. By examining eyewitness recollections of nuclear testing, focused on Trinity, the Earth’s first nuclear explosion, I will explore the failures of language that surrounded the Bomb and its extraordinary power. The first atomic explosion was met with silence which, more than just a deficiency of language, is the presence of an excess that cannot be mastered in words. Its world-ending and word-rending power made the Bomb an object of terror and fascination, a metaphor for the Real of the nonhuman world. While speculative fiction had previously explored the possibility of human extinction, for the first time this power was invested in human beings themselves, who could now choose the means and moment of their auto-eradication. From the very beginning, a paradox is evident: it is through language that we insist on the inadequacy of language to convey the “true” sense of nuclear experience. When the currency of language lost its value, more was simply printed: the resulting inflation did not get us any closer to the Real, but widely circulated an uncanny sense of something beyond mediation. The uncanny sense of the Real’s contingency intruding on a world supposedly of our making triggered attempts to reassert order and control by fitting the Bomb into the structural place of God. These were attempts to assimilate the Real while still maintaining a sense of connection to its numinous power. It is that sense of the Real’s power, I argue, that gives language its sublime aspect, not as a style but as an attribute of at least some signifiers that creates a point of attachment for desire.

Chapter Two examines some of these attempts at incorporation in the form of nuclear simulations. Defense intellectuals formulated complex theories for the conduct
of nuclear war and tested them through a series of “war games,” a cultural technology that was later adapted for an attempt at entertainment infused with anti-nuclear sentiment. War games are metaphorical in a double sense: the gaming metaphor describes the exercises, which themselves are material metaphors for the untestable system of nuclear warfare. Often so outlandish in their assumption that they are literally unbelievable, nuclear war games are a medium that still permits players to enjoy nuclear war by acting as its instigator or preventer. Even when used for ostensibly anti-nuclear purposes, these games still require enjoyment to be meaningful and are thus examples of terror and fascination acting simultaneously to stitch together a durable cultural practice. The recent game *First Strike* is an example of conflict between criticism of the nuclear establishment and the joys of imagining it. Game theory gave rise to a complex cultural technology of scenario planning of situations which are extremely unlikely but extremely threatening to the survival of humanity, a version of Pascal’s Wager that still operates to script order over disruptive contingency. The distortions in the attempt to calculate the incalculable to oppose nuclear violence create argumentative resources that are marshalled just as easily in defense of military aggression.

Chapter Three explores the notion of sacrifice and the imagination of space resulting from nuclear simulations and the efforts to calculate the infinite—another imagination of the world’s absence. “Countervalue” targeting policies made urban centers rather than military installations desired targets for nuclear attack and theorized that the USA should want the Soviet Union to target American cities rather than military installations for the sake of “stability.” The material results of this strategy and the tropes surrounding it resonate closely with discourses of neoliberal economic dislocation and white flight, as well as borrowing from the trope of deserts as (nuclear)
wastelands. Cities and deserts were conflated together in a larger wasteland trope. Both were understood as places of abjection but also of desire. The depiction of post-industrial urban wastelands today in cities like Detroit bears a structural similarity to post-nuclear city spaces imagined ever since the development of the first atomic weapons. In the United States, these tropes are made manifest in culturally-specific ways, concealing the sacrifice of disempowered groups under the banner of utilitarianism.

Chapter Four is about survival, an insistence that the world will be made present again after catastrophic destruction. The low risk/high impact thinking of nuclear war helped produce the modern survivalist subject, one crafted in opposition to the sacrificial populations slated to die in a hypothetical nuclear conflict. Beginning with civil defense initiatives in the early Cold War, the sign of survival came to organize a set of practices that would ostensibly reduce the uncertainty of the future. A great deal of fiction is produced around the dangers of post-apocalyptic society, but these dangers are also tied to the promise of renewal. Bomb shelters are built, food is stockpiled, weapons are acquired. Internet dating sites exist to cater to lonely “survivalist singles.” Television shows like *Doomsday Preppers* rate their participants’ chances of homesteading anew after Armageddon. These survival games consume a great deal of time and energy from their participants. They too are evidence of the co-presence of fascination and terror: their participants, mostly fairly secure financially and socially, become obsessed with the end of the world because it promises a more “real” experience in which the abstractions of modern life are washed away and people can enjoy the hardships that technology and society take from them. Doomsday preparation is enjoyable as a simulation of the Real represented by a return to (radioactive and devastated) nature.
The Conclusion takes stock of the ways that nuclear war organizes desire and seeks to identify lessons for communication scholarship and antinuclear politics. The examples of nuclear testing, war games, and survivalism behoove us to remember the link between communication and communion. In these examples, communication is driven by a desire to commune with the Real, to overcome the constitutive separation from one another that defines us as discrete subjects. This suggests that we supplement our attention to the organizing and ordering properties of communication with attention to what seems to be beyond mediation. For rhetoric, this means a continuation of the sublime tradition alongside the more traditional focus on persuasion. The political implications of the death drive are also significant. If our relationship to nuclear war is structured by the twinned forces of terror and fascination, it should change how we think about anti-nuclear efforts. Much of these are directed towards “unmasking” nuclear euphemisms and “revealing the truth” of the Bomb’s destructive power. This power is also the source of fascination, so imagining the world’s end is itself a site of enjoyment. A political response to the Bomb might require that we first confront the truly unspeakable desires that keep us in its orbit.
CHAPTER 1: SILENCE AT ZERO

With a wise silence we do honor the inexpressible...And there we shall be, our minds away from passion and from earth, and we shall have a conceptual gift of light from him and, somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with him and, our understanding carried away, blessedly happy, we shall be struck by his blazing light.
--Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”

The notion of extinction, utter extinction, is the most unbearable thought of all.
--Daniel Callahan, The Tyranny of Survival

Warned of Doomsday

Apocalyptic dreams long predate the nuclear age. At the start of its heyday around 600 BC, Zoroastrianism predicted the imminent destruction of the world in a mighty conflagration, ushering in a period where the forces of good would rise to power. The repetition of this basic template—worldwide catastrophe and rebirth—would define Jewish and Christian apocalypticism for millennia, as it still does today (Weber 39). A vast series of apocalyptic predictions has been made over time. Many European veterans of the First Crusade returned home at the turn of the twelfth century AD with memories of the hellish gore at Antioch, Ma’arra, and Jerusalem believing that they had participated in Armageddon itself (Rubenstein xiii). The advent of the atomic bomb itself was famously predicted in H.G. Wells’s The World Set Free. Even the exquisite English word mundicidious, “world-killing,” had time to be coined, used, and fall out of favor before the first nuclear explosion, codenamed Trinity by Robert Oppenheimer, ever took place. The atomic age was not the first time human beings had contemplated the end of the world, but it was qualitatively different from previous apocalyptic eras. For the first time, we were confronted with a power out of all proportion to previous
technology, both a force of nature and a product of human artifice. Speculation on the end of the world was suddenly different: it no longer required faith in God or a cryptographic attempt to decipher His will, although the Bomb helped fill this structural absence. The means of our own destruction were placed squarely in our hands, and despite millennia of apocalyptic thought, we were fundamentally unprepared.

The Trinity nuclear explosion took place in New Mexico on the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range (now the White Sands Missile Range) on July 16, 1945. There is a pattern of repetition even in accounts of the Trinity test. Nearly all of them begin with the date and time exactly: five hours, twenty-nine minutes, and forty-five seconds after midnight, in most accounts. Almost all of them describe the darkness before the “false dawn” of the Bomb and the “true dawn” of the day. Most of them say something about the desert landscape of New Mexico—its nighttime cold, its aridity despite the rain falling at the time of the test, and perhaps an ominous Spanish place name: *Jornada del Muerto* (roughly, “dead man’s route”). A few quotes are lifted from eyewitnesses to establish the tension of anticipation, the white-knuckled suspense of scientists, soldiers, and sundry credentialed indispensables still as death in the New Mexico desert.

Here the diligent Enrico Fermi, prepared to drop scraps of paper to estimate the bomb’s force. There the cultured Robert Oppenheimer, conflicted soul and brilliant scientist not yet dishonored. Elsewhere, Edward Teller, who would later dream of digging canals with H-bombs and blasting the rim of the Moon to show resolve to the Soviets, but concerned on this dark morning with the distribution of sunburn cream to protect against ultraviolet rays. And of course Leslie Groves, cast from the tough mold of the American wartime general, perhaps lacking the showmanship of MacArthur or the
homespun cruelty of LeMay, but blessed with their gruffness and organizational skills. These are four of the 425 personnel at Trinity. Sometimes one or two of these notables are omitted. Sometimes one or two more are added for a different emphasis—Klaus Fuchs, the spy; George Kistiakowsky, the herald of doom; Vannevar Bush, the bureaucrat industrialist; James Conant, the elite university president. Of course there were bodies sprawled in shallow trenches, perched on hilltops, even standing somewhat foolishly exposed. The War Department had helpfully advised that car windows be rolled down. There was a countdown. It was followed by the implosion of a plutonium sphere.

What follows the painstaking construction of this scene is a spectacular failure of language. Writers trying to explain the test seem to compete with one another to find the most powerful descriptive language but don’t find the words. Solar metaphors are the most common remedy. “The sun had been briefly recreated on earth,” writes Gerard deGroot. “A colony on Mars, had such a thing existed, could have seen the flash” (62). “The explosion created a brilliant flash,” writes Ferenc Szasz. “It lit up the sky like the sun” (83). The “most awesome weapon” created “its first terrifying sunrise,” writes Lansing Lamont (3). Robert Jungk named his history of the Manhattan Project Brighter than a Thousand Suns, referencing a quote from the Bhagavad Gita supposedly said by Robert Oppenheimer at Trinity, and Frenc Szasz called his book The Day the Sun Rose Twice. These descriptions closely fit the eyewitness accounts: before the heat or sound of the explosion reached observers, they were inundated in the otherworldly light of the Bomb. In its wake came the now-famous mushroom cloud, unlike anything most observers had seen. It was compared to various things before the mushroom label stuck. While Philip Morrison and Cyril Smith made the now-classic fungal comparison, Robert
Serber insisted that “there was no appearance of mushrooming at any height” (Morrison; Smith; Serber). O.R. Frisch likened it both to a mushroom and an elephant standing on its trunk (Frisch 50).

While these descriptions are not failures in the sense that no words at all were ever found for the experience, they are all attempts to impress upon the reader an experience that at the time inspired silence. Words were found, but they came later, and their authors often expressed doubt that language could ever be an adequate tool. Most witnesses agree that silence prevailed immediately after the blast before speech was returned to the scientists and soldiers. “The whole spectacle was so tremendous and one might almost say fantastic that the immediate reaction of the watchers was one of awe rather than excitement,” remembered Edwin McMillan. “After some minutes of silence, a few people made remarks like, ‘Well, it worked,’ and then conversation and discussion became general” (McMillan). Smith described an ebb in language, a gap before the symbols flooded back:

At the instant after the shot, my reactions were compounded of relief that "it worked"; consciousness of extreme silence, and a momentary question as to whether we had done more than we intended. Practically none of the watchers made any vocal comment until after the shock wave had passed...elation of most observers seemed to increase for a period of 30 minutes afterwards, as they had a chance to absorb the significance of the achievement.

Ernest O. Lawrence concurred. “The grand, almost cataclysmic proportion of the explosion produced a kind of solemnity in everyone,” he wrote. “There was restrained applause, but more a hushed murmuring bordering on reverence” (Lawrence, 168-9).

The most striking account of Trinity was written by Brigadier General Thomas Farrell. It deserves to be quoted at length:

The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous
power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after the explosion came first, the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized. (qtd. in Groves 436)

Farrell’s testimony is remarkable for its link between presence and imagination—it is not just that language is inadequate to convey what he saw, but he maintained that the experience of Trinity escaped even the imaginations of those who did not witness it. Statements like Farrell’s recount the inadequacy of language to capture the event and then go on to use powerful language in an effort to do just that. Scientist Jeremy Bernstein put it more simply: “what I saw defies description” (Bernstein). Still, descriptions were made.

Some observers claim to be overwhelmed, to have their identities temporarily suspended or reforged in the force of the Bomb. Melba Scott witnessed a later test as part of her civil defense activities in 1955. Forty years later, she said in an interview that “I don't remember .... What I remember is the silence, it was like-it was so awesome. [The atomic blast] was so much more than anybody could ever imagine, that you just weren't able-everybody kind of retreated into themselves. It was just so quiet” (Scott 40, brackets in original). Scott’s language, long after the test, was still full of pauses, false starts, incomplete fragments. The interviewer pressed this exchange:

   Ahlgren: I guess I should say, what were you feeling?
   Scott: I don't know. I don't know.
Ahlgren: Overwhelmed?
Scott: Yes. Mute. Which is really different for me [laughs]. And the quiet reigned. We had some responsibility to the state to speak...And I remember some of us did that...
It's the same way I've survived as a widow. If I'd really ever let it all come in on me, I'd be immobilized. (Scott 41)

Silence is not just the failure of words. As Max Picard argued, it is an affirmative presence. Silence is the world asserting itself against the human, reminding us that although a world without language can be imagined, a world without silence is impossible. It thus conjures up the totality of non-human nature and reduces the human perspective to its tiny, partial corner of a vast universe beyond our control. “Simply not to be talking,” he writes, “is not the same as to be silent. Silence must be present within a man [sic] as a primary reality in its own right, not merely as the opposite of speech...It points him beyond the life that is in the word to a life beyond the word, and it points him beyond himself” (121).

In the case of Trinity and other tests, silence combined with light, heat, physical pressure, a visual display on a massive scale, and sounds that “warned of doomsday.” The reality of a human-constructed world, understood as an ordered, predictable system and mediated through an interconnected weave of symbols, was briefly torn open in the New Mexico desert. Language returned to stitch the gap, but what revealed itself for a moment wasn’t simply an absence but a world of full existence in and for itself indifferent to the human standpoint. Order and predictability, captured and mediated to form a human reality, gave way to the Real. It is in the Real that language finds its limit, and with it, the limit of the human world. Trinity is a metonym for unfathomable changes in the human condition. The “entire basis” for a people’s existence was “fundamentally altered,” Paul Boyer writes. The Atomic Age “burst upon the world with
terrifying suddenness” (3-4). Jonathan Schell writes that nuclear war is not just unthought, but often considered “unthinkable” (4). This theme is echoed in a number of book titles on nuclear war: Thinking the Unthinkable, Where No Man Thought, Fathering the Unthinkable, and others. Where thought and mediation end, we have reached the Real.

The Real

Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Real is notoriously difficult to define. In his book on the subject, Tom Eyers calls it the “most elusive” of Lacan’s concepts, but one that is also one that is “central” and “determining” for psychoanalysis (1). There are common elements of the various definitions. First, an agreement that both the economy of tropes that allows the conditions for meaning to emerge (the Symbolic) and the meanings and values invested in these tropes, including the subject itself (the Imaginary), do not and cannot perfectly capture all of existence or experience. Second, this unassimilable remainder structures the Symbolic and Imaginary, just as they structure each other, and thus all three registers are knitted together as demonstrated in Lacan’s famous “Borromean Knot.” The Real is what escapes mediation, what disrupts language itself. To explain its significance and relationship to desire requires examining its foundational role in the formation of the subject.

The Real can be understood as the constitutive lack of the subject, its separation from the rest of existence by the self-definition necessary for it to come into being in the first place. This is made clear in the mirror stage, where the subject moves from a fragmented, disorganized concept of the body to the “finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his [sic] entire mental development with its rigid structure” (Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 78). The formation of a discrete subject (a function in
the Imaginary register) is a compromise. Its formation allows for participation in the Symbolic because to participate in that economy of exchange requires a “social I” (Lacan, “Mirror stage,” 79). This participation comes at the cost of alienation because the subject trades in a world of symbols which by their nature stand in for what is not present, and thus inescapably mediate the (Real) world outside of the subject, rather than making it present. This lack built in to the subject is the engine of desire: the subject’s divide from an object is a prerequisite for the desire of such an object, but the condition of mediation makes it impossible to ever incorporate it in a perfectly satisfying way. Thus desire remains unfulfilled and each chase for a symbol leads to another in loop which the very constitution of the subject dictates must be endless. This is the basic operation of the death drive which is not distinct from Eros. Were the impossible to occur and the drive of Eros to be fulfilled, it would be extinguished, as there would be nothing left to desire. Thus all drives aim, in a sense, at their own extinction, and therefore there is in a sense only one—the drive that aims towards the extinction of desire through its complete fulfillment in continuity with the world that was lost when the subject became distinct from it in the mirror stage.

Although the death drive might stand in for the singular character of the drive, it should not be understood as a desire for the actual biological death of the subject’s body, or even the desire to inflict death on others. The self-destruction of the death drive is a desire to break the limits of the self as the alienating armor of the subject by experiencing unmediated contact with the Real. Death still defines its operation in other ways. The last portion of Lacan’s “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” explains the metaphorical centrality of death as the center of a torus formed by incessant symbolization. The fort-da game is most significant not because it
shows that the child wishes to destroy its mother or even inoculate itself against that possibility, but because it assimilates the child into the Symbolic order through the repetition of the signifiers *fort* and *da*, which stand in for presence and absence. Death is central to language because the symbol itself invokes the absence and loss of non-existence since its function is to stand in for something that is gone. Language swirls around this absent center of death, a primordial absence encased in the inner ring of the torus, while the outer surfaces of language hold all else that cannot be symbolized at bay on the outside (Lacan, “Function and Field” 260-264).

Paradoxically, death is necessarily evoked by the symbol as that which is absent and also made possible in the first place by that same symbol. The separation of the subject into its alienating identity as a social object makes a meaningful concept of death possible because without it there is no *dasein*, no individual, no singular human to die. George Bataille explains this with an entomological example. If a scientist picks one fly from a swarm, that fly is subject to death, because its end means the end of the discontinuous being selected by the entomologist. Without differentiation of its members, however, the swarm lives on; the selection of the fly is for the entomologist, not the animal (Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” 14-16). Thus it is with human beings. The subject is founded by a rejection of its sole animal nature by participating in a world of work and accumulation, mediated by language—essentially Lacan’s Symbolic. Thus individuals are made discontinuous with the general economy of matter and energy from which all things are formed by a conceptual separation inextricably bound up in death. Our existences are thus defined by *discontinuity* from a world of *continuity*, and for Bataille as for Lacan, our drives are singular in the sense that sex is a coupling that unifies with another and momentarily overcomes discontinuity just as death is the
end of the subject’s brief separation from a universe differentiated only by the
dismembering violence of our imposition of symbols upon it (Bataille, *Erotism* 13-17).
The experience of death may still be unique because it suggests the absence implied by
the sign and because it can be experienced only once by the subject—and for obvious
reasons, cannot be symbolized by anyone with first-hand experience. As Freud argues in
“Thoughts For The Times On War and Death,” we cannot even hope to imagine our own
deaths because to do so demands that we imagine them from some perspective which
would be destroyed in the experience itself.

Death and the Real are therefore not identical, but are closely linked. The most
important characteristic of the Real is not just that it suggests existence beyond
language, but that this world-for-itself (to borrow from Eugene Thacker) intrudes on
human reality and reveals it to be incomplete. Encompassing Max Picard’s concept of
silence, the Real is not the absence of human reality so much as the traumatic revelation
that that reality was always incomplete, always feigned in the face of existence so much
more than human mediation has already covered. Chris Lundberg uses Lacan’s
distinction between *reality*, being the social world of human construction, and the *Real*,
being the occasional but inevitable failure of that reality, to develop his own distinction
between *failed unicity* and *feigned unicity*. The Symbolic operates as an economy of
interconnected and mutually-referential tropes weaving a kind of fabric that is the
precondition for meaning, an environment in which social relationships can be
understood in context. When the unified illusion of the social fails, we are compelled to
stitch the tears in that fabric to maintain the world that gives us meaning (*Lacan in
Public* 2-3). An account by Bill Laurence, the only journalist allowed to witness the
Trinity test, provides evidence for this rupture and repair. While “not a sound could be
“heard” for the period after the flash and before the thunder, Laurence saw civilization itself collapse in an instant:

The big boom came about one hundred seconds after the great flash—the first cry of a newborn world. It brought the silent, motionless silhouettes to life, gave them a voice. A loud cry filled the air. The little groups that had hitherto stood rooted to the earth like desert plants broke into a dance—the rhythm of primitive man dancing at one of his fire festivals at the coming of spring. They clapped their hands as they leaped from the ground...The dance of the primitive man lasted but a few seconds, during which an evolutionary period of about 10,000 years telescoped. Primitive man was metamorphosed into modern man—shaking hands, slapping his fellow on the back, all laughing like happy children. (12)

The witnesses at Trinity were overcome by silence for a few moments in the experience of a violence and beauty beyond measure. The explosion did not just tear apart the basic units of matter; it also tore apart an orderly social world. It created something without precedent in its fury and force. As Lacan argues, the advance of science expands the realm of the Real by introducing new unknowns, but humanity quickly struggles to fit these experiences into a preexisting framework—religion. In *The Triumph of Religion* he writes:

If science works at it, the real will expand and religion will thereby have still more reasons to soothe people’s hearts. Science is new and it will introduce all kinds of distressing things into each person’s life. Religion, above all the true religion, is resourceful in ways we cannot even begin to suspect...Religion is going to give meaning to the oddest experiments, the very ones that scientists themselves are just beginning to become anxious about. (64-65)

Once the actual explosion took place, the predictable order of the human social world seemed to cease. The horror of the Bomb is its sudden demonstration of physical forces that, although unleashed by human beings, are products of a universe whose forces are obscenely powerful, indifferent to humanity, and capable of destroying it. James Conant, president of Harvard, thought of human extinction: “My first impression remains the most vivid, a cosmic phenomena [sic] like an eclipse. The whole sky
suddenly full of white light like the end of the world. Perhaps my impression was only premature on a time scale of years!” (qtd. in Wellerstein). Scientist George Kistiakowsky was even more telling. For him, the spectacle was “the nearest thing to doomsday that one could possibly imagine. I am sure that at the end of the world—in the last millisecond of the earth’s existence—the last man [sic] will see what we have just seen” (Laurence 11). The bomb brought to mind the insignificance of human beings and the possibility of a world without us. Although speculative fiction writers had already contemplated human extinction, the possibility was no longer hypothetical. Suddenly, human beings were faced with the possibility of auto-annihilation, and therefore made to contemplate, like Kistiakowsky, a world where homo sapiens had been eradicated. Witnessing a nuclear explosion changed everything for some observers. Melba Scott was both made aware of the failure of mediation and gripped with a new determination:

Ahlgren: I remember reading, some observer, a general, maybe it was during the Trinity test, that when the bomb was exploded they said that they looked into the mouth of Hell.
Scott: They did. I said that at the talk, remember? I said, "You just can’t look into the bowels of Hell and not be changed." And you can't. .. any more than you could believe what it looked like. It's hard to visualize it, and certainly after seeing it, you'd be a fool not to let it [affect you]. You've got to build on something and that was building on the most potentially dangerous thing mankind has ever faced .... You do the best you can with what you've got. That's what it boils down to, every day of your life. That was a big challenge. I have to admit that there were people, maybe even some people that worked in civil defense, that did not have the intensity that I had. I don't know if it was the test. It isn't really anything you can transfer to another person-your understanding of whatever something is. I can't transfer that knowledge or feeling to you. (Scott 43)

The terror of this imagination has been theorized in Eugene Thacker’s book, In the Dust of this Planet. Thacker distinguishes between the human social world (the world-for-us), a world that functions independently of humanity and sometimes “bites back,” reminding us that we are not completely in charge (the world-in-itself), and
finally, a speculative world sometimes hinted at in these bites, where we no longer exist (the world-without-us) (Thacker 4). While fear has an object, horror is a reaction to the formless void behind the object of terror. We might fear the natural disasters brought upon by the world’s dangerous contingency, but horror is a result of the paradoxical thinking of the unthinkable—not just our complete annihilation, but the meaninglessness of such an event. Like the cosmic horror of H.P. Lovecraft and his better disciples (whose fortunes as serious thinkers are being raised by speculative realists like Graham Harman), the Bomb works not to expose a universe hostile to humanity, but simply indifferent to it. If all that we hold dear is arbitrary, a vain conceit by an irrelevant species, we must confront a void that dissolves any meaning and value that we assign to ourselves. Why live? Why bother? The universe is full of horror, and our lives mean nothing. Lovecraft wrote to Frank Belknap Long, that there is

a kind of hideous irony in the assumption of the human point of view at all—in the exaltation, celebration, or even detailed notice of the contemptible organic processes of the filthy louse called man. I could not take humanity seriously if I wanted to, and it rather sickens me to see a poet’s vision hound up in the trivial sensations and affairs of this crawling insect-species...When Kleiner showed me the sky-line of New-York I told him that man is like the coral insect—designed to build vast, beautiful, mineral things for the moon to delight in after he is dead. (172)

Lovecraft instead imagined “winged fiends” for whom “the name of man [sic]—and even the name of organic life—is unknown” (Lovecraft 172). Thomas Ligotti has written that the sole purpose of human consciousness is a “long con” designed to conceal the truth—that humanity is “malignantly useless,” tricked into continuing by the same attribute that also guarantees its misery by making it aware of its own inevitable death (Ligotti). This is what the hideous revelation of the Real of the Bomb hints towards. Todd Gitlin recalled primary school duck-and-cover drills as a part of life for
the “first American generation compelled from infancy to fear not only war but the end of days” (The Sixties 22). One could never be sure that humanity would endure at all. “Under the desks and crouched in the hallways,” he wrote, “terrors were ignited, existentialists were made” (23).

What Ligotti and other misanthropes ironically fail to explain is the appeal of their own fiction: that we can also enjoy what inspires horror. As Ira Chernus writes, the “lure of nothingness—the possibility of extinction—has always fascinated human beings and enticed them into situations of lethal risk. There is an intensity about such situations, where we encounter the ‘bottom line’ of life and death, that cannot be matched elsewhere” (Chernus, Dr. Strangegod 29-30). By definition, we cannot desire the Real, as it is what exceeds mediation and understanding. The Real is pure contingency, and the mechanism of desire scripts regularity, but as we attempt to mediate the Real we find symbols to which desire can attach. After the period of stricken silence at Trinity ended, witnesses fit the experience into a comprehensible order—they feigned unicity after its failure. The language of religion is a natural choice as it is designed to put transcendent, superhuman power into the base words of mortals. From his interviews with Manhattan Project scientists, Robert Jungk gathered that “they all, even those—who constituted the majority—ordinarily without religious faith or even any inclination thereto, recounted their experiences in words derived from the linguistic fields of myth and theology” (201).

Even before the explosion, many Trinity witnesses acted as if they anticipated specifically divine power. At least one had a nervous breakdown hours before the test and had to be escorted away, while another—a Nobel Prize winner—muttered in his trench “I’m scared witless, absolutely witless” (Lamont 12). Farrell, writing about the
moments before the test, said that the “feeling of many could be expressed by ‘Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.’ We were reaching into the unknown and we did not know what might come of it. It can be safely said that most of those present--Christian, Jew and Athiest--were praying and praying harder than they had ever prayed before” (Farrell). These sentences describe the scientists priming themselves in the moments before the test—a test that Oppenheimer had supposedly named “Trinity” after this John Dunne poem:

BATTER my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearely'I love you,'and would be loved faine,
But am betroth'd unto your enemie:
Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe;
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthral mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

Like the child playing fort-da, witnesses prepared themselves for the coming of something both present and absent, something catastrophic, and yet were still overwhelmed after it made itself apparent. For scientist Jeremy Bernstein, who witnessed a later test, the burning Joshua trees in the desert were like “some obscene pagan rite” (Bernstein). Nineteenth-century theologian Rudolf Otto saw the unique element of religious experience in the numinous—that transcendent quality of God that cannot be rationally understood or completely communicated in language (7). God’s power exists outside and beyond us in such a way that to experience it is to be reduced to “creature feeling,” like Abraham’s claim to be “dust and ashes” before the Lord (10).
But with the *tremens* of terror before the Lord, Otto also identified *fascinans*—our capacity to be transfixed by divine power.

As the symbols of the Bomb spread in their own *jornada del muerto* beyond those who witnessed its power first hand they became objects of both fear and desire. One detects an unmistakable attraction to the idea of atomic war. The attraction to the Bomb is unlike fascination with natural destruction because it is a thing of human creation that also promises to exceed our grasp. It therefore permits an encounter with forces previously reserved for God, but also an illusion of control over those same powers. This is what Freeman Dyson called the “glitter of nuclear weapons” (Seife 57). In the words of one Los Alamos worker who regretted never witnessing an atmospheric test, “I want to feel the heat. This is the most there is; this is the closest you get to playing God” (qtd. in Rosenthal 55).

Nuclear war, however horrific, would also end the tedium and tyranny of daily life. For Bataille, the world of accumulation that fights against loss is the world of work, one dominated by rules and order. It is discontinuous, but cannot survive without taboos that prevent its subjects from following their attraction to the world of continuity, characterized by unrestricted enjoyment. The stories we choose reflect something of this desire when we seek the maximum permissible loss (Bataille, *Erotism* 86-87). As Ira Chernus writes, “having a longing for some relationship with infinitude and finding it nowhere else but in our Bomb, we are drawn to the Bomb and the power it offers us...For this infinite power is a magical one—a power that can solve all problems with one quick and sweeping stroke... what could be more appealing?” (Chernus, *Dr. Strangegod* 31). This is perhaps all that truly defines the Real. In Lacan’s terms, the
Real is “the difference between what works and what doesn’t work” (*Triumph of Religion* 61).

The Bomb evokes both horror and desire. Both of these responses ultimately have the same root in the trauma of the Real. This trauma operates in two ways. First, it causes distress by interfering with the symbolic efficacy of the social world, upsetting its order. Were this to be the end of its interference, we might expect a recommitment to the symbolic world, as indeed the effort to feign unicity suggests. The second effect, however, is to expose artifice as a more general characteristic of language. Once the world “bites back,” we can never repair the illusion entirely. Language is revealed as artifice in its failure, and we are left with a desire for the Real which can never be fulfilled. This is the fundamental process of the death drive, the ceaseless quest for discontinuous subjects, once aware of their separation from the world, to regain something lost. As a result, subjects cathect to symbols, investing their attention and care in them.

This process has been well-established by others following the work of Jacques Lacan. But this basic explanation for the drive should apply to any signifier or combination of signifiers, so why do we invest in some instead of others? What the experience of twinned horror and desire in the nuclear imagination suggests is that we attach ourselves to signifiers in which the Real “shines through,” signifiers that promise a connection to something “really real.” Which ones subjects choose should be mediated by culture, life experience, and host of other factors. I am not suggesting that there is a general theory of desire that can abolish the specificity of individual subjects. What I am suggesting is that this sense of the Real is the attribute of signifiers that creates an “attachment point” for subjects to cathect. This suggests a new way to understand the
sublime, not as a *style of grandeur* nor as an *aesthetic* of overwhelming phenomena, but as the *aspect of signifier that indicates the Real*.

**The Uncanny**

This sense of the Real is the uncanny aspect of language. In a short essay, Freud developed the uncanny as an affect of discomfort in response to repetition which suggests something which ought to have remained repressed but has come to light. The uncanny contains its own opposite when familiar things appear alien and alien things familiar. Ultimately it is about the confusion of symbol and reality. As Freud writes, “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when...a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes” (Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” 3694). This conflation of symbol and reality is an attribute of all language to some extent, as all signifiers are catachretic in that a word stands in for an absent thing. Paradoxically, for language to work it cannot function with perfect efficiency. Meaning is the result of connections between tropes, some of which proliferate meaning through reference to others, and some of which condense meaning by emphasizing one particular connection, and thus rhetoric is central to psychoanalysis (Lacan, “Function and Field” 221-222).

Rhetoric may seem an unlikely source from which to question the Real. Famously defined by Aristotle as “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion,” rhetoric seems wholly confined to the order of the Symbolic. How can an approach so focused on artifice help to understand the intrusion of something difficult to define in any terms except those opposed to artifice itself? Some of this confusion arises from the conflation of the sublime as an attribute possessed by natural objects and the sublime as a rhetorical tradition. Longinus wrote of the overpowering effects of
the sublime, likening it to the grandeur of natural phenomena, but was clear that it was an aspect of language that suddenly appears “like a thunderbolt” (Longinus 4). The sublime is still an operation of artifice rather than revelation because it relies on the author’s words to strike this effect. For Longinus, sublime language is most effectively conveyed in metaphors which serve to overwhelm the audience so thoroughly that artifice is accepted as if it were natural. If “the best use of a figure is when the very fact that it is a figure goes unnoticed,” then an orator uses sublime metaphor to conceal artifice “by its very brilliance. Just as dimmer lights are lost in the surrounding sunshine, so pervading grandeur all around obscures the presence of the rhetorical devices” (Longinus 29).

For Lacan, ostensibly following Aristotle rather than Jakobson, the two basic tropes are metonymy and metaphor. Metonymy relies on accidental connections, relating one thing to another in such a way that the trope proliferates meaning, moving from one thing to the next through a connection that does not necessarily define either. Metaphor condenses meaning. To substitute one thing for another in metaphor focuses the audience on the essential trait that links the signifier and its referent. For Lundberg, the difference between metonymy and metaphor is affective rather than formal. The connections that animate a metaphor represent some accreted affective investment that makes signifier and referent powerfully associated such that to replace one with the other elides the centrifugal work of metonymy. The elevation of one metonymic connection to the status of metaphor therefore conceals both the labor that produces it and the persistence of other metonymic connections.

These elided connections that proliferate meaning may be concealed, but they persist in the unconscious. Discussing Lacan’s take on Freudian repression, Lundberg
explains that raising one “insular metonymic connection to the status of a metaphor conceals or renders latent the other metonymic connections that also inhere in the accreted history of a sign. But the condition of this concealment is the whole field of latent connections that are both accreted and expressed in the social use of signs” (Lacan in Public 52). All symbolic connections require some degree of labor if we reject the idea of natural signifiers, but metaphor, the archetope, is particularly demanding. Denis Donoghue finds that little distinguishes metaphor and simile in a formal sense, but the former requires an audience or reader to divine the connection themselves, making it a kind of enthymematic trope (52-53). That metaphor is not thought of as a revolutionary, disruptive act of imagination is, for Donoghue, because the “understanding of metaphor has been inordinately governed by a few sentences that Aristotle jotted down,” instead of the “wilder” philosophers or “flamboyant” sublime of Longinus (59). Indeed, a rhetoric focused only on persuasion, motivation towards concrete political goals, identification, or incipient action may miss the forces of language identified in the tradition of the sublime, looking straight into the light of the sun of the figure rather than the dimmer lights it may conceal.

What makes a trope “shine” is, in Lundberg’s language, the affective labor that links signifier and signified. The Symbolic can be understood as an economy of affect where repeated investments give symbols value as the currency of meaning and exchange. This economic metaphor, used also used by Lacan, is employed with sophistication by Lundberg to argue that rhetoric could be understood as a science if more attention was given to the Symbolic context currently diminished by excessive attention to the Imaginary. To understand how some symbols become objects of cathexis, we might introduce an allied scientific discipline as a metaphorical resource:
not the *oikos* and *nomos* of economics, but the *oikos* and *logos* of ecology. While energy transfer, trophic levels, and equilibria could all be adapted to the Symbolic, nuclear weapons testing gave us a perfect metaphor for the uncanny in radioecology. Much of modern environmental science evolved from ecology with the help of radionuclides which allowed cybernetic-systems theorists to track ecological relationships (Kuletz 260-261). Radioactive contamination is now almost universal due to open-air nuclear testing, not to mention Chernobyl, Fukushima, Three Mile Island, Lake Chagan, and other disasters great and small. But it was the early detection of fallout particles and their effects on human beings that inspired fear—the downwinders movement, Civil Defense, the various test ban treaties—and fascination—Project Sunshine, a host of science fiction stories, and so forth.

Radioactive isotopes are alien particles incorporated by an organism. They are not organic, and their radiation causes bodily trauma. Often the first sign is not the particles themselves, but the cancerous growths that result as the contaminants warp surrounding cells. Quickly, the body will expend great energy trying to incorporate them into the preexisting scheme of the organism—thus strontium-90, similar to calcium, is knitted into bones, and cesium-137, similar to potassium, ends up in soft tissues. It is possible to speak of an ecology of the Real, where the grains of radioactive dust represent these unassimilable interventions that are assimilated anyway by a body determined to put them where they belong, although their assimilation comes at the cost of permanently distorting the (genetic, Symbolic) plan that orders the phenotypical body. Perhaps Thomas Sebeok saw a hint of this parallel when he suggested that human DNA might be reworked deliberately to encode the locations of nuclear waste sites (2). This information would assist an “atomic priesthood” to watch over the abject refuse of
the nuclear age for millennia to come (Sebeok 24). The presence or absence of byproducts from Trinity are now used to prove that old wine is authentic, that ivory is legitimate, and that sediments are a certain age.

This metaphor is not perfect, of course. It is only meant to highlight one process: the means by which the Symbolic attempts to incorporate the Real, and the deformations that result. What makes strontium-90 and cesium-137 so dangerous is that they provide sites for other atoms to form bonds, just like the lighter elements to which they bear an uncanny resemblance. It is this sense of authenticity that lets the new disruptive element bind with the old ones as if it belonged—all the while warping the tissue into which it is woven. It is a similar trait that makes nuclear tropes in language so powerful. The Real cannot be a site of cathexis, but a sense of it is precisely what makes these tropes attractive. The sense of the Real in a trope—in other words, the uncanny—is what creates the conditions for strong bonds to form. Strontium is not calcium, but it is assimilated as if it was, changing the body’s code to reflect its new presence.

The Bomb is not God, but its atomic structure was close enough to be incorporated in God’s place. Newly ingested, it summoned the void that is a surfeit of reality without the need for human beings; the world without us. Fit into the place of God, it could be understood and made to serve the same purposes, its otherworldly power beyond mediation now mediated, although not without its inevitable distortions. Sublime language is a kind of catachresis, an abuse of language to cover up something monstrous, but it works precisely because it never does so completely, just as the mutant cells caused by radioactive exposure do not seamlessly restore the body to its prior state. For Paul de Man, catachresis is the figure of “mixed modes,”
capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways...Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachresis: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopeia, and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters. (19)

Swords and Plowshares

As awareness of the Bomb spread, the weapon was treated ever more as a vengeful God. Theologian Wilbur Smith, one of the first to write systematically about religion and nuclear weapons, noted that “writers seemed forced” to turn to Biblical language to describe the atomic test in New Mexico and the world it gave rise to (44). Smith’s declaration that “the next D-Day will be doomsday, unless men turn to God” (307) was perhaps the first in a long line of statements tying the Bomb to Biblical prophecy, the most notable being Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth and Billy Graham’s various proclamations on the topic. There is a certain smugness in Smith’s book directed towards all of those who dismissed the literal truth of the Revelation of John: finally, they will be forced to see the light, as it were, and pay for their obstinace. Much has been written of the apocalyptic fervor for the end times and the desire to hasten their coming in the form of nuclear war (Knelman, passim). David Noble argues that this treatment of the Bomb is contiguous with a larger metaphysics of technology that sees progress on Earth as a product of divine guidance. Technology is a means of transcending this Earthly life, and thus some desire even for nuclear war fits the pattern of techno-theology (Noble 3-13). The Bomb made a world-ending Armageddon a literal possibility, and thus made possible beliefs like those of Claire Schaus, who declared the coming of a new “Atomic God” with the Bomb as its “Hand,” exceeding humankind and demanding reverence (Schaus 30-4, 123). In the last decade it has come to light that Air
Force ethics training for launch officers relied until quite recently on explicitly apocalyptic Christian themes and Biblical interpretation, including a training session called the “Jesus loves nukes speech” by its participants (Leopold).

The God-like assimilation of nuclear weapons has even given them a transcendence of time beyond what William Laurence named the “Atomic Age.” The Bomb’s reign over the future is most evident in Jonathan Schell’s *Fate of the Earth*, which argued that its threat to future generations made it of infinite importance (the implications of this argument will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2). The discourse of the Bomb also gives it dominion over the past, however. The most striking difference between God and the Bomb—that one is supposed to predate and give rise to humanity, while the other is itself a human creation—has been somewhat erased. A number of Internet prophecy and conspiracy websites have espoused the Ancient Nuclear War Theory, choosing Atlantis (sometimes A-Tlan-Tis in the Great Lakes region of modern North America), the lost continent of Mu, Sodom, Gomorrah, or the Indus Valley as past targets of nuclear warfare, sometimes citing Robert Oppenheimer as a supposed advocate. This theory has exploded on the Internet with the help of David Hatcher Childress’s 2000 book *Technology of the Gods: the Incredible Sciences of the Ancients* and the earlier work of Erich von Däniken. The History Channel, a masterwork of euphemistic naming, has given a platform to these ideas, which also appear in fiction like *Battlestar Galactica*. In *Ancient Atom Bombs: Fact, Fraud, and the Myth of Prehistoric Nuclear Warfare*, Jason Colavito argues that this theory is a response to modern anxieties about extinction from the atom bomb, providing both a morality tale and a promise that this horrific technology can be survived (23). The theory also serves to naturalize the Bomb by moving it beyond the limits of recorded history, assimilating
its disruptive appearance into a scheme reserved for God, now represented in a secularized narrative. The work of John Brandenburg, a physicist who argues that nuclear war might have eliminated past life on Mars, moves the Bomb from before recorded history to before humanity itself (Brandenburg). Here the Bomb becomes akin to Quentin Meillasoux’s *arche-fossil*, a reminder of ancient time that dislocates humanity from the center of the universe (Meillasoux, ch. 1). This trait gave the Bomb a special sense of access to the Real, just as God was once more commonly afforded.

The Bomb was also tasked with answering prayers for earthly salvation. The best-known were those for smiting the enemy. Nuclear strategy in the 1940s and early 1950s did not go far beyond what Curtis LeMay termed the “Sunday punch,” an unrestrained and potentially world-ending nuclear conflagration. A huge array of weapons was created in the first decades of the Cold War, from impractically enormous Soviet Tsar Bomba to the impractically small “nuclear bazooka” called the Davy Crockett. Even more were dreamed of. In one proposed scheme called Project A119, the United States would detonate a nuclear explosive on the moon, ostensibly for scientific purposes (Reiffel). In another scheme, reported by *Popular Science*, U.S. troops would be equipped with “Atomic Six-Shooters” to police the Cold War frontier, firearms loaded with californium bullets (“From a Shocking New Book” 180).

Fever dreams of the Bomb’s salvific power reached their peak in Project Plowshare. Plowshare was the brainchild of Edward Teller, hardline anti-Communist and inventor of the hydrogen bomb (Kirsch 3). The program was intended to prove the feasibility of nuclear earthmoving, using hydrogen bombs to “change the earth’s surface to suit us,” in Teller’s words (Kirsch 3). The possibilities of “peaceful nuclear explosions” were first discussed following the Suez Crisis in 1956, when engineers contemplated excavating a
second Suez Canal through Israeli territory. Later, schemes for another Panama Canal received Congressional funding (Kirsch 148). Serious efforts were made to study the feasibility of creating a new deepwater port in Alaska, and a few nuclear tests were done in the Southwest. Teller co-authored a textbook about the opportunities for PNEs which ranged from space exploration, reservoir construction, and highway clearing to oil and natural gas development, meteorological studies, chemical production and mining (Teller et al.).

Plowshare was justified as a project for the creation and accumulation of mineral and commercial wealth, a way to unlock the earth’s resources and facilitate global trade to overcome scarcity. The program’s name itself is presumably drawn from Isaiah 2:4, which in the King James Version reads: “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” One chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission argued that God himself willed that humanity unlock the peaceful potential of the atom, and in fact our destruction was impossible due to divine providence (Seife 60). Teller’s own promise to “change the earth’s surface to suit us” evokes a similar power which again allows the Bomb to work in geological timescales rather than human ones to change the Earth forever. Even Nobel Prize winner Willard Libby embraced this vision, hoping to “move mountains,” and guarantee prosperity for all humankind (Kirsch 38–39).

Although these promises appear to have been earnestly believed by at least some Plowshare supporters, the program was also a cover for “clean” weapons development (Seife 68–72). Plowshare was supposed to allow nuclear testing as an exception to test ban treaties, and with it the development of low-fallout bombs for use against the Soviet
Union. “Cleaner” bombs reduce the barriers to nuclear use and allow territory to be safely occupied with greater speed (Makhijani and Zerriffi 2-3). The fact that both warfighting and development goals were united in one program should not be a surprise: both atomic destruction and the remolding of the earth signal divine power, and human mastery over these forces provides some connection to that promise. Even the program’s title contains a hint, for the Bible contains another reference to plowshares besides Isaiah in Joel 3:10: “Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong.”

Although the Soviets balked at the program and fallout concerns undermined it, the idea of “civilian” nuclear explosions did not stop. The USSR itself eventually blasted out Lake Chagan with a nuclear bomb. Schemes to use the Bomb for good still occasionally surface. When the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico caught world attention in 2010, Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda suggested that a nuclear detonation could solve the problem as it apparently had several times in the Soviet Union (Weinstein). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Hurricane Research Division felt compelled to explain why nuclear detonations are not simple solutions to hurricane formation—apparently a “frequently-asked question” (Landsea). If all else fails, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is still upbeat about the Bomb as a means of saving humanity from asteroids. NASA found that it would be the “most effective alternative” to deal with a “threatening object” in the “likely range of threats over million-year timescales” (NASA 15). A messianic discourse of “infinite energy” surrounds fusion power and was sometimes used by the National Ignition Facility, even though that program too (and inertial confinement fusion more generally) is probably a cover for weapons development (Makhijani and Zerriffi).
The tie between peaceful justification for nuclear explosive research and more aggressive weapons development illustrates a larger process of desire. George Bataille argued that the discontinuity of the subject from the indistinct flow of matter and energy that composes the universe is the basis for accumulation and with it, work. Human beings are those who resist the loss and decay of nature, seeking to create a bulwark against death which is itself only meaningful when the subject is separated from continuity. In the purposeless waste and consumption of nature, accumulation is a product of the human “No” (Bataille, Erotism 61-62). This is also the basis for Bataille’s distinction between general and specific economies. The general economy, considered as “the totality of productive wealth on the surface of the globe,” has an excess of energy: there is always more than can be put to productive use. Some loss is inescapable. Human societies, however, operate in terms of a particular economy—a system carved out from the general, fighting a vicious but losing battle of accumulation against loss (Accursed Share 22-23). The drives for eroticism and death for Bataille are the same in that they are both desires for continuity. Neither is “productive,” which is the origin of taboos against them: to preserve the discontinuous, local, particular economy from the continuous, undifferentiated, general economy. Excess is regulated by a taboo, but the taboo itself is maintained by transgression. Small transgressions allow subjects to indulge their desire without bringing society down with them, and their actions are made more enjoyable precisely because they are officially forbidden.

The Plowshare dream is essentially an embrace of artifice in the grandest way—human designs would reshape nature itself to bring it into conformity with the demands of the social. The “world without us” would be transformed into a “world for us,” that even long after our extinction (made far less likely by these changes) would continue
operating according to the codes we had put in place. This is accumulation for the propagation of the social order, but it is done with a weapon that heralds death, decay, poison, even human extinction. In this light, the seeming contradictions of someone like Edward Teller dissolve: the H-Bomb and Plowshare are linked by the taboo uniting continuity and discontinuity and the transgressive Bomb that allows passage between the two. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), primary legal embodiment of the taboo against nuclear weapon use, asserted an “inalienable right” to peaceful nuclear explosives, even outlawing price gouging on future projects (International Atomic Energy Agency 3). Nuclear states could thus enjoy the numinous power of the Bomb free of guilt, justifying it as an accumulative technology rather than a disintegrating weapon.

**Contingency**

Nuclear weapons testing, including Trinity and Plowshare, calls for an expanded understanding of the sublime. The Real is the manifest failure of communication which is revealed by the eruption of unassimilable excess. Its revelation decenters the subject by revealing the artifice of our reality and the inability of its order-scripting functions to overcome completely the contingency of the world-without-us. We live day-to-day in a reality that we have constructed for ourselves in concert with others, passed between us by various forms of mediation. Most of the time, this reality “works” so efficiently that we do not have to be aware of it. We can treat artifice as nature and misrecognize the Symbolic as the Real. Events like Trinity burst the seams of this reality and force us to confront the fact that it is ultimately artificial. This can inspire a sense of vertigo, even terror, as we are suddenly confronted with the presence of a much vaster world that exceeds our ability to capture it entirely and translate it amongst ourselves in language.
Our concerns seem small indeed when compared to the unimaginable vastness and energy of the cosmos as revealed in the Bomb.

We do try to mediate our experience nonetheless. Confronting the Real certainly produces a crop of true nihilists, but for the most part, we try to stitch our fabric back together. At the same time, we value truth. Symbolic communication works because we agree that certain signifiers are linked to certain signifieds and not others, despite the network of metaphor and metonymy that keeps the whole scheme running. Some tropes serve as more powerful links in this network than others, and the sense of the Real—really, the outline of the lack—is why. This is the uncanny aspect of language that allows specific tropes to serve as sites of cathexis. The Bomb is a powerful locus for investment because it stands in for something beyond language, even beyond our ability to imagine. This sense cannot be imparted directly, because by its nature, it is in excess of our ability to mediate, but language can act as currency until it reaches that final limit where it is exposed as inadequate. The sublime character of language is its uncanny capacity to be understood as the Real even though it is the fate of discontinuous beings to cathect to the Symbolic as if it were the (unreachable) Real which remains unspoken. The Bomb occupies a metaphysical position as a force, sometimes with its own agency ascribed to it, which makes the Real palatable by implying some structure to it where none such exists.

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6 This “agreement” does not have to take the form of a formal pact. Part of desire is its mimetic quality, where we desire a certain object because others desire it—or rather, because we believe that they do. Its importance in the broader economy of the Symbolic marks it as a target for the desire of the Other. Thus something can become important despite the lack of any inherent worth simply because “desire is the desire of the Other,” as Lacan puts it (Anxiety 22). This again reflects a relationship between order and contingency—the tropes that serve as loci for investment and are therefore made durable can be the products of anarchic investments.
This implied structure is important. Psychoanalysis has been criticized by critics such as Andrew Robinson who have argued that contemporary psychoanalysis scholarship reasserts an unjustifiable division between representation and reality, ultimately “rigging the game” by positing an agential Real that guarantees the failure of mediation and authorizes claims about the subject’s “lack” which flow from the assertion of a category rather than fine-grained analysis of context. The unearned theoretical benefits of this dualism are several: having declared in advance that mediation fails, it is an easy task to make claims about the subject based on that failure. If the Real cannot be assimilated into representation, then the concept provides a convenient means to explain away discrepancies and failures of psychoanalysis itself while still providing what is ultimately a deterministic, structuralist explanation for the world—an active Real that accounts for perceived reality through a set of automatic operations that compose an invisible “deep structure.” Finally, to posit a “beyond” of mediation insulates one from criticism since the Real cannot be discussed directly, what Robinson calls (after Judith Butler) a “theological” project (Robinson).

Robinson’s argument should caution us against a reading of the Real as the “deep structure” of reality that determines it in its entirety. An understanding of the Real as the contingent eruption of non-human reality into a Symbolic order that creates the illusion of a human-centered reality avoids this critique. The Real is not deep structure with a set of laws that determine society—or, if indeed it does have a set of laws, they cannot be determined by us, because they cease to be the Real the moment this happens. The Real is what is inaccessible. It does impact our world, but it does so through distortion and disruption, not determination. The interplay of the Symbolic and the Real is essentially one of structure versus contingency. The ceaseless work of automaton
scripting order over *tuché*, mentioned in the Introduction and explained further in the next chapter, creates a set of rules that might provide predictable order, but they only appear to be inevitable and natural. Beneath them is not a deep structure, but an endless void.

It is worth noting that the Symbolic need not have a permanent structure either. Constellations of tropes are made durable, but not permanent, by what Lundberg calls “affective labor” and I have generally referred to as cathexis. That the belief in determinism persists in some quarters should not discredit the Real or the drive for unmediated experience (i.e., the death drive). Instead, it should highlight our tendency to mistake the durable but artificial structures of the Symbolic for some metaphysical truth of the Real, just as the Bomb is conflated with God. This is also why Lacanian psychoanalysis is consistent with the emerging set of ideas grouped together as speculative realism. Humanity mistakes its reality for the Real, and is only shocked into perspective when the latter is revealed by the inadequacy of the former. As Lacan wrote,

> To be a psychoanalyst is simply to open your eyes to the evident fact that nothing malfunctions more than human reality...nothing is more stupid than human destiny, that is, that one is always being fooled. Even when one does do something successfully, it is precisely not what one wanted to do. (*Psychoses* 82)

The conflation of Symbolic and Real is at the heart of the Bomb. Jacques Derrida famously wrote that nuclear war is “fabulously textual,” having no existence outside of the system of language, which we might broaden to representation, or better yet, mediation. Derrida argued that because a total nuclear war has not taken place and its coming would obliterate the archive, it can exist only in its “essential rhetoricity” as a “fantasy” or “fable” that has no referent in reality (Derrida 24-27). Some, like Masahide Kato, have criticized Derrida on the grounds that nuclear war has taken place in the
form of nuclear testing, part of a larger project of radioactive colonialism and destruction of indigenous peoples (Kato). I read this argument a different way. We do not have to deny that a nuclear war is in some sense ongoing in order to claim that it has never happened. The kind of nuclear war imagined by Kistiakowsky at Trinity can never come to pass because it means the end of everything on Earth. The radioactive destruction of native nations does not qualify as a “total” nuclear war in the minds of strategists and their peace activist Doppelgängers because the war they imagine is beyond any material referent, only hinted at by the presence of the Bomb on Earth. It represents both the Real in its punishing materiality and a speculation that could not exist anywhere but the human imagination.

The desire to experience the Real is therefore bound to be frustrated. The final advent of the Bomb always seems imminent but is never realized, so obliteration is endlessly deferred. The desire for the Real described in this chapter is thus a source of inevitable failure and frustration. But it is only on part of the death drive. Unable to meet the Real and still remain extant as discrete subjects, taunted by the continuity that lies over the line of taboo, our desires remain. We are dislocated and decentered by the Bomb, but we do not accept our being as dust and ashes. Instead, the subject desirous of the nuclear Real finds its enjoyment in the opposite fantasy: one of power over the conditions of presence and absence, mastery of contingency and the Real itself. This is the dynamic of Freud’s fort-da game, and in context of nuclear war, it manifests itself in

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7 The frequent use of “obliteration” in nuclear texts is interesting from an etymological perspective. The word derives from the Latin *literra*, “letter,” and prefix “ob-,” meaning “against.” To *obliterate* then is to destroy the letter. The prefix ob-, however, has another meaning, much rarer, of “to go towards,” as in “obdulcorate” (to make sweeter). *Obliterate* could therefore mean to rush towards the letter, rather than to be against it. The word appears to be its own antonym, but the context of mixed desire and terror of nuclear destruction makes it a perfect choice. A similar observation can be made about “desolation” and “destruction.” The prefix de- has opposite meanings in the two words (desolation: towards solitude; destruction: away from structure) so that “desolation” and “destruction” might mean “away from/towards solitude” and “elimination of/rush to structure.”
the compulsion to repetitively simulate nuclear destruction. Atmospheric nuclear testing ended for the USA in 1963. Ultimately only a relatively small number of people witnessed nuclear explosions anywhere in the world, so inevitably awareness and imagination of the Bomb’s overwhelming presence would spread in an increasingly mediated form. War games as rituals helped to sustain a nuclear priesthood in its (necessarily incomplete) access to the revealed truth of the Bomb after the end of atmospheric nuclear testing left its followers merely longing to “feel the heat.” As these technologies gave form to videogames and ostensibly anti-war simulations, they would democratize access to the Bomb and cement its force as an organizing metaphor for the Real.
CHAPTER 2: PLAYING WARGAMES

[W]ar and business are conflicts resembling games, and as such, they may be formalized as to constitute games with definite rules. Indeed, I have no reason to suppose that such formalized versions of them are not already being established as models to determine the policies for pressing the Great Push Button and burning the earth clean for a new and less humanly undependable order of things.
--Norbert Weiner, God & Golem, Inc.

**Ipsos Custodes**

In his “Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter,’” Jacques Lacan wrote that “it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject,” and that the subject receives “major determination” from “the itinerary of a signifier” (7). One is “possessed” by the signifier, a thrall to its agency: “the signifier’s displacement determines subjects’ acts, destiny, refusals, blindesses, success, and fate...everything pertaining to the psychological pregiven follows willy-nilly the signifier’s train, like weapons and baggage” (21). One doesn’t have to adopt a fully deterministic attitude towards structure to accept that it is the sign that speaks through us, not vice versa. Human agency does not operate without restriction, but constitutes a negotiation of rules that largely prescribe our behaviors. In the itinerary of an individual life, one can see the influence of accreted structures that give it form.

There is perhaps no better example than that of Vice Admiral Tim Giardina. Giardina is the former deputy head of the United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM) at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, the successor to the Strategic Air Command parodied in Dr. Strangelove. In June 2013, Giardina was caught using
counterfeit poker chips at a local casino. It was revealed in the ensuing investigation that Giardina had spent almost 1,100 hours gambling in an eighteen-month period. He was such a common sight that other casino regulars remembered him as “Navy Tim,” and recalled comments he had made about the polygraph requirements for U.S. nuclear forces (he was quoted as saying that the purpose is really to find out if one is “having sex with animals or something really crazy”). Giardina was banned from several casinos but continued to play even after being caught with counterfeit chips. Following an investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, he was removed from his post, demoted to Rear Admiral, and reassigned to Washington (Burns).

It is not illegal for Navy officers to gamble. Vice Admiral Giardina’s habitual compulsion to play poker did not seem to have any effect on his official duties. Giardina had to be punished not because his actions are out of line with the ethos of the Strategic Command, but precisely because they are not. Giardina enjoyed gambling in poker, but in forging fake chips, he seemed to enjoy gambling on gambling: his was a kind of “meta-gambling,” taking risks on the rules that regulate risks. In doing so, Giardina exposed what Slavoj Žižek calls the “obscene supplement” of his system. Ideological fantasies are maintained by disavowing their central, obscene foundation, a gesture necessary to the function of the fantasy but impossible to acknowledge, for the lack of distance would collapse the whole edifice (Žižek 35-36). Admiral Cecil Haney, commander of STRATCOM, said in recent Congressional testimony that the core mission of the organization remains to deter attack on the United States. This means

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8 Giardina was also reported smoking cigarette butts scavenged from ashtrays—literally “sifting through the ashes.”

9 The admiral does not appear to have simply needed more money. He was accused of forging $2,000 in poker chips, a relatively small amount, and were he to fail to report excessive debt, he would have violated policy and the NCIS investigation would have had clearer grounds to discipline him, which does not appear to have been the case.
minimizing pervasive uncertainty and risk. In Admiral Haney’s words, “America’s nuclear deterrent force provides enduring value to the nation. It has been a constant thread in the geopolitical fabric of an uncertain world, providing a moderating influence on generations of world leaders” (U.S. Senate Comm. on Armed Services, Statement 7). More directly, it is necessary to identify “where we are taking risk and where we cannot accept further risk” (U.S. Senate Comm. on Armed Services, Statement 6). “Risk” and “uncertainty” appear constantly in Haney’s statement, which is a statement for minimizing chance and developing “contingency plans” to control the consequences of unforeseen events.

The disturbance of Symbolic order by the contingency of the Real is met with an attempt to restore order, to respond to chance with law. Lacan describes this dynamic as the interplay of *tuché* and *automaton*:

Where do we meet this real? For what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—and appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us... First, the *tuché*, which we have borrowed...from Aristotle, who uses it in his search for cause. We have translated it as *the encounter with the real*. The real is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automaton...it is this that is the object of [Freud’s] concern. (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 53-54, italics in original)

This is the central element of the repetition compulsion. Driven to make our encounter with the Real, we are perpetually disappointed, but the Symbolic world of reality abhors a vacuum. *Automaton* describes the endless attempts to reach the Real which are doomed to failure but cannot be surrendered, so are repeated again and again. These repetitive behaviors thus develop an aspect of order, and are, paradoxically, orderly
attempts to reach the chaos of contingency. They are also linked by Lacan gambling, death, and signification (“Purloined Letter” 28-29).

Nuclear deterrence can be read in this frame as an attempt to secure the world against the contingency of the Real, the uncertainty of nuclear war. It is the STRATCOM automaton’s answer to the chaos of the Bomb’s tuché. But the attempt to restore order has at its heart a desire to encounter the Real. In a history of nuclear defense intellectuals, Fred Kaplan described them in the 1980s at the height of their power having come with the mission “to impose order,” but lacking any means to control the wild abandon of the Bomb in a hypothetical war for which there was no precedent, “in the end, chaos still prevailed” (Kaplan 391).

Desire is the motive force, and that what we desire cannot be attained is what requires repetition. When the chaos of tuché reigns, automaton does not surrender, but comes to be an end in itself, a site of investment. Repetition itself becomes enjoyable. In repeatedly simulating nuclear war, defense intellectuals who could not experience the Real of nuclear violence could enjoy the illusion of mastery over the terror and fascination inspired by the Real by appearing to simulate the conditions of presence and absence—in this case, the presence of the world-for-us and its absence in the Bomb’s inferno. Langdon Winner distinguishes between risk (a term prevalent in both nuclear war and poker) and threat or hazard on these grounds: risk always has an implied benefit to it, an element of desire and an opportunity for control (145). There is little empirical basis for nuclear war simulations and the calculations of probability they rely on, so nuclear war plans always require a good deal of faith, and thus to adopt them is a risk—a calculation of both hazard and reward (Ghamari-Tabrizi 8). Their parameters are set arbitrarily by the personnel who design them. In other words, they are games of
chance in which we also manipulate the rules. This is the obscene supplement of nuclear deterrence that Vice Admiral Giardina could not be allowed to reveal: we don’t just repeat nuclear simulations again and again because we think that they will someday be perfect. War games are fun, and we don’t always care about the rules. Poker, after all, was rumored to be the genesis of game theory at the RAND Corporation, prominent modelers of nuclear war, and was a favorite pastime of the defense intellectuals who sought to tame the world with human reason (Arbella 51-53).

This chapter will begin with an exploration of war games as media for access to the Real of nuclear war and sites of cathexis that permit the subject to enjoy its discontinuity, using the videogame First Strike as an example of enjoyment even amongst those who claim to resist the nuclear status quo. War games were supposed to model the conduct of war, but they were also supposed to predict when and how it might occur. John von Neumann’s game theory and Kenneth Arrow’s resulting rational choice theory, both elaborated at the RAND Corporation, attempted to quantify human conduct to explain the world. The second part of this chapter will deal with a problem that arises from attempts to make decisions based on nuclear war predictions. Because the Bomb as a herald of the Real occupies a place beyond rational calculation, the mathematical language of nuclear war attempts to calculate the incalculable. The result is a theological impasse which provides argumentative resources equally to activists and their enemies, illustrating the unassimilable distortions worked by the contingency of the Real in the Symbolic attempts to contain it.

**War Games**

Herman Kahn and Bernard Brodie, perhaps the most prominent American strategists of the early Cold War, tried to make nuclear war “thinkable” in the sense that
they tried to explain how such a war might start and what options would exist for national leaders. At the same time, both acknowledged that the outcome of a full-scale nuclear war was indescribable. In Brodie’s words, to “make an intellectual prediction of the likelihood of war is one thing, to project oneself imaginatively and seriously into an expected war situation is quite another” (Ghamari-Tabrizi 149). The unwillingness or inability to think “seriously” about a nuclear war—in other words, to understand it instrumentally rather than through dislocating language of the sublime—was met by organizations like the RAND Corporation with an attempt to systematize nuclear strategy and develop the intellectual and technical means to actually fight and control a nuclear war. Before RAND exercised its power through the “Whiz Kids” of the Kennedy Administration, the Strategic Air Command’s “Sunday punch” nuclear plan, enshrined in SIOP-62, was an all-out nuclear attack on the USSR, Eastern Europe, and the People’s Republic of China. It might have killed 285 million people in the initial attack (Kaplan 269). Despite its intricate planning and detailed execution strategies, SIOP was immensely inflexible. Asked whether the U.S. had any options to attack without striking China, which might not even be a combatant in the war, General Thomas Power replied “Well yeh [sic], we could do that, but I hope nobody thinks of it because it would really screw up the plan” (Kaplan 270, emphasis in original). Starting in the 1960s, a set of war games of various complexity was developed to test a broader range of nuclear theories and attack options at RAND and elsewhere (Arbella 35). Games like them continue to be used for strategic military planning today (Raatz). Most of these games—or at least their results—are classified, as they became the basis for US nuclear plans. In politico-military games, a number of military officers, civilians, and generally mid- to low-ranking government officials would play various roles as US and/or foreign
decisionmakers. Another group, “control,” would feed them information about the
actions of countries or groups not played by the participants or about world events that
might influence the context of their actions. In more limited military simulations, extant
or proposed war plans would be evaluated by computer or human players to identify
possible flaws and improvements.

The games themselves never had a guarantee of accuracy and were often quite
obviously flawed. In one Navy game, American aircraft carriers were declared to be
unsinkable. In others, the Soviet Union was assumed to have no effective airpower.
Because factors like air pressure, prevailing winds, defense effectiveness, early warning,
and missile failure rate were largely random or incalculable, a “fudge factor” simply
declared estimated success. Even their designers sometimes admitted that the games
were inaccurate, unprovable, or simply wishful thinking (Ghamari-Tabrizi 8; Allen 78).
Especially in the case of nuclear war, these games cannot possibly be understood as
accurate simulations of a real-world system, because there is no empirical data on the
compound effects of many near-simultaneous nuclear explosions and no data on what
factors cause states to cross the nuclear threshold against other similarly-armed states, a
fact that bedevils nuclear planning in general and always has (Kaplan 87). By the
admission of many of those who create and play them, they are “social science fiction”
with no tangible effect other than that they are entertaining (Ghamari-Tabrizi 160-1).
Some contemporary social science work supports this claim especially in the context of
extinction-level events. Human beings simply aren’t wired to think at such a scale, and
they perform very poorly assessing probability and calculating magnitude (Yudkowsky).

Others have suggested that warfare is a stochastic system that we could never
identify laws for, no matter how diligent we might be, because its initial conditions are
simply too complex to model and they do not conform to linear causality (Beyerchen; Buchanan 62). Indeed, military planners tended to be far less willing to predict the conduct and outcome of a conventional war—despite an enormous data set spanning thousands of years—than a nuclear war fought between two superpowers, an event that has never occurred in recorded history. Fred Iklé, former RAND strategists who was at times head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, criticized these semi-mathematical abstractions in harsh terms that deserve to be quoted at length:

The prominence of the calculations continues because we know how to make them...we have tailored the problem to our capability to calculate. The seemingly rigorous models of nuclear deterrence are built on the rule: "What cannot be calculated, leave out"...Such thoughts, especially those focusing on deterrence, lack real empirical referents or bases. No other field of human endeavor demands—absolutely compels—one to work out successful solutions without obtaining directly relevant experience, without experimenting. There can be no trial and error here, no real learning. Curiously, we are far more skeptical in accepting the calculations of traditional conventional military campaigns than the calculations of nuclear warfare. In fact, the more battle experience and information military analysts have, the more modest they become in predicting the course of conventional war. Such modesty is missing for nuclear war, where pretentious analyses and simplistic abstractions dominate and blot out the discrepancies existing between abstractions and possible reality—a reality that for so many reasons is hard even to imagine. (Iklé 246)

Iklé is drawing attention to two unique aspects of nuclear war planning: first, that no empirical date (or at least very little) can be gathered for the species of war that planners concerned themselves with, and second, that unlike other military problems where little data exists, defense intellectuals were willing to display great confidence in untested (and untestable) theories. Despite this lack of empirical grounding, nuclear war simulations have been repeated again and again over the decades while nuclear doctrine has remained fundamentally the same (McKinzie et al. ix-xi).
There has been some dispute in military circles about whether these exercises should be called simulations or games, with “simulations” becoming more popular by the 1980s (Allen 7). To call politico-military exercises “roleplaying games” conjures images of adolescent boys rolling dice and weaving fantasies about orcs and dragons. To call battle simulations “war games” might associate them with videogames produced for entertainment. Still, even military officers responsible for the creation of these artifacts had trouble distinguishing between game, model, and simulation and used them interchangeably. In his comprehensive history of U.S. wargaming, Thomas Allen writes that the three words “hover over imaginary battlefields like a mysterious, ever-shifting concept of the Trinity” (64, emphasis added). Berger, Boulay and Zisk, writing in the journal Simulation & Gaming acknowledge that “[d]efinitions of simulation are legion,” but center on representations of a system that allow users to model behavior (Berger et al. 416). Brewer and Shubik define games as a subset of simulation and simulation as a subset of modelling, the key defining feature of a game being the inclusion of human beings playing roles. Still, their extended attempt to define these terms results in the acronym MSG, grouping them all together (3-8).

The difficulty in Brewer and Shubik’s definition is that all models and simulations require that human beings make decisions at least indirectly, at a minimum defining the independent variables and the parameters of the exercise. As a result, they all create some possibility for investment in the outcome. In common usage, the difference between simulations and models, on the one hand, and games, on the other appears to be a ludic dimension. Games are for play, with an agent making decisions within a set of prescribed rules to change the outcome, while simulations and models may simply represent the rules of a system.
The least common denominator is that one rules-bound system—the game—stands in for another. Games, simulations, and models therefore have a metaphorical quality to them. In his work on videogames, Ian Bogost has identifies what he calls procedural rhetoric as “the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular...a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created” (3). Whereas oral rhetoric attempts to persuade an audience to adopt a particular viewpoint through speech and written rhetoric does the same through writing, procedural rhetoric has its own unique goals and characteristics suited to the medium of games. Videogames create a digital process that simulates a real-world process, allowing the player to model something extant in the world of flesh, blood, steel and glass that exists outside of the game. Procedural rhetoric is the persuasive aspect of simulation. Bogost’s argument might be adapted to this understanding of metaphor. The replacement of the tenor (the thing represented) with the vehicle (the signifier standing in for it) makes an enthymemetic argument that draws the audience to do the work of cathexis in connecting the two based on the shared principle that allows the substitution.

This does not suggest that we read games as texts. Games require their players to invest in a specific way because they are called on to make choices that alter the outcome. Players identify with their characters in a powerful way: what is shared is not

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10 It could still be objected that games often model systems that aren’t real, like magic or nonexistent sci-fi weapons. It could be argued that these imaginary systems are metaphorical representations of something else, making the game an example of metalepsis, or that apparently non-referential games like Tetris are simply vague metaphors, but in the context of nuclear war games, no such gymnastics are necessary. The kind of nuclear war that we usually model does not itself exist as lived empirical reality. As one civilian shouted at an Air Force officer during a heated debate on nuclear strategy, “General, I have fought as many nuclear wars as you have” (Arbella 138).
just a set of traits, but decisions over time that, to maintain the interest that keeps players playing, require at least some minimal attachment. One can identify deeply with Sauron, but no reading of *Lord of the Rings* can make him finally subjugate his haughty human and elven foes, let alone order the Scourging of the Shire and its disgustingly bourgeois hobbits when he still has a chance to succeed. This is the procedural element of Bogost’s theory: it is the procedure that links the system with its representation in the game, and the sense of control that binds us, something that differentiates this medium from others. One doesn’t have to decide that play matters and narrative doesn’t—it is the interaction between the two that channels the player’s investment in a game.

In war games, attachments are formed even when a computerized Sam fights a computerized Ivan to test the SIOP and RSIOP. Allen’s book is full of examples of war game players becoming emotionally tied to their games, sometimes in perverse ways. Failing in a game that he was allowed to play, Allen himself described his team reacting with

shock, *real* shock, not just a reaction to a bad break in a game. We were really feeling upset about what was happening in our imaginary world. ‘What is happening to our institutions?’ someone indignantly asked, as if real institutions were really going through what the situation paper had described. I had an unreasonable feeling of helplessness and failure. Some of us spoke softly to each other about having failed. (18)

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11 Although one *can* read the story as a tragedy, perhaps centered on Gollum’s epic journey to reclaim his stolen ring, which ends with his death at the hands of the thief’s nephew and the defeat of Sauron, whose tireless work to bring order to Middle Earth was doomed from the start. There is also Kirill Yeskov’s sequel from the Orc perspective focused on the tyranny of the Fellowship and their inheritors.

12 “SIOP” is the American Single Integrated Operations Plan, now outdated. “RSIOP” is the “Red Strategic Offensive Plan,” the hypothetical enemy plan against which SIOP was tested in games. The “Red” in this title is a reference to the “Red Team” that simulates an enemy in Pentagon war games, not (directly) the Communist ideology of the Warsaw Pact. It is worth noting the fact, however, that the “O” in the American SIOP stands for “Operational,” while the “O” in the simulated Soviet plan stands for “Offensive” (Allen 25).
The prevalence of this reaction is confirmed in more recent scholarship by Paul Bracken, himself a war game participant. Bracken puts the case simply: “People get emotionally involved in games” (20).

This identification with the social image describes a process in Lacan’s Imaginary register. Recall that in his famous essay on the “mirror stage,” Lacan argued that one comes to identify with an image and adopt it as the self so that the subject is not a product of discovering the “real you” but identifying with a signifier capable of commerce in the economy of the Symbolic. Lacan writes that the “core principle” of the “general theory of the symbol” is a twofold movement in the subject. One makes one’s action into an object, but only to return it to its foundational place. More simply, one acts as an identity, then associates other elements of that identity with the self. He gives the example of a worker forming his identity: “in phase one, a man who works at the level of production in our society considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat; in phase two, in the name of belonging to it, he joins in a general strike” (“Function and Field” 236). This same dynamic is evident in war games. One player, made to represent the Soviet Union, did more than just adopt its strategy. He found himself wanting to punish his subordinates, to treat them cruelly as he imagined the Soviets would. Another player adopted the Red perspective so thoroughly that an Army general demanded to have his security clearances checked (Allen 40). A terrorism expert played a game as the terrorists he studied and decided at one point to kill hostages. “I thought I wouldn’t be able to identify with terrorists. But after two hours I think that I was one of the hard-liners on our team, and I must confess that I really enjoyed killing those two people” (Allen 267).
War game players often enjoyed their roles in starting nuclear war. While military players were famously reticent about escalating to the nuclear level, civilian weapons scientists were notoriously bloodthirsty. Steve Pieczenik, a crisis management specialist in the State Department, said that in Pentagon games it is “usually the wishy-washy liberal or the political appointee who comes in and feels very desperate and resorts to force. The ones who do frighten me are the scientists. God almighty! Those nuclear boys, you know, the ones from the labs. They’re deadly. They love to think in megatons” (qtd. in Allen 250; italics in original). The so-called “nuclear boys” would be the generation after Trinity, the one which still wanted to “feel the heat.” The perverse enjoyment of destruction was no secret, although Paul Bracken claimed that a game called Proud Prophet (!) so frightened President Reagan that he no longer contemplated war with the Soviet Union (Bracken 82-88).

Just as metaphors are made meaningful by the repeated investments that tie signifier to signified, war games are made meaningful by the investments that tie them to nuclear war. The simulations are enjoyable because of their link to the power of the Bomb. Lacan explains the enjoyment of subjectivity in the Symbolic by analogizing it to a game. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud recounts a game played by a young boy of his acquaintance (13-17). The boy had a wooden reel attached to a string which he would throw over his curtained cot, making it “gone” (fort). Then he would pull the spool back into view, rejoicing that it was “there” (da). He would repeat these actions again and again. The game can be read as the child inuring himself against the potential absence of his mother, but a more productive reading would locate enjoyment not in the conditions of “gone” or “here” but in the exercise of control over the conditions of presence and absence, essentially a simulation that permits agency over a situation in
which the child must be passive (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 16-17). Games are particularly powerful media for this control if they differ from representation based on the player’s ability to affect the outcome of each repetition within the procedures created by the game. This sense of control, that the outcome is dependent on the player’s actions, is a key feature that distinguishes games (and, in principle, other simulations) from traditional linear texts in which the reader’s choice is more limited, as is exposure to “risk” (Aarseth 4). This is a challenge for work that understands gaming simply as a metaphor where one term replaces and conceals another, as Barry Brummett argues, without acknowledging that gaming is both a linguistic choice and a material *practice* of substitution and connection (Brummett 91-92).

Norbert Weiner speculated that games would be used to “determine the policies for pressing the Great Push Button and burning the earth clean for a new and less humanly undependable order of things” (24-25). Noting that there is not enough experience to establish criteria for nuclear war games, Weiner emphasized the importance of accuracy:

The chief criterion as to whether a line of human effort can be embodied in a game is whether there is some objectively recognizable criterion of the merit of the performance of this effort. Otherwise the game assumes the formlessness of the croquet game in *Alice in Wonderland*, where...the Queen of Hearts, who kept changing the rules and sending the players to the Headsman to be beheaded. Under these circumstances, to win has no meaning, and a successful policy cannot be learned, because there is no criterion of success.”  (26-27

This argument may well be correct, but it misses the most important trait that sustains nuclear war games: they are enjoyable even when they aren’t accurate, hence people ponder the nuclear war even though its consequences are imponderable (Rose, ch. 5). They serve as a site for cathetic attachment and solidify the subject’s sense of itself. Nuclear deterrence resembles gambling, just like the poker games favored by Vice
Admiral Giardina. In the exchange for one set of risks for another, nothing is produced—
counters are merely moved around, made meaningful by their assigned values, but
ultimately traded and expended by the players with no real increase in value during the
process, a useless exchange that serves the subject’s enjoyment by creating a space for
play separate from work and art (Caillois 5). Fudging the numbers in a nuclear
simulation, just like forging fake chips in a casino, is a kind of cheating, but not a threat
to the game itself—breaking the rules maintains a certain fidelity to them, recognizing
them as existing constraints to be manipulated, and reinforcing the logic of the game
even if the cheater is dishonorable. The cheat only sustains the game. The only threat
comes from one willing to say that the game is arbitrary and therefore completely
worthless, to “break the spell” (Caillois 8-9). It is significant, therefore, that critics of
wargames largely continued to play them.

More important than the games themselves therefore is their role in organizing
the subject vis-à-vis the Symbolic, understood as reality for the subject. Lundberg
describes this relationship as one of “useless subjectivity:”

Enjoyment is useless in a very specific sense: although the effect of the habitual
capture of affect in the form of enjoyment purchases a sense of unity for the
subject, enjoyment is useless in regard to the specific site of its exercise. When a
subject enjoys a relationship to an object, or a specific habituated practice, it is
tempting to read the subject’s investment in the object or practice as a validation
of the fact that the subject values the thing in and of itself. But, if Lacan’s account
of enjoyment is correct, enjoyment in an object or practice is less about the
dignity of the thing invested in than the ways that the object or practice serves the
subject in negotiating a relationship to the general economy of exchange. Thus,
the exercise of enjoyment is often somewhat counterfactual: the subject invests in
objects or practices for the sake of something that is beyond the object or practice
and for the sake of accommodating to failed unicity. (Lacan in Public 114)

The subject, permanently frustrated in the desire for continuity by the state of
discontinuity that is the condition for its own existence, enjoys instead its capacity to
enjoy because there is nothing else that it can do. Thus the death drive works in two stages in response to the eruption of the Real: first, the desire to touch the Real, mistakenly manifested as the desire for a mediated sense of the Real as it inheres in some symbols, and second, the enjoyment of the very conditions of the subject’s alienation from the Real: its subjectivity and attendant capacity to enjoy.

In the context of nuclear war games, players could enjoy not just the sense of control, but also what Lundberg calls “habituated practices” and we might just as easily name rituals. Thus computerized nuclear models “take on quasi-religious overtones. Offerings are put into the black box by acolytes who are never sure what is going to come out; those who come to worship are often not sure what has happened either...With large simulations, unfortunately, unlike large cathedrals...the whole structure may collapse or become meaningless without anyone’s realizing it” (Brewer and Shubik 25). In some sense, the outcome hardly matters. Only the game does. Excitement is also generated by risk. There is always some uncertainty in how the story will end, what results the player’s actions might have. Nuclear war simulations create a hypertrophied sense of control over presence and absence: the simulated stakes are usually the presence and absence of human civilization and perhaps all life on Earth. Lacan wrote about the significance of our ability to be the agents of our own downfall and the contradiction between agency and responsibility:

[Scientists] have begun to get the idea that they could create bacteria that would be resistant to everything, that would be unstoppable. That would clear the surface of the globe of all the shitty things, human in particular, that inhabit it. And then they suddenly felt overcome with pangs of responsibility...What a sublime relief it would be nonetheless if we suddenly had to deal with a true blight...That would be a true triumph. It would mean that humanity would truly have achieved something—its own destruction. It would be a true sign of the superiority of one being over all the others. Not only its own destruction, but the
destruction of the entire living world. That would truly be the sign that man is capable of something. (Triumph of Religion 60)

For these reasons, the use of nuclear war games as anti-nuclear tools presents a paradox. Anti-nuclear games do not reveal the horrors of nuclear war any more than Pentagon simulations provide scientifically accurate strategic plans. A number of ostensibly anti-war games have been developed to expose nuclear strategy. Balance of Power was described by its creator Chris Crawford in the early 1980s as “a grand, idealistic, make-my-contribution-for-peace crusade,” intended to show the irrationality and danger of nuclear war (Aaron 2). Players who started a nuclear war were shown only a black screen admonishing them, refusing to display images of nuclear war, and stating “we don’t reward failure.” After the Cold War ended, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) created its own simulation of nuclear targeting. Despite the demise of the Soviet Union, SIOP remains a closely-guarded secret. NRDC hoped to create a rough picture of current US nuclear war plans based on the theory that exposing the “grotesque results” of nuclear war would turn the public against it (McKinzie et al. xi). Lack of access to the tools of simulation undermines democratic debate, which the NRDC simulation set out to change (McKinzie et al. 1). The assumption shared by both Crawford and the NRDC is that nuclear war plans survive only due to secrecy and therefore that exposing the way things “really are” is an effective project for anti-nuclear politics. To examine this argument and further illustrate the common processes of enjoyment these games share with official war planning, the next section will analyze the popular 2014 nuclear war simulator First Strike, an ostensibly anti-nuclear videogame developed by the Swiss Blindflug studios.
First Strike

First Strike is deceptively simple. Players are given control over one or several territories on a pristine globe where they can research, build weapons, defend, or attack, but may only take one action at a time. There are no limitations on the player’s choices regarding money, personnel, or raw materials—only time. Gameplay involves research, defense, and offensive nuclear attacks. There is no peaceful resolution or element of diplomacy, despite some early misleading third-party statements (Lund). Victory occurs when one has entirely destroyed all enemies. Along the way, millions of people will die.

Prior to its release, developers argued in a number of fora that First Strike was intended to have a political message. In an interview with Harry Slater, game designer Moritz Gerber claimed that this anti-nuclear sentiment was present “[f]rom the beginning.” His argument for the videogame medium is essentially in line with previous activist nuclear simulations:

We’re definitely of the opinion that the video game is a very strong medium for [anti-nuclear politics]. Blindflug wants to combine the big issues of the world with gaming, so people can participate in, and not just talk about, nuclear war. Games let you see what happens if you launch a nuclear missile, or what happens when you hit London, for example. And that should bring people closer to these issues. (H. Slater, “Firing Line”)

Executive producer Moritz Zumbühl argues that Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin “should play more games [like] First Strike,” repeating his belief that games are “powerful tools” to oppose nuclear proliferation (First Strike, “Mr. Obama”). The game’s release in March 2014 coincided with escalating tensions between the United States and Russia over Ukraine, an important part of the game’s context. First Strike’s official blog intersperses advertising materials, some of which mentioned the conflict in Ukraine, as well as informative clips on various real Cold War nuclear incidents, media treatments
of nuclear war, information about disarmament advocacy, and nuclear tests beginning with Trinity in 1945 (First Strike, “// B%-L#OG»....”). Advertising materials, reviews, and interviews all compose a “paratextual vanguard” for the game, priming players to interpret the diegetic elements of First Strike in a particular way, as does the political situation in which the game is released (Payne 305-11). In-game text reinforces this message. Successful players are rewarded with “You Win?” and a stark estimate of casualties, often in the billions. Repeated play unlocks a message from the NORAD supercomputer Joshua in the 1983 movie War Games: “A strange game. The only winning move is not to play” (Blindflug). Game site IGN notes that a portion of the game’s profits go to nonproliferation efforts and claims that First Strike “just may save the world” (“App Store Update”).

The narrative elements of First Strike and its political paratext thus contain a consistently anti-nuclear message. The procedural elements of the game could support the idea that nuclear war plans, if implemented, would result in unmitigated suffering. The message of First Strike’s procedures, however, could also be read as the exact opposite. Nuclear powers are the only ones with agency in the game. Non-nuclear territories are simply empty space for the player or nuclear enemies to capture and control. Imperialism pays: not only are more territories available for the game’s core actions, but conquests of some places by some countries (e.g., annexation of Africa by the European Union) yield special rewards. Although the victory screen contains a question mark (“You win?”), success and failure are clearly different states and winning is rewarded. The procedural message of this supposedly anti-nuclear game can therefore be read as an argument for speed, resourcefulness, aggression, and amoral planning as keys for success in a nuclear war. There is no human extinction in First Strike. No war of
any scale can produce a nuclear winter. Victory and survival are both possible. This ambiguity has been noted by reviewer Carter Dotson, who wrote that “most of the social commentary [in First Strike] seems to come from the way that players interpret the situation, rather than any conscious message that the game gives. There’s no reward for not striking first, or any punishment for being the aggressor” (Dotson).

Developers frequently said that this game about nuclear war had to be “fun,” and this is reflected in its gameplay and aesthetics (First Strike, “Mr. Obama”). The game’s crisp graphical model of the Earth is reminiscent but richer than the similar Introversion game DEFCON, and it is accompanied by ethereal, cerebral music. The aesthetic of the game is almost clinical. Although casualty numbers are sometimes displayed, these transmissions are matter-of-fact, even soothing when they reflect a successful attack by the player. It is possible to argue that this sanitization is intended to produce an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance, akin to what Bogost calls “simulation fever,” the “the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game’s unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player’s subjective understanding of that representation” (Unit Operations 136). Some of this discomfort is apparent in player reviews, but it seems subdued, the minor embarrassment of a guilty pleasure. One reviewer called it “worryingly fun” (Priestman). Another reviewer acknowledged the game’s stated message while recognizing the thrill of simulating destruction:

There's a maudlin, desperate undercurrent to First Strike. It tells a tale of the inevitability of destruction. Rockets miss their targets, cities are laid waste, and millions fall under the push of a finger on the screen. A percentage of each sale goes to anti-nuclear proliferation charities, and while you’re always disconnected from the barbarity of your actions, by ticking numbers and less-than-real graphics, there's a constant reminder that you're doing something wrong, and a bit silly.
The fact that that message is wrapped around a fantastic strategy game makes it even stronger. First Strike has worthy and important things to say, but while it's saying them, you get to blow up Greenland. (H. Slater, “First Strike”)

The accompanying photo caption (“Suck it, Greenland,” with echoes of Cohn’s critique of the hypermasculinity of nuclear discourse) is reminiscent of a meeting between General Thomas White and Robert McNamara where White described the likelihood that noncombatant nations would be destroyed by the United States in a nuclear war as an unintended consequence. “Well, Mr. Secretary,” he said, “I hope you don’t have any friends or relations in Albania, because we're just going to have to wipe it out” (Arbella 159).

One can therefore identify discontinuity between the game’s purported anti-nuclear justification and the enjoyment that comes from simulating nuclear war. In Owen Faraday’s comparison of the game to Call of Duty, which also combines the horrors of war with the fun of simulation, he wrote that:

First Strike is doing its utmost to both eat and have that particular cake. The game aspires to be a stern lecturer, opening and closing with dark admonitions about mankind’s suicidally large stockpiles of horrific nuclear weapons. And we need to be reminded, especially now that the Cold War is remote, unlived history to an entire generation of adults. But First Strike the game—the thing you’re actually playing in-between those dire bookended warnings—loves nuclear war. It makes the prospect of ICBMs hurtling through space to targets on the far side of the globe look downright lovely. First Strike is a reasonably clever (though flawed) game — but as pure spectacle it’s second to nothing on mobile. (“Review”)

Players enjoy the game in the simple sense that it can be fun to play, but they enjoy it in the Lacanian sense of jouissance, as well, the affective investment in or cathexis to an object even when it surpasses the point of pleasure and becomes painful. Intentions, procedures, and player reactions to First Strike are analogous to the rhetor,
speech, and audience in more traditional rhetoric. The game’s paratextual context and narrative content contradict its procedural argument. To account for players’ investment in the repetitious play of simulation requires attention not just to the context and content of the game itself, but to the relations of enjoyment and repetition in which players invest. That the game can be “worryingly fun” (Priestman), “equal parts beautiful and gut-wrenching” (Faraday, “Go to DEFCON 2”), a “frenetic, stressful, and awesome scramble” (Jones) suggests that simulation fever does not repel players. Instead, they become feverish for simulation as such. Reviews suggest that players invest not in one side or the other of the nuclear fascination/horror discrepancy, but in the discrepancy itself.

In First Strike, players are compelled to repeat by the incentive structure of the game, which rewards repeated plays with new countries to fight as or against. But even without this procedural reward, the game encourages repetition. It is almost impossible to play a “perfect” game, and the outcome could always be changed somewhat, and as no two sessions are identical, repetition is always repetition with a difference. In the words of one reviewer, “The replay value is through the roof, since every experience is different. Even without multiplayer, you will come back over and over again” (Gil). In the words of another, the game is a “replayable single-player strategy game that I kept coming back to long after I had enough material for my review” (Faraday “Stop Worrying”). First Strike’s repetition allows players to enjoy useless subjectivity, or the enjoyment of the subject as subject—the enjoyment of the capacity for choice primarily rather than the results of specific choices (Lacan, On Feminine Sexuality 3).

In his article “Tether and Accretions: Fantasy as Form in Videogames,” Christopher Goetz describes one mode of producing pleasure in videogames as the
“tether” fantasy. Players enjoy exposing themselves to risk, “expanding” out into the world, and then withdrawing into a safer space, repeating the process again and again. Being caught in a vulnerable state can be a “playful act” even when this play is “repetitious of an originally horrifying event” (423). The “worrying” fun of *First Strike* is understandable as the uncanny effect of repetition and simulation fever. Recall that for Bogost simulation fever is the gap between the performance of a simulated system and the player’s concept of that system’s operation “in real life.” This fits well with Freud’s understanding of the uncanny, where “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when...a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes” (“The Uncanny”). Players of *First Strike* are made uncomfortable by the juxtaposition of fun and war, but the illusion of control, the ability to exit the game and continue their lives, creates a tether like that attached to the young boy’s reel, permitting them to control the conditions by which the simulated world is made present and absent. Perhaps the enjoyment of this control explains why so many reviewers requested a pause feature, originally absent but added in an update by Blindflug (“Forums”).

That discomfort persists can be understood as the game’s incomplete move to conceal the more horrifying associations of nuclear war. *First Strike* might strengthen certain metaphorical connections, for example those between nuclear war and victory, at the expense of other metonymic ones, such as the direct bodily horror of radiation burns and screaming victims. These elided connections that proliferate meaning may be concealed, but they may persist in the unconscious as described in the previous chapter—in other words, they remain live connections in the Symbolic economy that produces given subjects. This can be seen in Jason Ruddy’s review of the game, which
he calls “wickedly fun,” although its “hope” is “not quite enough to shake off the
uneasiness you’ll feel every time you read the stats at the end of a game.” His discomfort
is palpable near the end of his review. “I had a lot of fun playing it,” he wrote, “and feel
as though the only negative bits in my experience were tied to...the bad taste it left in my
mouth after each game was complete. Every 10 minutes met with the same result,
billions dead and a ‘You Win?’ stats screen. If that sort of thing won’t stop you from
having a good time, then I recommend giving this one a go” (Ruddy). Here is enjoyment,
unease, an acknowledgement of the game’s contradictions, and a decision to play this
program “meant to be played...repeatedly” because it allows players to practice and
improve their decisions (Ruddy). The capacity to enjoy this ostensibly anti-war game is
the same factor that brings players to the U.S. Office of Naval Research MMOWGLI
(Massive Multiplayer Online Wargame Leveraging the Internet), a collaborative online
simulator that relies on the fun of playing to crowndsource defense policy ideas.

It could be argued that a Lacanian reading forgoes one of the most important
qualities of Bogost’s procedural rhetoric—its focus on contingency. Indeed, in Unit
Operations Bogost avoids structural explanations that rely too heavily on large
deterministic systems. He calls these deterministic frames “system operations,” which
are “totalizing structures that seek to explicate a phenomenon, behavior, or state in its
entirety. Unlike complex networks, which thrive between order and chaos, systems seek
to explain all things via an unalienable order” (6). Bogost argues that Freudian
psychoanalysis and its Lacanian variant tend to explain the world too much in terms of
these systems operations, and where such work is helpful for him, it is because of a focus
on smaller-scale “unit operations” (32-35). These unit operations are “discrete,
interlocking units of expressive meaning” (ix).
Bogost’s reservations about Lacan constitute a strong argument for avoiding overly-deterministic theories of meaning that reduce specific artifacts of speech to mere expressions of an all-pervasive underlying structure, like wax figurines cast from an unchanging mold. This understanding of Lacan is a “structural poetics” approach to psychoanalysis that privileges the structural aspects of the Symbolic (Lacan in Public 9). It is in response to such a reading that the understanding of psychoanalysis advanced here might be helpful. As Lundberg argues, more rhetorically-inflected reading of Lacan focuses on the interplay between larger structures and particular expressions in speech, closer to Bogost’s unit operations, but still attentive to the conditions that make these operations possible. Whereas the American rhetorical tradition may focus too heavily on the immediate context of speech at the expense of the larger economy of trope, structural readings of Lacan diminish the importance of contingency and agency. To knit together rhetoric and psychoanalysis, however, may allow us to craft an elegant solution to this impasse.

Rhetorical expression does indeed occur within a specific context, but repetition and subjects’ investment in feigning unicity explains how contingent constellations of tropes become durable. There is not some underlying deep structure that determines the outcome of specific rhetorical acts, but there are ingrained connections between signifiers that channel meaning in particular directions (Lundberg, Lacan in Public 4-5). The intrusion of the Real (tuché) is radically contingent because it is always unexpected and unassimilable, but the repeated effort to retroactively suture the rift (automaton) is an attempt to build structure, or at least predictability (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts 53-56). Like the concept of play as (contingent) movement within a (structural) set of procedural constraints, a rhetorical understanding of
psychoanalysis may help rescue rhetoric from hypercontextualism and Lacan from structural determinism at the same time. The intersection of these two fields is important because each corrects a shortcoming in the other. To explain how the structural preconditions for meaning and affective investment translate into any particular artifact such as a videogame and how players “enjoy” some things and not others requires rhetoric’s attention to contingency to supplement a psychoanalytic theory of videogames.¹³

A rhetorically psychoanalytic theory of games is a helpful approach to *First Strike* because it can explain both the cultural work of the game as an iteration of nuclear simulation and why system operations can be so appealing. Along with other nuclear models, *First Strike* is constructed as a zero-sum game. The player’s gain is a loss to the opponent, and conflict is always imminent. In the famous Prisoner’s Dilemma, a staple of RAND strategic thinking, one party must choose to betray or cooperate with the other without knowing what their competitor/accomplice will choose. The attempt to understand the other side, to think as they do, was of capital importance because the stakes of guessing were unimaginably high. In the traditional liberal critique of the arms race, the resulting problem was one of “mirroring;” one assumed certain hostility in the other, and therefore, one had to adopt that same hostility. The two sides were compelled to become more similar and more aggressive over time.

Lacan’s discussion of repetition in his seminar on the “Purloined Letter” provides a somewhat different perspective. Understood simply as mirroring, the problem of deterrence exists in the register of the Imaginary. One’s intentions are defined by the

¹³ This argument also relies on an understanding that not everything produced by human beings should be read as a text. The medium of games is important, which, as argued in the introduction, is fortunately being acknowledged by attempts in communication studies to emphasize commonalities in traditions like rhetoric, media studies, and cultural studies.
perceived intentions of the adversary. But in a competitive, zero-sum game, the player must assume that the enemy will know that the player is guessing its intention, and therefore adopt a different strategy. But perhaps the enemy also knows that the player knows that it will make this assumption, and so forth. The imaginary modelling of opponent behavior with limited options is thus intractable. “Hence each player,” writes Lacan, “if he [sic] reasons, can only resort to something beyond the dyadic relationship—in other words, to some law which presides over the succession of the rounds of the game” (“Purloined Letter” 44). Thrown into a chaotic world in which the other is inaccessible, players reach for some transcendent order to retain the coherence of choice. The depiction of nuclear enemies as inherently aggressive due to objective principles of international order can thus be understood not (just) as a failure of imaginary identification, but as a necessary solution to the game within apparently inflexible rules. At the same time, when contingent desire and transcendent rules clash, players are driven to seek underlying deep structures to break the impasse of choice.

**Pascal’s Wager**

Two anecdotes about John von Neumann, famous mathematician who worked on the hydrogen bomb, serve to introduce the problems of risk associated with attempts to calculate the incalculable. First, there is a story that von Neumann formulated the early precursors to game theory playing poker (Allen 142). RAND analysts played the game regularly, many with some passion. These players apparently thought of the game mathematically rather than an exercise in psychology, since RAND was “stumped” by human behavior. As RAND president Frank Collbohm said about an Air Force-ordered pilot reaction study, the one “machine” that remained a mystery “is called a ‘pilot’” (Arbella 25). The basic assumption in reducing war games to mathematical simulations
was that the universe could be rendered in such a language, that “numbers could save the world” because life was ultimately a game of risk, calculable and controllable (Arbella 134).

Later, diagnosed with terminal cancer, von Neumann supposedly converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, convinced by another, long dead, mathematician: Blaise Pascal (Jordan 1). Pascal’s wager, that one should believe in God even if He is very unlikely to exist because the consequences of eternal damnation are infinite (Pascal 67-9), is the basic structure of the sign of survival that was inverted in the twentieth century to be an argument mandating care for the material world instead. Incubated in the warmth of the Bomb, this sign has metastasized to other areas of apocalyptic fantasy predictions. As its transmogrification from Jonathan Schell’s pacifist anti-nuclear stance to Dick Cheney’s defense of preemption will show, arguments based on the attempt to calculate the incalculable are indeterminate. The excess of tuché frustrates automaton, and this secular version of Pascal’s wager is the broken machinery it leaves behind.

Jonathan Schell wrote perhaps the most famous book about nuclear war to be marketed as non-fiction. *Fate of the Earth* is an attempt to make nuclear war seem real through the unabashed use of sublime language. The first of its three parts is full of beautiful passages about the destruction that a nuclear war might produce before ending in a “republic of insects and grass.” Relying heavily on the assumption that a nuclear winter would follow a war between the USA and USSR and that such an event would cause humanity to go extinct, Schell contemplates what the end of the human species

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14 Nuclear winter is a theory, itself based on volcanic and impact-event theories extrapolated in climate simulations, that a nuclear war would produce so much smoke and debris along with ecological changes that it would temporarily blot out the sun, causing an extended period of darkness on Earth where low temperatures and lack of sunlight would imperil life on Earth. In another example of the metastasis of simulation, nuclear winter models were the basis for the GCMs used for calculations of global warming.
might mean and what its possibility suggests for defense policy. Schell, like Kristiakoswky at the Trinity test, thought of nuclear war as the end of humanity. Seeing the world apparently as one for us, he wrote that all value was human value, so a nuclear war would destroy everything meaningful in the known universe (95). Nuclear war must, therefore, be avoided at all costs. Schell wrote:

[T]he mere risk of extinction has a significance that is categorically different from, and immeasurably greater than, that of any other risk, and as we make our decisions we have to take that significance into account...It represents not the defeat of some purpose, but an abyss in which all human purposes would be drowned for all time. We have no right to place the possibility of this limitless, eternal defeat on the same footing as risks that we run in the ordinary conduct of our affairs in our particular transient moment of human history...although the risk of extinction may be fractional, the stake is...infinite, and a fraction of infinity is still infinity...morally they are the same, and we have no choice but to address the issue of nuclear weapons as though we knew for a certainty that their use would put an end to our species. (Schell 95)

This passage serves as the end of the first part of Fate of the Earth and a transition to the middle section of the book, “The Second Death,” which is about future generations. Schell’s argument is a version of Pascal’s wager where “infinity” takes the place of a Christian God. “Infinity” as a concept is always an attempt to mediate the Real because it replaces something that by definition cannot be resolved in language or understood by human beings in its entirety into a single word, a placeholder to represent with finite bounds something that can never be represented. It is the ultimate license in metonymy since all associations are included within it; no proliferation of meaning is prohibited. Its symbolic function can be compared to the various names of God in negative theology, all of which stand in for something that is acknowledged to be inexpressible (Pseudo-Dionysius 52-53). Some version of Schell’s infinite risk argument which as they became more sophisticated, were then used again to calculate nuclear winter effects. For a critical history of the concept, see Lawrence Badash, A Nuclear Winter’s Tale.
was used by anti-nuclear activists in public rallies (Sorensen 141), and also used by others to think about a range of other “existential threats” (e.g., Matheny). A report by the Global Challenges Foundation explicitly focuses on “infinite risks” including nuclear war, describing itself as “the first science-based list of global risks with a potentially infinite impact” (Pamlin and Armstrong 31). Representatives of the Vatican recently used the argument too, signing on to a statement including this line: “as long as nuclear weapons exist, there remains the possibility of a nuclear explosion. Even if the probability is small, given the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear weapon detonating, the risk is unacceptable” (Gagliarducci).

Even when the hazard is expressed as “catastrophic,” or quantified with some suitably huge number, it is effectively infinite: as Yudkowsky argues, human beings calculate scale poorly, and a sufficiently large number is not rationally understood. “Human emotions take place within an analog brain,” writes Yudkowsky. “The human brain cannot release enough neurotransmitters to feel emotion a thousand times as strong as the grief of one funeral. A prospective risk going from 10,000,000 deaths to 100,000,000 deaths does not multiply by ten the strength of our determination to stop it. It adds one more zero on paper for our eyes to glaze over, an effect so small that one must usually jump several orders of magnitude to detect the difference experimentally” (16). In the more elegant formulation attributed to Josef Stalin, one death is a tragedy. One million deaths is just a statistic. Our failure to grasp these magnitudes could be called the problem of *hrair* after the Lapine language of *Watership Down*. Rabbits in the novel can only count to four. Any larger number, be it five or one thousand, is simply *hrair*. The word means “a great many; an uncountable number; any number over four” (Adams 475). The language we employ attempts to master and reduce the
incomprehensible vastness of time and space to mark difference where comprehension is impossible. Infinity is perhaps the best example, but any very large number serves the same structural function of expressing loss beyond practical measure. Thus, although the Global Challenges Foundation argues that “infinite risk” is not meant in a mathematical sense and that calculations are possible, they are in effect meaningless: the investments of “infinity” exceed our ability to calculate, as indeed the report acknowledges when it argues for a categorically different treatment of these risks (Pamlin and Armstrong 33).

This quandary frustrates the attempt to make calculable values that seem to exceed calculation itself. A shadow always remains in the quantification of infinity and the attempt to master it technologically, a remainder that haunts the edges of supposedly perfect reason. This is Martin Heidegger’s concept of the gigantic, something much like the sense of the Real that shines through in the sublime:

The gigantic is rather that through which the quantitative becomes a special quality and thus a remarkable kind of greatness... as soon as the gigantic in planning and calculating and adjusting and making secure shifts over out of the quantitative and becomes a special quality, then what is gigantic, and what can seemingly always be calculated completely, becomes, precisely through this, incalculable. This incalculable remains the invisible shadow that is cast around all things everywhere when man [sic] has been transformed into subiectum and the world into picture. (Heidegger 135)

Through this shadow the modern world extends itself into “a space withdrawn from representation” and gestures towards something which we are denied to know (Heidegger 136).

For Schell, the losses possible in a nuclear war are infinite because they threaten future generations beyond count. Preventing the birth of future individuals is immoral, by this logic, which has some bizarre (and apparently unintended) echoes in the Catholic
view on abortion (Schell 116). As no future individuals are cotemporal with those assigning them worth, the value of future generations is symbolic, not unique to the individuals actually “prevented” (Kleinig 196-197). The reason we must not immolate ourselves in nuclear fire, then, is that we must continue to reproduce—the value of each individual lies in that person’s ability to create more individuals. There is no discussion of anything else that we are obligated to do for the future. For Schell, responsibility seems to be a finite obligation to an infinite number of people. This infinite future is frequently represented by the metaphor of the child. In Lyndon Johnson’s infamous “Daisy Girl” campaign ad, a child pulls petals off a daisy, accompanied by a mechanical countdown and interrupted by the familiar mushroom cloud of the Bomb. “These are the stakes,” a man’s voice intones. “To make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die” (“Campaign Spot”). Lee Edelman’s words, bitterly describing the Child as a figure for “compulsory investment in the misrecognition of figure,” could have been about the Johnson ad. “And lo and behold,” he writes, “as viewed through the prism of the tears that it always calls forth, the figure of this Child seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah’s rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later” (Edelman 18).

Unfortunately for disarmament activists, nuclear strategists have children too, and some, like Jim Lipp, express the value of their own work in the same terms—as a matter of caring for “grandchildren’s grandchildren” through nuclear deterrence (Kaplan 78). The “fraction of infinity” argument has been used by those defending an aggressive defense posture. The George W. Bush administration invaded Iraq citing that country’s possible future development of weapons of mass destruction as a primary
casus belli. It is only logical that no time ought to be wasted—every second that the decision for war is delayed increases the chance that a rogue regime could develop nuclear weapons. Any non-zero risk is equivalent to an infinite one. Vice President Dick Cheney went one further, however, establishing the “Cheney Doctrine” in response to nuclear terrorism. Told at a briefing with CIA director George Tenet that Pakistani scientists could potentially be assisting Al Qaeda in the development of nuclear weapons, Cheney responded that if “there’s a one percent chance...we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.” The response must be immediate, regardless of proof: “It’s not about our analysis,” he said, “or finding a preponderance of evidence. It’s about our response” (Suskind 62). Members of the security community often assert that nuclear terrorism is an “existential risk,” a threat to American “civilization” or even the entire species despite the complete lack of evidence to this effect (Mueller 19-20).

There is no mathematical way to distinguish between infinite risks. If any fraction of infinity is infinity, then every fractional risk is infinite—Heidegger’s unquantifiable “gigantic” casts its shadow over attempts to calculate. While the last part of Schell’s book is a passionate case for disarmament, the opposite is equally plausible: if there is any chance greater than zero that disarmament opponents are right and American nuclear weapons are deterring a nuclear war (and uncertainty in calculation alone ensures that there must be), then the risk is infinite. The future is compressed entirely into the present, since any action we take now could determine whether that future exists at all and what character it might have. We are enjoined to do everything, right now, as fast as we can, because any delay might cost trillions of deaths—an argument Nick Bostrom has made about space colonization using the same structure of Pascal’s wager used by Schell (Bostrom 3). At the same time, we must be in (literally) perfect stasis and do
nothing at all, for any change might be the one that cascades into nuclear war. If we extend this infinite value to human extinction more generally, it might even be imperative that we deliberately cause a nuclear war as soon as possible to destroy industrial civilization and thus prevent the collapse of global ecosystems on which all life depends (Caldwell).\textsuperscript{15} The logic of infinite loss results in aporia. It is simultaneously true that no risk is worth taking and that every risk must be taken. At the same time, each individual is afforded some symbolic connection to the Real, because each action we take has effects on the unbounded infinity of future human beings. Each decision we make now is of limitless import, and thus we can enjoy the imagination of destroying future generations because it invests us with the power over existence and nonexistence on a cosmic scale.

This quasi-secular iteration of Pascal’s wager shares its defect with nuclear war games. Both attempt to make rational calculations about nuclear war by quantifying variables that cannot be quantified. The Symbolic order can be analogized to a set of operations, like an equation, that provides the conditions of possibility for meaning, while the Imaginary describes the value of specific variables in that equation. If the Bomb is valued as infinity, then the rest of an operation is overshadowed: no probability assigned to that variable fundamentally changes the result. Like the sun outshining dimmer lights in Longinus’s treatment of metaphor, the threat of human extinction as an unquantifiable evil outshines the issues attached to it (preemption or pacifism, reproduction or culling, counterforce or countervalue, and so forth) such that many paths lead audiences to the same result: the poorly-healed scar in the Symbolic that

\textsuperscript{15} The point is not that Caldwell is right, but that the appeal to infinite impact as an argument provides an unreliable resource that can be exploited by either side of a dispute, and renders judgment formally impossible. For a more complete argument about judgment and arguments related to nuclear fear, see Zemlicka and Matheson, forthcoming.
results from automaton’s sutures over the wound of tuché. In fact, because nuclear war is a problem in which two or more agents are pitted against each other and the optimal solution for one party requires responding to the optimal solution of the others, rationality must necessarily collapse—the only way to frustrate enemy calculations of American plans is to ensure that they are irrational. Rationality thereby demands irrationality (Rose, ch. 5)

Nuclear war games might incorporate data from nuclear testing or conventional bombing, but they still rely largely on guesswork. The “infinite risk” of Schell’s argument does the same, warping calculations by including a cipher for the incalculable. Both operations are sustained by enjoyment. As Cheney said, it’s not about our analysis—it’s about our response. In the case of war games, simulations allow players to enjoy their ability to enjoy—to attach to subjectivity itself. The appeal to infinite destruction is remarkably similar, only those who use it can enjoy the capacity to make the world present and absent in speech. Imagining the apocalypse is fun; doubly so if apparently sophisticated simulations allow us to alter the models of its occurrence.

While this kind of scenario planning and simulation had its most important early developments in Cold War nuclear games, the cultural technology has become deeply ingrained and proliferated in a number of different discourses and practices. A cottage industry in extinction prediction has blossomed in the last few decades, concerned with everything from asteroid collisions and ice ages to magnetic pole shifts and whether the universe is a simulation that might be switched off (see for example Bostrom; Leslie; Posner; Matheny; Yudkowsky). The 2014 outbreaks of the Ebola virus in Africa are a recent example. Modelers quickly produced simulations of the spread of this disease. An article on the Infowars website discusses the most extreme of these disease models,
asking if “you really want to wait until after infections have been identified in the United States to make your preparations?” (Slavo). An embedded Youtube link leads to a video entitled “Mathematical Model Shows How Ebola Will Spread: ‘Worse Case Scenario... An Extinction Event’” posted by TheDailySheeple.

The graphical presentation of this video closely resembles the gameplay of Pandemic 2, a game with millions of online plays popular long before the outbreak. In Pandemic 2, the player controls the disease and the object is to kill everyone in the world (Crazy Monkey Games). The notorious difficulty of infecting Madagascar in the game has spawned its own Internet meme where players express frustration in sympathy with their fictional pandemic (interestingly, the aforementioned Ebola video leaves Madagascar untouched). The website for Northeastern University’s MoBS lab (Laboratory for the Modeling of Biological and Socio-Technical Systems) shows efforts to model the spread of Ebola using graphical icons that also closely resemble Pandemic 2, right down to aircraft flight paths and a similar color-coding system for the incidence of infection (MoBS). It is no wonder that many people might share the feelings of journalist Abraham Riesman who recently wrote a self-reflective piece on his “amoral twinge of excitement” on reading Ebola news and imagining the end of the world (Riesman).

We might imagine many apparently credible threats to the existence of human beings on Earth; the ways the world might end seem nearly endless. While RAND tried to calculate how a nuclear war might begin and how it should be fought, Schell lacked Vice Admiral Giardina’s passion for risk and argued that probability hardly mattered. Alongside nuclear war there are many other low risk/high impact events that introduce the possibility of extinction and thus stand in for the Real—metonymic expansions of
the Bomb’s grand place as the monarch of American terror since the 1940s. Along with those resigned to such threats there have always been others organized under the sign of survival. Perseverance has become a duty: despite our attempts to calculate risk, the specter of societal annihilation motivates some to refuse extinction, to live so that a new, even better, society can be built. If we cannot predict, we must instead prepare, for the specter of apocalypse enjoins us to *survive at all costs*. After all, if the end of the species is an infinite evil, then sacrifice at any price is a bargain we must take. The material, emotional, and cultural labor of postapocalyptic survival is an expression of enjoyment, and this investment organizes life in response to the threat of death, creating communities bound by the notion of survival. But for the fantasy of postapocalyptic survival to be fulfilled, the world must end, and thus destruction and renewal are twinned aspects of the same sign, one that has exerted its powerful influence from Cold War civil defense to contemporary zombie narratives. Survivalists are not irrational fringe elements circulating their own disharmonious language in an otherwise orderly society. The sign of survival speaks through them, organizing communities of those who are willing to undergo—and enjoy—hardships, real or imagined, in order to increase their odds of survival in the end times. Before this phenomenon can be explored fully, we must explore the logic of sacrifice that it is pitted against, along with the material traces of a society organized by this sacrificial logic.
CHAPTER 3: ZONES OF SACRIFICE

I really wonder if our interest is so much in survival as in the fascinating possibility we might be legitimately able to get rid of our neighbors. If we really want to be safe, we’d better start shooting our neighbors now, to be sure we get them all.

--Frederick E. Jessett, letter to the editor of The Christian Century

Wastelands

All nuclear targeting schemes relied to some extent on the threat of massive retaliation against cities full of civilians not directly involved in the war, and perhaps even unaware that it had broken out. Counterforce targeting, in which missiles would be aimed primarily at other missiles, still relied on the threat to cities to deter the Soviet Union from a massive attack against American cities. The characteristics of nuclear weapons are such that, no matter what they are ostensibly aimed at, they are capable of genocidal devastation of civilians in a so-called “countervalue” attack. Even a purely counterforce posture thus retains this possibility and implicit threat of “city swapping” (Finnis et al. 138-139). In addition, a counterforce attack would certainly kill tens of millions of civilians due to the proximity of military assets to major population centers, so although the adherents of countervalue and counterforce targeting each argued that their chosen policies better maintained peace by making a superpower nuclear attack less appealing, both advocated preparations that would amount to unprecedented destruction of “enemy” people (McKinzie et al. 15). Even when Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was supplemented with plans to “win” a nuclear war through limited attacks on enemy military sites, it remained a part of American and Soviet nuclear
doctrine. After McNamara’s Strategic Air Command briefing, he endorsed a counterforce (eventually called a “limited war”) plan, but quickly backed off, maintaining MAD as did later administrations, even when they publicly debated counterforce alternatives (Richelson 240-242).

The logical conclusion of this prevalent (although admittedly not universal) strand of strategic thinking was that the Pentagon should want Soviet nuclear warheads targeted at American cities, and should also want those cities to be largely unable to withstand a nuclear attack. Although this scheme was sometimes disparaged for making cities “hostages,” it is perhaps more accurate to describe them as conditional sacrifices. The advocates of nuclear deterrence justify this policy on instrumental, consequentialist moral grounds, arguing in line with Pascal’s Wager that some cost to the few (or in this case, the many) must be sustained to preserve the lives and freedoms of all with “no limits to the measures that may be taken to preserve the political community’s independence and continuity” (Tucker 53).

A tradition of area bombing began against Germany in World War II, the goals of which, as described by its advocates, included all manner of destruction other than killing civilian human beings, which was indisputably part of its aim. It was war waged against an economy expressed in areas rather than a population expressed in lives. Historian Richard Overy, for example, describes the targets of area bombing as “factories, transport facilities, supporting services and workers’ housing,” aimed at “the destruction of Germany’s industrial areas.” Overy argues civilian deaths should not serve as an indictment of the program because given the technology at the time, “collateral damage” was unavoidable and thus permissible (Overy 112-3). It is technology and the need to destroy “areas” that defines what is permissible, not just
what is possible. Nuclear plans further refined this trend. Besides euphemisms like “countervalue” were others, such as “counter-recovery targeting,” meant to prevent the enemy from rebuilding after a war. Unlike the Allies of the Second World War (at least after the Battle of Britain), both sides during the Cold War were susceptible to massive attacks against their cities. MAD embraced this vulnerability as a condition for stability. An enemy that knew it could be destroyed completely would be less likely to aggress. Knowing that the other side’s cities were vulnerable would also reassure nervous leaders, lessening the pressure to take rash decisions.

The stability of Mutually Assured Destruction would become an argument used to oppose widespread civil defense initiatives and missile defenses on the grounds that these programs might reduce the expected damage of a nuclear war and thus increase the incentive to strike first, eliminating some enemy weapons immediately and reducing the number left for the missile defenses to handle or from which civil defense must recover, thus making nuclear war a more feasible instrument of national policy and therefore more likely to occur (Rose, ch. 3). Others like Eisenhower Secretary of State John Foster Dulles argued that building an effective U.S. shelter system would undermine American alliances, amounting to a decision to “write off our friends in Europe” (Rose, ch. 1). In other words, Americans civilians must be ready to die to reassure European allies that American soldiers would be ready to die, too. Left unsaid was the question of exactly which civilians would die in a Soviet attack. This chapter will argue that visions of Armageddon in American nuclear plans were filtered through a logic of white supremacy.

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16 The U.S.-Soviet 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which the George W. Bush administration ultimately withdrew from, allowed two limited missile defense sites on each side. The Soviet Union built a site around Moscow. The United States built a site around a missile field in North Dakota.
While cities were made conditional sacrifices in the name of MAD, vast areas of the United States were contaminated by fallout from nuclear testing, storage of nuclear waste, and pollution from uranium mining. Maps circulated by peace activists showed the dispersal of fallout throughout the country carried by western winds. These sites and others are frequently referred to as (“national,” “nuclear,” or “national nuclear”) “sacrifice zones” (e.g., Dr. Good Heart). Although some “downwinders” exposed to radioactivity were white (notably Mormons in Utah), the majority of desert sacrifice areas were once populated by indigenous peoples, and many still are. The Nevada Test Site itself is on land once occupied by the Western Shoshone, who unsuccessfully challenged the federal government’s occupation of that site and others in United States v. Dann, alleging that the government was in violation of the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley (Kuletz 69). Deserts formed another element of the wasteland trope. While city spaces were marked as potential targets for an imminent Soviet attack, deserts were bombed and irradiated by the United States government itself to further nuclear weapons testing and design. In both cases, the wasteland was a site of potential death, but fear also mingled with desire.

In his “Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter,’” Lacan wrote that “it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject,” and that the subject receives “major determination” from “the itinerary of a signifier” (7). Later in the same essay, Lacan describes this itinerary as the sender receiving their own message “in an inverted form” (30). One is “possessed” by the signifier, a thrall to its agency: “the signifier’s displacement determines subjects’ acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate...everything pertaining to the psychological pregiven follows willy-nilly the signifier's train, like weapons and baggage” (21). It is clear that Lacan considers the
subject a secondary effect of the signifier, a product of language rather than its master. The city as a signifier does this work. As a site of chaos, danger, and difference, it helps to form the identity of (white) suburbanites as good Americans, ordered and pure, unlike the (Real but not real) corruption and disorder of the urban center. The imagination of apocalypse had an effect on the spatial order of American cities. Far from an ideal form, the sign does its work and is made present in a material sense. We do not have to understand everything as a text to appreciate that the web of language stitched over the threatening incursions of the Real is perceptible in the physical order of objects arranged in space. The decay of post-industrial cities seems natural once they have been sacrificed already in the imagination of nuclear war, just as the contamination of desert spaces which already resemble the imagined outcome of a nuclear war seems almost natural.

This chapter will explore the spatial imagination of nuclear wastelands in deserts and cities. Under the guise of rational tradeoffs, poor and minority populations would bear a disproportionate risk from Soviet attack. The populations imagined “gone” in the *fort-da* game of catastrophe and post-attack survival were not arbitrarily chosen but instead reflected the preexisting racial anxieties of Cold War America. The wasteland trope became a self-fulfilling prophecy as people and industry fled city centers and left them to decay. White flight and urban decline were produced in part by neoliberal economic logics but matched closely with nuclear sacrifice tropes. This is significant because it demonstrates the material effects of cathectic investment in the wasteland trope. Cities were imagined as targets destined to be destroyed which facilitated their actual destruction not by nuclear weapons but by measures justified to avoid their use. The specificity of loss in an imagined nuclear war also demonstrates that the
psychoanalytic account of *fort-da* or *tuche* and *automaton* should account for cultural specificity. The sacrifice of poor and minority populations in an imagined nuclear war forms the first part of a *fort-da* iteration. The second part is contemporary survivalism, which is the subject of the next chapter.

I will begin by engaging some extant literature on the devaluing of difference in the context of strategy, turning then to the racial anxieties and influences on cities as imagined nuclear targets. Desert landscapes strongly influence post-apocalyptic imagination and are often conflated with the bombed-city-to-come but also have their own history of association with death and nuclear weapons, notably in the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant’s scheme to communicate the dangers of radiation over 10,000 years. The prospect of destruction in the wasteland trope provided cover for white flight and industrial relocation, demonstrating the capacity for one powerful trope to conceal other logics.

**Desired Ground Zeroes**\(^{17}\)

Because the mutuality of Mutually Assured Destruction required reassuring the Soviets that they could potentially destroy American targets, what Rey Chow calls “the world target” was truly worldwide, as domestic populations too were made expendable in the name of crisis stability (Chow). Defense intellectuals did not contemplate only the bombing of enemy cities, but also their own. The logic of game theory suggested an optimal set of targets for the enemy to be accepted by the U.S. It could be argued then that the “bare life” of enemy populations subject to nuclear attack reverberated beyond the explicit zones of strategic destruction abroad to incorporate the whole world. Georgio Agamben has claimed that sovereign power derives its ability to kill from a ban

\(^{17}\) The phrase is borrowed from Richelson, p. 241.
that both excludes an individual or group from the profane protections of the law and also from the divine status of sacrifice. This status of *homo sacer* derives from a seemingly contradictory category of Roman law in which “bare life” can be killed with impunity, but not sacrificed. As Agamben writes,

> What defines the status of *homo sacer* is therefore not the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed. This violence -- the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege. Subtracting itself from the sanctioned forms of both human and divine law, this violence opens a sphere of human action that is neither the sphere of *sacrum facere* nor that of profane action. (81)

Agamben takes Foucault’s notion of biopower as a point of departure to argue that upon this foundation of bare life exists the camp, a space in which there reigns a state of exception where the ban, or suspension of the law, becomes the “*nomos* of the modern,” epitomized but extending beyond the concentration camps of Nazism (Agamben 166). The sovereign ban is a technology of rule rather than an attribute of the camp, and where it operates, zones like the Vietnamese “Free Fire Zones,” Soviet industrial target areas, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki as generalized targets become possible.

As Chapter 2 argued, the abstract reasoning of nuclear war is inherently problematic because it is an attempt to calculate the incalculable. As Michael Dillon writes, this is also the necessary condition for the devaluation of populations in the modern age and their exposure to the kind of risks posed by nuclear war. The attempt to make life commensurate and calculable is another attempt to mediate something that exceeds our ability to express—the very purpose and importance of human existence, the central value of life that nuclear war brings starkly into question by forcing us to imagine a world in which we are destroyed. To respond to this possibility by articulating
the value of life in tradable units, i.e., to claim that we can “rationally” determine the necessity to risk one part of the population on behalf of another, makes it possible to obviate the value of some lives entirely. “There is nothing abstract about this,” Dillon writes. “[T]he declension of economies of value leads to the zero point of holocaust...[systems of value] run the risk of counting out the invaluable. Counted out, the invaluable may then lose its purchase on life. Herewith, then, the necessity of championing the invaluable itself. For we must never forget that, ‘we are dealing always with whatever exceeds measure’” (165). Rational calculation makes life capable of being devalued entirely, and therefore the triumph of reason results in the kind of “bare life” for which there is no recourse. It can be killed but not sacrificed. The details of countervalue targeting seem to confirm this overall trajectory. Held vulnerable to a Soviet attack, the urban American population could be killed by anyone, even the USSR, because the calculation of the value of potential lives lost in a nuclear war made risk acceptable, and thus exposed them to risk. The attempt to calculate the incalculable depersonalized some (urban) populations, trading cities as abstract pieces in an hypothetical, simulated exchange with the Soviet Union. This dynamic mirrors the move between incalculable, excessive Real and mediated, reclaiming Symbolic.

All populations are not equally exposed to risk, however. While the general principle of utilitarianism that underpins the calculation of lives should treat them all as equal, in practice some populations are more disposable than others. The characteristics of conditionally-sacrificed peoples were not erased. Thus the underlying dynamic of failed and feigned reality described here previously has been manifested in culturally-specific ways. Repeated investments accrete into durable formations, but those formations then channel how further investments are made. A number of examples exist
for the link between sacrifice, space and violence. Following from Heidegger’s essay “The Age of the World Picture,” Rey Chow argues that we are now in the “Age of the World Target,” in which foreign spaces are known and mapped in order to be attacked. In “the wake of the atomic bombs,” Chow writes, “the world has come to be grasped and conceived as a target—to be destroyed as soon as it can be made visible” (12). Chow implicates area studies and Western “theory” broadly, including post-structuralism, literary theory, and a range of other pursuits broadly originating in European or Euro-American culture. Area studies in particular serves as a vehicle to know the world and thus reduce it to the target, promising destruction as the inevitable result. Chow does sometimes write about difference in general terms, and mentions a few domestic concerns and anxieties about the limit of U.S. borders (42-43). Nevertheless, her focus is primarily on how the United States imagines enemies outside its own territory and how xenophobia results in violence against them.

Chow’s work advances a similar argument to that of historian Matthew Jones. Jones extends the influential work of John Dower, arguing that the American decision to use nuclear weapons against Hiroshima, while not reducible simply to racism, reflected a fundamental devaluation of the Japanese (Dower). Jones applies this insight to American nuclear policy in Asia throughout the early Cold War, arguing that racial discrimination repeatedly characterized American attitudes towards nuclear policy in Asia (Jones 2-3). The intersection of space and race is important for all of these authors as they connect racial violence with the construction of external threats beyond American borders. Other work examines enemy construction, stereotyping, and racism more generally, treating the devaluation of the Japanese in during World War II and the demonization of Soviets during the Cold War as examples of a deeper psychological
process of enemy construction. Sam Keen argues that an automated, depersonalized depiction of technology replaced explicit images of the enemy in Vietnam and in Pentagon images of the “the world as target” (Keen 84-85). A well-known recent treatment of racism and zones of destruction by historian Nick Turse confirms this link between spaces of death and devalued foreign populations. Turse not only uncovered Pentagon documents authorizing almost unlimited violence in Vietnamese “Free Fire Zones” but also connected these to attitudes of racial hatred and superiority amongst rank-and-file U.S. troops (49-51).

The argument that strategic nuclear planning in particular was linked to race was advanced by Dean MacCannell in the same issue of *Diacritics* in which Derrida’s much more famous call for nuclear criticism was published. Focusing primarily on the works of James Conant, the Harvard president whose testimony of the Trinity test was excerpted in Chapter One, MacCannell argues that there is an unconscious connection between urban planning and nuclear warfare. Relying on Conant’s transition from defense intellectual to advocate of “ghetto” education, MacCannell argues that the deterrent balance has been undermined because “macrosocial changes” in the form of white flight and minority concentration in cities “can be interpreted as making the use of nuclear weapons, not on an enemy, but on our own society, the realization of a collective unconscious desire” (34). The warrant for this argument relies on a particular understanding of the Lacanian unconscious as a “subjectivity which has the power of consciousness, but a consciousness which has lost its ability to speak.” The unconscious bears a relationship to “macrosocial arrangements” beyond analogy. Both are agents that cannot be identified except through their effects, but structure the world and organize symmetries such as minority urban confinement and the imagination of cities.
destroyed in nuclear war (MacCannell 45). MacCannell is also careful to insulate himself from criticism by arguing that a defining trait of efforts to describe the unconscious structure of society or the structure of the unconscious itself will be met with criticism and denial (34).

Although his conclusions are interesting, the means by which MacCannell arrives at them are called into question by the theories of the Symbolic and the Real advanced in Chapter One. MacCannell’s understanding of what he calls macrosocial arrangements is located explicitly in the Symbolic as evidence of both its “fragility” and its tendency to connect apparently distant concepts. The agency he ascribes to these forces, however, and especially their inability to “speak,” conflates the Symbolic and the Real, making the latter term closer to the theory of the active Real critiqued by Andrew Robinson and critiqued in Chapter 1. Whatever we choose to call macrosocial arrangements, fundamental antagonisms, or the unconscious, to the extent that we can describe their operations and material effects, these things cannot be located in the Real.

MacCannell’s conclusion that the Bomb reveals the fragility of the Symbolic is consistent with the overall argument made here, but on the basis of the arguments developed in the last two chapters it can be argued that an account of the Real is necessary. The Real is what distorts the Symbolic through disrupting the social fabric built within it. The ameliorative responses of automaton repair these fissures, but never exactly, because the distorting shape of the lack persists. It is more productive to see social arrangements as things that do in fact “speak” in the sense that the sign speaks through the subject and not vice-versa, reserving the Real as a concept for silence and contingency, both of which shape these relations but do not directly structure them. MacCannell’s conception of the Real paints it as the deep structure for which the social
is epiphenomenal and is also not falsifiable, both ideas that led Andrew Robinson to reject the Real altogether as politically disabling and analytically unhelpful.

If, as I have argued in the context of the sublime, the Lacanian unconscious should be understood as the sublimated but present tropes concealed by metaphors of unusual cathetic purchase, then the best starting point for an investigation of the connection between targeting policy and macrosocial (spatial) arrangements is the set of tropes that serve to conceal these connections through the intensity of affect invested in them. The social world is not ordered by preexisting signs speaking through their subjects. The sign is necessarily mutable, and its work is done largely by concealing metonymic connections that are overshadowed by powerful metaphorical ones. The Real does break through, but when it does, it is manifest only as overwhelming, alien contingency, everything but a coherent underlying logic for human affairs, let alone the universe overall. It is not just the subject formed by the attempt to weave the Symbolic over the Real, but even the material environments we build. The sign is thus material in a very real sense: it produces subjects, their practices, and their physical surroundings. The city is one such sign, built in part by the powerful attachments negotiated under the threat of nuclear war. The metonymic connections concealed by the city as a nuclear target are all of the other investments that contribute to its material structure. In Cold War America, racial and economic inequality were some of those investments operating alongside nuclear calculations.

**Our Cities Must Fight**

Class, race, and anti-urbanism were long bound up in the cultural reaction to civil defense. One of the most overtly cold-blooded results was the debate over “ethnic targeting” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This policy would have attempted to
disproportionately kill ethnic Russians in the event of a nuclear war with the hope that non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union (Ukrainians, Baltic peoples, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and so forth) would rise up and overthrow the state, which was understood by planners at least to be a Russian-dominated continuation of the Tsarist Empire. Zbigniew Brzezinski, interrupted a targeting discussion once to ask “Where are the plans for killing Russians?” When it was explained that all nuclear attacks would kill many Soviets, Brzezinski impatiently insisted “I mean Russian Russians,” and in doing so broke the taboo about openly promoting the direct killing of civilians (Powers 86). That United States officials contemplated genocide in their nuclear war plans is hardly worth pointing out. More telling was the backlash against Brzezinski and other advocates of ethnic targeting. David Cattell and George Quester opposed the policy in their article “Ethnic Targeting: Some Bad Ideas” partly on the grounds that it was immoral, but also from an anxious white American racial perspective. If the United States targets ethnic Russians, might not the Soviet Union follow suit with its own increasingly accurate missiles? “Will we hear,” they ask, “future discussions of how Soviet nuclear warheads are aimed at Scarsdale and not Harlem, at the San Fernando Valley and not the Spanish-speaking sections of East Los Angeles” (282)?

Cattell and Quester express a fear that began with the advent of strategic bombing against colonial targets around the turn of the twentieth century, where gas and explosives were used by European powers and the Japanese against Africans and Asians. Initially confident that only “uncivilized” Africans, Arabs, and Chinese could be targeted, “under the surface calm, evil dreams began to rise. The character of our fantasies changed. Before there were airplanes, we had dreamed of triumph through bombing other races, other planets, other solar systems. But now that we really were
bombing other races, we had nightmares of being bombed ourselves” (Lindqvist 71). Planners were force to concede that when SIOP selected ethnic Russian targets as “Desired Ground Zeroes,” the Soviets might do the same, and suddenly nuclear war seemed less palatable.\textsuperscript{18} In contrast to the supposedly rational logic of nuclear utilitarianism, the argument is not that more people would die,\textsuperscript{19} but apparently that some lives are simply worth more than others. Are we to assume from Cattell and Quester’s argument that the Soviets currently target Harlem, and that we should hope that they continue to do so because the alternatives are worse?

The populations of cities that would be targets of Soviet attack were almost always described in abstract terms, but nuclear strategists, politicians, and urban planners were long aware that particular populations would die while others lived. In a 2000 article, Andrew Grossman analyzed civil defense and reconstruction plans from the 1950s based on their consideration of race. The Federal Civil Defense Administration collected data suggesting that racial minorities, especially black Americans, would disproportionately die. The agency stressed continuity in government after an attack. Such a government would be dominated by Republicans and white Dixiecrats. At one extreme, sixty-seven percent of Protestants would survive the projected war. At the other, only seven percent of Jews would live. Recent immigrants, Jews, and other minorities were disproportionately urban in the early Cold War period, and thus likely to die in larger relative numbers (Grossman 491). In theory, Grossman writes, “FCDA planning would have reestablished the contemporary social order of the

\textsuperscript{18} The reciprocation argument was also made about civil defense. Its basic narcissism is suggested by the dearth of examples of its inverse, i.e., it was seldom suggested that Soviet policy would be modeled by the United States, but frequently suggested that American policy would be modeled by the Soviet Union.

\textsuperscript{19} Due to resource disparities, population densities, and more widespread suburban shelter building, the opposite can be presumed to be the case.
early 1950s in a post-nuclear era with one fundamental difference: the post-attack demographic reality that civilian defense planners used resembled Alexis de Tocqueville's homogenous America of the 1830s, not the country of the early 1950s” (Grossman 479).

The racial order also influenced debates over bomb and fallout shelters. The first Federal Civil Defense Administrator was Millard Caldwell, a former governor of Florida who supported segregation and opposed the right of black Americans to vote (Sharp 196-7). Speaking at Caldwell’s nomination hearing on January 15, 1951, Clarence Mitchell, director of the Washington Bureau of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, called the nomination “an insult to colored people,” describing it as appeasement of white supremacists (U.S. Senate Comm. on Armed Services, Nomination 2). Mitchell and the NAACP leadership were particularly worried about what segregation would mean in the aftermath of a nuclear attack:

Here at home a national emergency may convert our large cities into battlefields...If a bomb drops we do not want regulations that require citizens to run 10 blocks to a separate racial shelter when one marked for “white only” is just around the corner...[Caldwell’s] record shows that he would not avoid dual standards, based on race. We, therefore, solemnly urge that his appointment be rejected. (U.S. Senate Comm. on Armed Services, Nomination 6)

Mitchell’s concerns were well-founded. While segregation was never an official part of civil defense doctrine, it was quietly assumed in a number of plans formulated by individual states. Caldwell’s strong support of states’ rights against federal oversight helped to encourage this kind of planning (Grossman 482-3). This could be done in part by treating evacuation as simply a problem of moving people through space, referring to locations rather than the populations that lived in them or would be moved through them. Jonathan Lieb and Thomas Chapman studied one such plan in Savannah,
Georgia, in which train cars would be used to evacuate schoolchildren. Although there was no mention of Jim Crow, Lieb and Chapman found that students from majority white schools were slated to be moved to communities with more resources for recovery (588). Evacuation areas were effectively segregated, with thirty-nine of the forty-three sites receiving only black or only white children (Lieb and Chapman 586). Civil defense was therefore viewed with suspicion by many black communities. During one drill in Mobile, Alabama, rumors spread that nuclear weapons would be employed deliberately to kill black people in resistance to school desegregation, causing a brief panic in the city (Rose, ch. 3).

The national shelter program was ultimately quite limited in scope, briefly capturing public attention in the early 1960s and fading again, not to return until the Reagan administration made nuclear war seem imminent yet again (Rose, introduction). Shelters were built, but ultimately the lion’s share of preparation happened in the suburbs, a “built-in notice to millions of city dwellers that they are expendable” (Rose, ch. 5). Representative Martha Griffiths, a Democrat from Michigan, opposed urban shelter plans on the basis that “if the bombs fell at night” no one would be saved but “skid row characters” and “drunks” (Rose, ch. 6). Caldwell encouraged a strategy of “digging in” rather than evacuating, although the latter would become policy as part of America’s highway programs later in the Eisenhower administration (Grossman 484). The 1951 Federal Civil Defense Administration propaganda film Our Cities Must Fight described the impulse to “take to the hills” as “pretty close to treason,” “desertion, plain and simple” since in modern warfare, “each of us has his [sic] share of fighting to do.” Enemies are constantly gauging our willingness to fight, or as the film bluntly puts it, “our capacity for sacrifice” (Our Cities Must Fight). The repeated
message of the film is that cities will need every bit of help they can get, although there’s good news for those patriots who choose to stay: “after an atomic airburst, the danger of lingering radiation and falling debris is over in a minute and a half” (Our Cities Must Fight).

Ultimately, no American city built shelters capable of withstanding a nuclear attack on any scale likely to save a significant portion of city residents. An alternative program of industry dispersal was more successful. If the population of cities could not be guarded against a nuclear strike (and indeed, if they were to serve as deterrents, they could not be), then it was thought possible to break up the geographical concentration of cities to some degree. Dispersal was a plan to incentivize industries moving into suburbs and other locations where Soviet missiles were less likely to strike directly. Some precedent already existed in cities like Detroit, where the World War II-era Willow Run bomber plant, at one time among the world’s largest factory spaces, was sited outside the city itself. Federal defense spending continued to make suburbs increasingly attractive after the war, partly with industry dispersal in mind (Peterson 1-7). Dispersal may not have been the primary cause of the white, middle class relocation to suburbs, but it still played a significant role nonetheless in the construction of cities as dangerous spaces and suburbs as a potential solution (Light 11-12). Not only did federal financial incentives encourage dispersal, but the problems of urban civil defense created academic and professional connections between urban planners and defense intellectuals starting in the 1950s and 1960s. Both frequently published across disciplines on the problems posed to city infrastructure and planning by nuclear weapons. This collaboration supported narrow ideas like industry dispersal and more generally introduced military technologies and modes of thinking into the previously
somewhat insular world of urban design, encouraging an ostensibly rational view of planning and human behavior (Light 3-5). This collaboration continues to shape cities as objects for global military targeting today, as Stephen Graham argues (Graham xiii-xv). Graham claims that this intensification of rational military planning applied to cities began a new era of “military urbanism” in which cities both in the U.S. and abroad were increasingly seen “through the bombardier’s eye” (14). Industries were dispersed to avoid nuclear attack. People were not—at least not all of them.

People were to escape with automobiles. Highway construction took off during the Eisenhower administration, officially justified in part by nuclear fear. While the German Autobahn had proved difficult to bomb for Ike’s forces during the Second World War, other transportation networks were highly vulnerable. Adapting this lesson to the United States, politicians argued that highway construction—particularly the kind that allowed people and vehicles in and out of cities quickly—was a survival necessity (Lewis, ch. 5; Graham 14). Sirens were installed around the country as highways were built to give locals warning of an impending Soviet attack. Beltways would be “Life Belts” permitting the U.S. to recover quickly and “hit back” in the words of a Life magazine report on cyberneticist Norbert Weiner’s plan for recovery (“How U.S. Cities” 78-80). Because shelters were largely built by individuals in the absence of a government program, the “best” shelters were available only to the wealthy (if, that is, any shelters would have been effective). Highways were public goods, but cars were not. Again, city dwellers without the means to buy automobiles or the suburban contacts to help them relocate quickly would not benefit much from evacuation.

At various times during the Cold War, shelters, evacuation, and dispersal were government policy, with only the latter two gaining a substantial degree of federal
support. There was very little evidence to suggest that these plans would work. The hydrogen bomb astronomically increased the potential for nuclear destruction, and as arsenal sizes rapidly increased, a great deal of expenditure would not necessarily guarantee any increase in survival odds for people living anywhere remotely near presumed Soviet targets in the United States. Robert Moses, infamous New York city planner, wrote an article opposing both large-scale civil defense measures and noting the impracticality of evacuation. Writing in the midst of highway expansions, Moses claimed that there were “Too many vehicles; too many people; no place to hide” (31). The suburbs, disproportionately white, were where Americans would survive, and what fallout protection programs were actually authorized concentrated their efforts there, a “built-in notice to millions of city dwellers that they [were] expendable,” or in John Kenneth Galbraith’s words, “a design for saving Republicans and sacrificing Democrats” (qtd. in Rose, ch. 5).

Urban Sacrifice and the Wasteland Trope

The policies supposedly designed to protect American cities helped to destroy them. In Thomas Sugrue’s study of industrial decline and social conflict in Detroit, the dispersal of industry combined with an expanded highway system is blamed for allowing factories to relocate, exacerbating poverty and confining the increasingly black, poor, and uneducated population to misery (Sugrue 3-6). “As Detroit goes,” wrote B.J. Widick in 1972, “so goes the country” (v). This maxim was unfortunately correct. Urban populations remained in place and therefore were increasingly denied manufacturing work, the basis for economic prosperity in Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities that were rapidly transforming into the “Rust Belt.” Meanwhile, highways cut cities apart and demanded the destruction of neighborhoods—never wealthy ones—
that stood in the way of construction (Lewis, preface). Industry dispersal and evacuation relied on a geographical scheme and physical infrastructure that were also the basis of the massive exodus undertaken by middle-class and white Americans. Especially in a climate where nuclear war was often considered very likely, if not inevitable, cities became death traps, sacrifices, potential wastelands. Without effective civil defense, evacuation, or dispersal, the city could almost be written off as almost destroyed already. Cities became sites of danger for those concerned with nuclear war, their future desolation so certain that the present and future blurred together. For the survivalist movement, covered in Chapter 4, the threat of nuclear war blended with race riots and hatred of minorities into a generalized rejection of the city (Coates 9; Rose ch. 4).

With the flight of population and wealth, decaying cities seemed to validate the wasteland trope. Detroit, as the most visible example, has been “so thoroughly humiliated by history, so emptied of the content, both material and human, that used to make this place mean, that it becomes questionable wither the city still exists,” in the words of Jerry Herron (14, emphasis in original). Films such as Four Brothers, Assault on Precinct 13, Narc, and True Romance tell of a city plunged into anarchy by violent crime both organized and random. In this film, the city is literally hellish. Robocop portrays a future Detroit as almost ungovernable, saved only by a cyborg policeman constructed by a corrupt megacorporation. The cover of the recent documentary Detropia shows a man and a woman posed in front of an abandoned neo-Gothic house. The image would look much like American Gothic except that both figures are wearing gasmasks, a common trope in advertising for popular post-nuclear videogame series like Fallout, Borderlands, and Metro. These representations helped to change the city’s image from the “Arsenal of Democracy” to “Wild West Detroit” (Martelle 227), a place
where “the wheels came off the wagon of Western Civilization” according to the spokesman of the city’s last white mayor (Chafets 26). The habitual association in all forms of media between Detroit and violence has made the city a space of abjection that can be filled with any social evil, an internal zone of danger foreign to the rest of the country. Detroit is an ideograph, a powerful site of condensation for the fear and desire of urban destruction. Detroit’s representation in mass media “stands for what everyone else fears and wants to be different from: a singular, cautionary disaster from which people elsewhere imagine they still have time to retreat” (Herron 100).

Recently, the ruins of Detroit have attracted “urban explorers” who seek out abandoned structures from the city’s heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s, including fallout shelters. Detroit is represented as an abandoned, post-apocalyptic city, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of residents still live there. The supposed scarcity of healthy food in the city, as in others, is described as a “food desert” (Gallagher, *Examining the Impact*). Explicit use of the wasteland trope is so common that religious organizations have picked it up as a call for salvation. The Christian Broadcasting Corporation in one recent example described this “urban wasteland” as a result of corruption rather than economic or racial conflict. “Welcome to Detroit, or what some call ‘The Dead Zone.’ It’s an area of near-complete destruction many miles across,” CBN stated. “Crime is the only growth industry, with murder being an everyday occurrence” (Holton).

Detroit is a particularly notable example, but similar associations of danger and decay are made with other blighted urban spaces. The city wasteland trope transforms the victims of nuclear war (or neoliberal economics) into dangerous threats. Defense planners argued that hordes of refugees would leave big cities before or after a nuclear
attack, straining the resources of the wealthier suburbs around them. This possibility led
many public intellectuals, including religious leaders, to suggest that the ethical
response of shelter owners confronted with the unprepared was to defend one’s
preparations, with lethal force if necessary. This “gun thy neighbor” ethic encouraged
citizens to arm themselves not against potential Soviet invaders but against their own
neighbors in the event that the desperate need of those neighbors became too intense.
Suburban civil defense officials began to contemplate violence against their urban
neighbors, as Bakersfield chief of police Horace Grayson did: “the greatest danger to
Bakersfield would not be from an atomic bomb or its fallout, but from hundreds of
thousands of displaced residents from the Los Angeles area...They must be stopped
south of town and shown a route to some kind of refuge on the desert” (qtd. in Rose, ch. 3). Whites fleeing to suburbs in fear of race riots prepared the same way. A 1968 poll in
the Detroit suburbs known as the “White Noose” found persistent fears of black invasion
into these homogenous communities (99.5% white, according to the researchers), along
with rumors of child murders and racial conflict (Warren 124). Meanwhile, 63% of
residents thought of buying guns, a decision with obviously tragic consequences for non-
white populations today (Warren 137).

It is a short step from this thinking to the idea that nuclear war might have an upside
as “urban renewal” (Rose, ch. 4; Kossik 117). Lawrence Hafstad, who was head of the
Reactor Development Division of the Atomic Energy Committee before becoming Vice
President of General Motors, argued that the nuclear threat might be positive in a sense
because it encouraged industries to relocate from city centers. “The atom bomb
development,” he wrote, “may come to be looked at in historical perspective...as
‘Nature’s slum clearance program’” (42). In this thinking, atomic weapons would
disproportionately destroy unproductive, undesirable populations which were themselves making city spaces dangerous. David Wilson argues that “discardable” rust belt cities have globalized the trope of desolation and danger in which “poor black neighborhoods and populations need to be systematically isolated and managed as tainted and civic-damaging outcasts” in the name of “city survival” (5). Even the denial of insurance coverage had its bizarre parallel in nuclear warfare: that insurance companies deny coverage explicitly for nuclear attack lead Frances Ferguson to meditate on the sublime characteristics of nuclear war, unthinkable in the same way that uninsurable “acts of God” might be (4-5). Meanwhile, segregation was maintained partly by “redlining,” or the denial of insurance to prospective minority (especially black) homebuyers seeking to move into white-dominated suburbs.

Nuclear policy alone did not give rise to segregation, highways, suburbs, or interracial violence. Highways were built and industries relocated in part for economic gain (Light 11). Nuclear war did create an alibi in the form of transcendent, incomprehensible danger, a possibility so awful that it had to be avoided at all costs, and decisions taken to prevent it were difficult to oppose because nothing could be more important than survival. Thus the Bomb could help to “sell highways to Congress and the nation,” even though it was not the primary motivator for their development (Lewis ch. 5; Light 6). Phil Reed, chair of the company board at General Electric, claimed that defense considerations were a supplement, but that his company’s decision to decentralize production was primarily economic (Light 26). In Detroit, automakers fled first to the suburbs and later farther afield to avoid unions and high labor costs. The rate of automobile job creation in the city lagged behind national averages starting as early as 1939, and when jobs were created, they tended to go to whites (Zukin 106, 132).
Deliberate design would be almost impossible to prove in any savvy conspirator, “But to recognize the political dimensions in the shapes of technology does not require that we look for conscious conspiracies or malicious intentions,” Langdon Winner writes. The “deck is stacked” in favor of some interests over others (25-26). The distraction that focuses attention while the deck is stacked is the operation of the unconscious, understood as I have previously argued as the set of metonymic and metaphorical connections that are obscured by powerful sites of cathetic investment. Racial hatred and willingness to sacrifice the poor might underpin the urban transformations of the early Cold War period, but decisions by individuals and corporations to withdraw to the suburbs could be justified by the threat of nuclear war, an ever-present danger that helped conceal other motives. The Bomb intensified one set of explanations for sacrifice and in doing so managed to conceal others, even dispersing a set of tropes bearing an uncanny similarity to the white mythology of suburban flight. Cities were depicted as wastelands full of potential danger not just from the Bomb but from urban residents themselves who pose a threat to the (white) suburbs. As Sharon Zukin argues, industrial landscapes are a “moral order” in the sense that economic decisions also reflect cultural values (254).

“This is not a place of honor”

The desert has its own nuclear history. Like cities, desert and rural spaces were transformed into sacrifices for the Bomb, but in the case of deserts radioactive contamination and death are ongoing realities. A number of scholars including Valerie Kuletz, Joseph Masco, Danielle Endres, Ward Churchill, and Masahide Kato have sought to document the nuclear landscape of the American West and the discourses surrounding it. For many of them, colonialism and disregard for indigenous lives and
lifeways are central to this project. Besides the Nevada Test Site itself, the most attractive target for academic criticism is perhaps the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), subject of a book by Peter van Wyck which uses a psychoanalytic approach to danger and risk in its explanation of WIPP as both a site of danger and desire (van Wyck 96-111).

Much of this attention is the product of two bizarre planning documents. Because the Environmental Protection Agency’s period of regulatory concern for the site is 10,000 years, markers have to be designed that will be intelligible in the distant future. To accomplish this task, a “Futures Panel” was assembled to determine what threats the nuclear waste repository would face from what kinds of society. Possibilities included the ideological hegemony of anti-scientific feminism; a reconquest of New Mexico by the “Free State of Chihuahua;” and the unprecedented longevity of the United States over a period of 10,000 years (Hora et al.). This report was followed up by a “Markers Panel” which speculated on the possibility of building gigantic rock sculptures, thickets of spikes, and centerless abstract sites to warn future humans, including the prominent statement that “This is not a place of honor,” all the while noting that such measures have not deterred archaeologists from intruding in the sacred sites of past civilizations warded with similar markings (Trauth, et al., F-49).

WIPP’s siting in the New Mexico desert is significant. When the issue of transuranic waste disposal was first seriously considered in the 1950s, deep geologic burial in desert salt caverns was but one possibility. One suggestion was that nuclear defense waste could be treated to reduce its volume, loaded on rockets, and fired into the sun. Other possibilities involved reprocessing (or “burning”) in reactors; burial in Antarctica; or setting hot radioactive wastes on the surface of glaciers until they melted
their way through into long-term stasis (Donath 22-3). Great optimism was displayed in
the powers of the ocean to contain and absorb nuclear waste. Over four decades
proposals included simple dumping, drilling beneath the sea bed, or firing it out of a
sort of submerged cannon (Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation 13-16). Even
after DOE settled on a geological repository in the continental United States, the desert
of New Mexico was not the only option. Potential waste sites were examined in
Michigan, Kansas, and elsewhere, and geological formations other than salt domes were
still being investigated after the WIPP site was chosen (Carter 664-5; Kerr 64). So the
decision to dispose of transuranic waste beneath the desert near Carlsbad, New Mexico
was a conscious choice—the WIPP that is could have been otherwise, and its desert
location might be seen as somewhat unlikely.

Colonial violence against indigenous peoples may explain a great deal of the
nuclear weapons and waste cycle, but it is a poor explanation for WIPP, although Kuletz
implicates it in her broad criticism of federal involvement on native lands (47, 97-99,
289). WIPP was sited in Eddy County, New Mexico, an area distinguished from the rest
of the state by its unusually high percentage of white inhabitants. The area was
sometimes called “Little Texas,” and is more reminiscent of the Bible Belt than the
Southwest (McCutcheon 19). The nearest native settlement is a Mescalero Apache
community some sixty miles away, as Kuletz points out (101). This is twice the distance
between Carlsbad and WIPP. Carlsbad’s mostly white residents fought for WIPP
because they thought it would help the region’s flagging economy (McCutcheon 12, 194).

But why did they seek nuclear waste, of all things? The simplest answer is that
they were already used to it. New Mexico housed so much of the American nuclear
defense infrastructure that WIPP was not perceived as a unique risk. The state had a
nuclear “cowboy culture” that downplayed the risks of nuclear waste and viewed the state as a natural place to store them (8-13). The DOE emphasized that all wastes stored at WIPP would come from defense activities, meaning that New Mexico’s citizens were doing their patriotic duty for their country, not serving as a dumping ground for commercial radioactive waste from other states. Opponents of the plan were portrayed as outsiders, foreign elements unfamiliar with the local culture (Downey 33). So WIPP ended up in the New Mexico desert because preexisting idea that the desert was a proper home for the nuclear weapons complex.

The numinous power of the Bomb is at home in the sacred landscape of the desert, a place with a powerful web of attachments marking it as sacred in the sense that it is set apart from human experience, both magical and abject. The desert is a landscape coded as sublime, combining both terror and fascination. In one discourse, the desert is hostile, frightening, demonic; a symbol of death. In a second, it is nearly the opposite: in continuity with a long monotheistic religious tradition, it is a place of refuge and holiness. Here one can find God far from the corruption of civilization. The desert represents raw nature, purification, and prophecy. This is the desert image of Mount Sinai, the wilderness prophets of the early Christian church, and the chintzy New Age spirituality of the late twentieth century. Both sets of investments reinforce each other in showing the desert as a place of power, whether of life or death. In the nuclear religion of Cold War, both were intimately fused into a single recuperation of the sublime. “Fierce landscapes,” writes Belden Lane, “remind us that what we long for and what we fear most are both already within us” (37).

In the wasteland trope preexisting investments were stitched together by the Bomb. According to Patricia Limerick, “in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word
desert, in its special meaning of arid land, was in fact synonymous with wilderness.” In the American West, “the word recovered its biblical harmony” (5). The desert was seen as an empty space, perfect for nuclear experiments. “It was almost providential,” Limerick writes, “the way in which aridity had reserved certain regions from settlement, and therefore left them suitable for bombing” (175). The Atomic Energy Commission described the human beings living downwind of the Nevada Test Site as “a low-use segment of the population.” Armed Forces magazine, in the inimitable style of the 1950s, described the American West as “a damn good place to dump used razor blades” (Gallagher, American Ground Zero xxiii-xxiv). As McCutcheon reports, “anyone from Carlsbad who would say ‘not in my backyard’ to nuclear waste would have to point to a desolate prairie” (34). Although the argument advanced is somewhat more complex, the title alone of Charles Reith and Bruce Thomson’s collection Deserts as Dumps? has a certain force to it.

The products of the Bomb weren’t simply to be dumped. The desert wasteland’s mix of austerity and awe would be complemented by the WIPP site, which in all of its proposed designs would have been a massive public works project on par with the pyramids of the Egyptian Pharaohs. The symbolic power of the WIPP markers makes them virtually guaranteed to fail as practical measures to prevent intrusion. Curses on Egyptian tombs were spectacularly ineffective. Mayan ruins, peppered with skull images that the WIPP panels saw as archetypal warnings, were quickly plundered by Europeans. The WIPP designs could even be seen as beautiful. Gene Rochlin notes that “intelligent life is notoriously incautious in indulging its curiosity.” The presence of markers only heightens mystery and encourages exploration. People tend to explore unique geological formations for their own sake, seeking something marvelous and
powerful, so the salt domes of WIPP might be enough to attract future explorers on their own. That the nearby Carlsbad Caverns have become a national tourist attraction reinforces this point.

The desert wasteland appears as a prominent setting in a great number of post-apocalyptic fictional works. These include Fritz Lieber’s *Night of the Long Knives*, in which lone survivors desire only sex and murder; Walter Miller’s *Canticle for Liebowitz*, in which a second nuclear war destroys a desert city once more; *Fallout I, II, and Fallout: New Vegas* in which post-apocalyptic cities and actual deserts blend into one another; the film and story *A Boy and His Dog*, which blend misogyny, survivalism, and a rejection of 1950s nostalgia; *The Book of Eli*, a post-nuclear Western, and all of the *Mad Max* franchise, which import similar Western motifs to Australia. The desert collapses time, hinting at the possibility of life’s total destruction, human civilizations of the distant past (e.g., Ancient Egypt, Babylon) and the distant future (as imagined in science fiction and by the WIPP panels), and the minute-to-minute exigencies of survival in the present. It is a perfect setting for apocalyptic time in which cycles of destruction and rebirth stretch on endlessly, with a future anticipated apocalypse always imminent. The desert’s specifically nuclear connection has to do with the physical destruction possible in a nuclear war, the siting of nuclear laboratories, testing, and infrastructure in the desert, and the sublime aspects of the desert as a signifier. Long a trope of religious significance, the desert was adapted easily to the quasi-secular religion of the Bomb, once reinvested with this significance, it metastasized throughout nuclear fiction and science fiction more generally as an alien landscape which is still recognizable (Womack 81).
The Logic of Sacrifice

The desert and city are different variations of the wasteland trope, united by sacrifice. Desert spaces, both magical and forbidding, have to be destroyed by the Bomb because the exigencies of national defense demand it. But the deserts are depicted as always having been empty, spaces free of human life that force us to contemplate what the world without us might be like, and in them, see the possibility for something we cannot fully recuperate. Cities seem to lack this sense of otherworldly power because they are monuments to human artifice, but the shattered city is a testament to the power of the Bomb as a weapon capable of overwhelming even the most enduring human constructions. The city wasteland is made into a desert by nuclear war, but it was not always so—the narrative of Detroit is so powerful because it was once prosperous and now is fallen, paying for its sins, whether they are imagined as corruption, excess, and racial otherness by conservatives or the depredations of neoliberalism and the auto industry in the “place where capitalism failed” in Frank Rashid's phrase (qtd. in Kossik 115). Cities too were places of sacrifice to the vagaries of nuclear deterrence.

My point here is not that there is a causal connection between the sacrifice of cities in nuclear imagination and their real abandonment. Indeed, the lack of such a causal connection makes the resemblance between tropes of urban decay and nuclear apocalypse all the more striking. The natural laws of capitalism and the supposedly objective foundations of deterrence both seem to mandate that some populations will be sacrificed. The shadow of the Bomb provided an alibi for abandonment. The city as a nuclear target relied on many of the same tropes that circulated amongst white suburbanites, including marauding gangs of destitute city dwellers, abandoned wastelands incapable of supporting life, dangerous others, and the stark contrast of
security and American values in the suburbs. All of these tropes could be animated by nuclear fear without acknowledging their parallel connections to white supremacist investments. By the same token, capital could flee on the basis of civil defense decentralization, making the now-unemployed urban population “collateral damage” rather than victims of neoliberal disregard for their welfare. The demand to know why there must be a sacrifice at all can be met with the melancholic reply that Žižek characterizes as the knave’s conservative mode of political engagement. The demand “why must there be sacrifice” is met by the sad lament, “why must there be sacrifice?”

The necessity for the loss is not in question. There is only space to sigh and wish it could be otherwise while we acknowledge that it cannot be so, generalizing the problem from the targeting of one group to an aspect of the immutable human condition (Žižek 56-7). This argument applies equally to nuclear deterrence and the neoliberal dislocation of industry in the Rust Belt. The available grounds for critique are limited by the unthinkable. Capitalism is not the Real, but when presented as such, alternatives are necessarily constricted. The same is the case with nuclear weapons. Once the logic of inevitable sacrifice is accepted, political discourse is limited to a series of “least-bad” decisions rather than a fundamental reordering of political and economic power.

The differences in how the logic of sacrifice manifests in deserts and cities also suggests that the psychoanalytic economy of desire does not preclude attention to material structures. What it means to say that the sign speaks through the subject is that the range of tropes available to make meaning is limited by the unconscious, the economy of the Symbolic in which the subject is formed. This economy is a way of describing how particular cultural forms are shaped over time. Some signs bear more cathectic investment than others. Some “work” to a great degree and some don’t.
Formations like the city-as-wasteland trope cannot be explained away by reference to an underlying structure that explains everything empirically identifiable in the world, but they also require attention to the metaphorical and metonymic connections that make them potential sites of cathetic investment. Psychoanalysis does not replace explanations based on race, class, gender or other categories, but instead provides a set of analytic tools for describing the ways that subjects speak in the world, helping to account for which tropes become durable and which fade away. An account of the wasteland based on desire does not dismiss racism or neoliberalism as explanations, but supplements them with a theory of desire that helps to describe the conditions necessary for these formations to last. As discussed in the next chapter, these ideologies can be understood as myths—networks of interlinked tropes that form a lasting pattern in which specific tropes are made meaningful.

Some Americans had the power and privilege to refuse sacrifice. Told that billions might die, they responded by insisting that they would make their own personal sacrifices not to be included amongst the dead. Sacrifice was met by survivalism, a set of practices employed by those who accepted the logic of infinity but inverted it such that the goal was no longer avoiding nuclear war, but surviving it. Communities formed, knit together by the myth of survival and the collective enjoyment that could be found in the fantasy of a society renewed by fire, where cities made into deserts could be rebuilt by true patriots unhindered by the loathsome otherness of their neighbors. If those who would die in an imagined nuclear war were already undesirable, the fantasy of nuclear war could have a strong appeal. Whites fleeing the cities did not just build shelters. The
suburbs themselves became shelters. In them, the relatively privileged could indulge in the fear of nuclear war while also enjoying the prospect in a Lacanian sense. Some grappled with the challenge of the Real that the figurative desert represented, and imagined themselves seeding a new garden in its place. In nuclear fantasies, the sacrificial wasteland was an absence, whereas the reborn post-apocalyptic community was a new presence. The prospect that absence and presence could be controlled—that sacrifice could be refused in the name of survival—is an iteration of fort-da and a locus for enjoyment. What seeds were sown reveal the desire to transcend mediation in the form of a corrupt society, a motion of the nuclear death drive as it wended its course around the trauma of the Real.

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20 I am indebted to Eric Watts for this observation.
CHAPTER 4: SURVIVAL

The point is generally misunderstood, but the objective of civilian defense is not merely to survive a nuclear war. By itself, such an activity is meaningless. Rather, the aim of civil defense is to assure enough survivors so that the nation can be reconstructed and its social structure, fundamental morality, and traditions be preserved.

--Thomas Martin and Donald Latham, Strategy for Survival (emphasis in original)

When the Shit Hits the Fan

The death drive is the desire for continuity. The cost of participating in the order of the Symbolic is developing the “alienating armor” of identity that allows subjects to function themselves as signifiers. Now separated into a discrete entity, loss becomes possible. This loss tends to manifest in an object of desire (petit objet a). Each individual is distanced from the object of their desire and can never fully reincorporate it even if it is attained since each object only stands in for something else, a lost sense of continuity that the conditions of the subject’s existence prohibit from ever being fulfilled. I have argued here that this desire for continuity is what underlies the drive for unmediated contact: media is by definition what is “between” us, what brings us together but also marks our irrevocable solitude. Most of the time, we can forget this condition and act in the world of mediated things, but the eruption of the Real dislocates us and reminds us of that world that we cannot capture in words. Nuclear weapons are of special significance (although probably not unique) in that they remind us that we need the world, but the world does not need us. This non-human reality, undivided by our anthropocentric classifications, is at once horrifying and attractive. We are pulled
toward the Real but can never have it; thus it is that we attach to symbols with a sense of the Real. Locked into our subjectivity, we come to enjoy its capacity to enjoy. We invest in our perceived control over the conditions of presence and absence. This is how the desire for the Real is channeled into the media at our disposal including language. It is how the desire for an unmediated world comes to be a desire for mediation.

The death drive is not exclusively about the desire to be destroyed. Death qualifies as a return to continuity, so the desire for death fits into this scheme, but it is not the only means of reaching out for the Real. Lacan, interpreting Freud, argued that there was only really one drive which contained both Eros and the death instinct. This closely follows Bataille’s desire for continuity which is expressed in both sex and death. Our capacity to confuse reality with the Real through the loop of the subject and its enjoyment of subjectivity itself means that other symbols can stand in for the Real and serve as sites of cathexis. The desire to reproduce and the desire to destroy are linked: both express a desire for continuity. The individual could die and be dissolved in the alien movements of the general economy’s matter and energy, or could produce generations of other beings and be lost in a lineage stretching back to the origin of the species and forward to the heat death of the universe (long enough, for us, to be forever). Desire for the Real is therefore met by some with a will to survive. The fort-da game contains both presence and absence. The apocalypse is enjoyable largely because we imagine ways to control these conditions. Organized under the sign of survival, we imagine that a more authentic society might be rebuilt. We imagine catastrophe with horror, but there is also a whisper of desire underneath it: human society is one enormous mechanism to separate us from the Real, so if we live through the fire, we get to start over, closer to the land, closer to our nature, closer to the Real. We could form
more genuine bonds with others and establish what might be thought of as communities of the Real. There might indeed be a silver lining to the mushroom cloud.

Over the last seventy years in the United States, this desire has been expressed in the myth of survival. While some populations are quietly slated for conditional sacrifice, other subjects define themselves around their imagined perseverance in a post-nuclear world. Bearing strong similarities to the romanticized mythology of the American frontier, fictional narratives of post-apocalyptic survival left persistent marks on American culture. Communities are organized around the texts, technologies, and practices of survival and the fantasy of rebuilding. Beginning with novels such as *Level Seven*, *Canticle for Liebowitz*, *Farnham’s Freehold*, *Dr. Bloodmoney* and *Alas, Babylon*, post-apocalyptic stories have remained influential both through mainstream items like *The Road* and more right-wing, survivalist-community focused works such as *One Second After* and *Patriot Dawn* in which survivalists imagine themselves tested against fantasized hordes of others who are often marked as racially or culturally different, as Chapter Three demonstrated. While it is possible to analyze these stories as representatives of a literary subgenre, the powerful cultural labor of post-apocalyptic narrative stretches beyond explicit fiction and gestures towards a place previously reserved for myth.

This chapter focuses on survival, the counterpoint to the sacrifice discussed in Chapter 3. If control over sacrificial zones represents power over absence, imagining survival creates a sense of power over presence. I will begin with a discussion of myth as a potential frame to interpret post-apocalyptic survivor narratives. Mythic criticism, once popular amongst some rhetoricians, has largely fallen out of favor, but a reinterpretation of its psychoanalytic underpinnings might make it a useful avenue for
exploration of the desire for the Real. A brief examination of Cold War survivor fiction follows. Whereas the last chapter focused on the populations and spaces imagined as sacrifices in a nuclear war, this look at survivalism will emphasize the attendant myth of rebirth and regeneration that relatively privileged groups had imagined for themselves. Because I am interested in the breadth and persistence of the Bomb’s influence, I have chosen to focus on recurrent tropes across many novels, films, games, and other media, focusing on the tropes themselves rather than a close reading of these artifacts since the argument here relies on breadth rather than depth. The next section is an attempt to balance that breadth with a closer look at three recent, conservative survivalist novels to show the continued reverberations of the nuclear survival myth and the lasting disruptive power of the Bomb. The power of this myth of violence and rebirth to shape both individual and collective identities is then explored through survivalist dating websites. These, together with the hybrid human and electronic networks that constitute survivalist communities, suggest a contradiction between fear of the collapse of technological society and a dependence on it for identity and communication. This contradiction dissolves when survivalism is seen as a form of collective ritual rather than a wholly practical means of protection against catastrophe. Survivalist dating sites are mediated expressions of the desire for unmediated connection through fantasies of love and death. Far from the popular media image of naïve extremists, survivalists are “good readers:” the horror of Trinity, the indulgent scenario planning of nuclear simulations, infinite-risk logic of the disarmament movement, and twinned fear of and desire for the wasteland are echoed every time a North Carolina patriot stocks up on hollow point ammunition to defend his fallout shelter from unprepared hordes of others and a young Houston professional plans her escape routes for when the “shit hits the fan.”
The Survival Myth

In a little-known article published in *Medicine and War*, John Burry argued that nuclear war is, and must remain, a species of myth (Burry). Nuclear survivor stories, surprisingly coherent as a category, might constitute a specific mythic tradition within this larger frame. Elements that are inessential to the plot are still very similar between different works. Most of them exhibit similar characters, involve a hero’s journey from one place to another, meditate on lawlessness, and describe new belief structures. These stories also walked a line between science fiction and social commentary. Because nuclear war was considered a real possibility throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the central element of post-nuclear setting gave credibility to these stories that space operas (for example) lacked. While still speculative, therefore, nuclear survivor stories were plausible, putting them in a non-falsifiable but persuasive category of their own, the possible but unreal.

These characteristics are all suggestive of myth. Unfortunately, myth suffers from a good deal of conceptual confusion. Traditional concepts of myth, even as they are applied by rhetoricians, tend to assume that myth is “merely” metaphor standing in for some underlying truth that could be expressed literally. Further, most deployments of myth rely on a problematic psychoanalytic interpretation of the subject as the bearer of some essential kernel of identity, a hidden interiority that is expressed through, rather than shaped by, language. Myth is nevertheless important because it allows us to analyze durable structures of metaphor as coherent themes that often work enthymematically when specific instantiations reference a larger, familiar, narrative structure. Without analyzing these durable narratives, criticism of post-nuclear survivor stories would miss the work that they do in organizing publics in relation to the Bomb.
Elements of “mythic criticism” have been present in rhetoric at least since the 1960s. Michael Osborn argued in a 1967 essay that “archetypal metaphors” exist “immune to changes wrought by time” and “unaffected by cultural variation” (“Archetypal Metaphors” 116). Osborn claimed that oppositions such as “light/dark” and “up/down” are universal. These metaphors are grounded in human experience and basic motivation. Osborn’s primary influence seems to be literary critic Northrop Frye, although his attempt to explain how universal categories stem from shared extralinguistic human attributes is also reminiscent of Carl Jung. Sigmund Freud also made the argument that biology directly influences human experience, and through it, myth (Ellwood 87). Freud and Jung initially differed over the importance of myth. Although Freud used myth even in his early work to explain his theories of repression and the unconscious, he criticized Jung for taking myth too seriously as an independent frame for psychoanalysis. Whereas Freud saw myth as a potential object of study for psychoanalysis, Jung saw the work of the field as itself mythic (Sels). Still, the opposition between these two perspectives is not as stark as it may seem. As Daniel Merkur argues, although Freud “adopted an ostensibly ‘objective’ perspective” and regarded Oedipux Rex as an allegory for the Oedipus complex, “he wrote publicly as though his theory...were being argued on the basis of Sophocles’ text. Far from illustrating the Oedipus complex, Oedipus Rex became its proof text” (7). Freud also softened his position later in life, taking myth more seriously in books such as Moses and Monotheism (Sels).

It is Jung rather than Freud, however, who has most clearly influenced rhetorical scholars attending to myth. Jung’s theory of myth explained it as a phenomenon resulting from the human unconscious. Basic structures of thought inaccessible to the
conscious mind are projected outwards onto the world but they exist as categories that preexist any specific instantiation. Archetypes are one aspect of this projection, as underlying character concepts are used to interpret concrete phenomena. As Osborn would later argue, these types and stories are culturally and temporally universal (Jung 65). Significantly for our purposes here, Jung explained the dynamics of the nuclear arms race through this mythic frame and the “shadow” (396-399). Jung became widely known through the work of Joseph Campbell, who also drew from mythologist Mircea Eliade (who in fact collaborated with Jung and advanced a somewhat similar theory of archetypes). Campbell proposed that meaning “reveals itself” but one must first know the “grammar of symbols,” for which there is “no better modern tool than psychoanalysis” (Campbell vii).

The rhetorical theory of myth used by Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frentz is adapted from Jung and Campbell’s ideas. Rushing cites Campbell and the notion of the “culture hero” in her discussion of Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, for example, a significant project for nuclear criticism (429). Rushing and Frentz argue for the place of myth in a field they saw as increasingly focused on ideological criticism, using Jung’s work to argue for universal elements of narrative and an unconscious interiority that is expressed outwards on the world. Even in 1991, these two scholars saw myth as being “marginalized,” “dismissed,” and “subordinated” in cultural and rhetorical studies (Rushing and Frentz 387). This feeling was perhaps in part a response to a debate begun by Robert Rowland in the pages of Communication Studies a year prior, although others such as Barry Brummett, Michael Osborn and Martha Solomon stood by Rushing and defended the concept, eliciting a somewhat noncommittal response from Rowland on the potential uses of myth (Brummett; Osborn “Defense”;
Rowland; Rushing; Solomon). Uses of myth in the same Jungian vein still occasionally crop up, such as James Darsey’s citation of Jung in discussing the “journey” metaphor in President Obama’s discourse (89).

Some elements of so-called “mythic criticism” are compelling. The theory of archetypes does seem to have some basis in observation. Recurrent characters crop up in much public discourse and many works of art. Alongside the “Wise Old Man,” the “Culture Hero,” and the “Shaman” we might add modern incarnations such as the “Greedy Capitalist,” the “Lecherous Politician” or the “Vapid Reality TV Star.” All of these character types perennially reappear carrying a certain cultural import and valence. Similarly, Campbell’s heroic journey does seem to show up time and again virtually unchanged. In the context of nuclear fiction, the “Mad Scientist” (Bluthgeld in Dr. Bloodmoney, the titular character of Dr. Strangelove, Lufteufel in Deus Irae) the “Tough Wasteland Survivor” (Vic in A Boy and His Dog, the narrator of Fritz Lieber’s Night of the Long Knives, the player-characters in all of the Fallout games) and the evil “Old Regime Survivor” (the Enclave of the Fallout games, the sentient computer of I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream) are all characters that might qualify as archetypal.

The concept of the journey is also frequent enough to be a generic attribute (the player’s quest in every Fallout game, Riddley’s journey through post-apocalyptic England in Riddley Walker, the journey to the sea in The Road, the race to Antarctica in Down to the Sunless Sea, etc.). Ultimately most of these stories are tied together by a simple overarching theme: a nuclear war occurs, some people survive (often underground), and some kind of “good” new society arises, opposed by “bad” people.
Most of these stories are written or created by Americans, and this origin shows: most of these stories are essentially post-apocalyptic Westerns with tough individualists surviving in a violent new frontier.

These convincing elements might be more solidly grounded by acknowledging some of their limitations. First, there is little evidence to suggest that archetypes are culturally universal. Leaving aside his unfortunate mention of “race consciousness,” Osborn’s claim that constructs such as “light/dark” have cross-cultural meaning requires ignoring a number of exceptions for nearly every rule and frequently accepting widespread European practices as universals. The claim that “white” is good and “black” is bad would rightfully make many modern scholars uncomfortable, especially those who are aware of the destructive legacy of aesthetics articulated to race. Osborn himself later recognized that archetypes were not culturally universal, but this creates serious difficulties for the view that they express some hidden unconscious commonality (Osborn “Trajectory”). Assertions about “sea” versus “land” and other geographical metaphors are also historically and culturally dependent. It is difficult to imagine that an inland culture like the nineteenth century Comanche would attach meaning to the ocean identical to that given by sixteenth century Polynesian islanders or eleventh century Norse Vikings. Simply noting that certain archetypes or narrative structures are durable is not enough because it denies the epistemological basis of the conclusions that Jungian critics derive from the theory and mistakes durability for inevitability. If the theory concedes that the unconscious is not a universal influence that gives rise to recurrent tropes, it begs the question of why these tropes are durable in the first place.

21 Exceptions include *Mad Max, Down to the Sunless Sea*, and *On the Beach*. 
A related problem is that Jungian theory of the unconscious assumes questionable models of the subject and communication. To argue that myths are unconscious tendencies projected outwards assumes a prior, extra-linguistic interior subject. In *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, Lacan argues that “nothing touching on the behavior of the human being as subject, or on anything in which he [sic] realizes himself [sic], in which he [sic] quite simply is, can escape being bound by the laws of speech” (83). The unconscious is not some hidden interiority but is “continuous with the external dialogue,” Lacan writes. It is the discourse of the Other understood as the Symbolic register, not of the internal self (112). The sign speaks through us, and we are defined by what is said in the cacophony of the parlor like Kenneth Burke’s famous “unending conversation” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (110-111).

This observation that the subject is shaped by language also complicates the model of communication on which Jungian myth interpretation relies. Joseph Campbell assumes that truth “reveals itself,” or in other words, that it exists prior to its expression. This is the same argument that Sophia Heller uses to dismiss myth altogether: myth is “merely” metaphor, and once the underlying truth that it references is exposed, myth is irrelevant (1-5). The assumptions here are that language can perfectly represent the world, that such a thing as “zero degree” language is possible, and that metaphor is merely ornamentation. As argued in previous chapters, language cannot communicate an unproblematic Real—the real by definition is what escapes symbolization. Efforts to construct mythic explanations of the world are exercises in reality, not the Real, meaning that they form human social reality but do so only through symbols which necessarily fail to capture the totality of the world external to human consciousness (Lundberg, *Lacan in Public* 25-26). This doesn’t deny that myth is understood as a
revelation of underlying reality, but it does mean that what works its influence on mythmakers is not the Real but the set of symbolic ties that constitute reality, as distinguished by Lacan.

Acknowledging that there is no detectable “deep structure” that determines the form of any particular myth, it is more useful to think of myth as a durable constellation of metaphor and metonymy that forms the context for specific narratives shaped by its operation. Myth is the network of signification that organizes individual metaphors into culturally durable narrative assemblages, a specific economy of meaning within the more general economy of mediation. Like stellar constellations, myths are durable but not timeless: their meaning and structure precedes any specific individual but changes over time. Within this scheme, archetypes are simply ossified metaphors, sites of repeated investment that take on an illusory quality of permanence. William Marderness argues that myth is distinguished by its display of an analogy of form (23-24). In this sense, it is a species of metalepsis, determining meaning through an enthymematic comparison of one set of metaphorical relationships to another. Auditors familiar with the larger story will fill in missing pieces, investing absences with meaning. Robert Ellwood argues that this is precisely what makes myth powerful. No myth can answer every question, so this “symbol in narrative form” requires the audience to participate (4-7).

What might distinguish myth from genre is its relationship to the Real. Both myth and genre are characterized by serial repetitions of certain tropes in a narrative form which come to establish conventions for their type. Myths, however, are understood by their adherents to represent a hidden reality, like the deep structure which some (mistakenly) understand to be the Real. Fans of romantic comedies or film
noir may invest a great deal of significance in their chosen genre, but they are unlikely to believe that said genre represents a timeless, transcendental truth about cosmic order. Similarly, myths have an instructive aspect. They are supposed to be guides for behavior, as the title of one of Campbell’s books suggests: *Myths We Live By.* Rituals inspired by myth are products of human artifice, but ritual adherence serves to produce a sense of the Real as those who keep them can experience a connection with a mysterious order that greatly exceeds them (Eliade 28). Thus myth is a means of feigning unicity by incorporating the threatening Real into a predictable, mediated order, one that offers some reassurance in the face of the possibility of nothingness. As Eliade puts it, religion “expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man [sic] thirsts for being. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness” (64). Like the sublime metaphor for Longinus, myth conceals the fact of its own artifice. Roland Barthes calls this “hide-and-seek,” a move offering “an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation” (118). This is the “alibi” of myth. Even as it constructs a narrative, it is always somewhere else, never present to be revealed as artifice (Barthes 123-124). This is true also in the community-forming properties of myth. Individual subjects do not so much build relations with one another through myth as they identify shared relations between themselves and the myth mirrored in others, although the sign in which they are mutually invested appears as a bond between them rather than a third term. In other words, they share a relation to the

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22 “Genre” and “myth” do not have to be understood as ontologically distinct categories for this argument to work. What we learn from interpreting something as myth might differ from what would be learned treating it as representative of a genre, but I do not mean to draw some impervious boundary between the two. They are distinguished here as means of interpretation, not as formally distinct categories.
myth, not necessarily with one another, and thus identify through a relation of non
relation or metaxy, as Lundberg puts it (Lacan in Public 101-103).

To call post-nuclear survival a “myth” is not a statement on the possible accuracy
of survival plans, but instead draws attention to the power this arrangement of
metaphors has to influence behavior and belief. Civil defense was revived in the early
1980s during first Reagan administration when Cold War tensions (and urban social
disparities) again came into the national spotlight (Winkler 124-133). According to
apocalypse historian Frederic Baumgartner, awareness that the world might end
became more intense in the Atomic Age than it ever had been before, even at the height
of the Dark Ages (Baumgartner 213). A sense of impending judgment tied specifically to
Revelation was evident in popular books like Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth
and among Reagan Administration officials, perhaps including the president himself
(Knelman). Although civil defense remained limited, preparation for Armageddon still
occurred. The ritual aspect of these preparations was evident in the repetition of rites
meant to protect against the dangers of the Bomb, even ones met with a cynical reaction
in some quarters, like “duck and cover” drills. Preparation was sometimes given an
almost mystical quality. T.K. Jones, who bore the magisterial title of Deputy Under
Secretary for Defense for Research and Engineering, Strategic and Theater Nuclear
Forces, said in 1981, “If there are enough shovels to go around, everybody’s going to
make it...It’s the dirty that does it,” hardly a reassuring statement, and one for which he
was quickly silenced (Scheer 18). Jones’s dirt and shovels are presented as talismans to
ward against danger even though the increasing power of hydrogen bombs which made
civil defense impractical by the 1960s had continued apace into the 1980s. Repetition
and ritual are hallmarks of survivalism today, with many “preppers” practicing their plans and endlessly revising them for the apocalypse they imagine.

These (ostensibly) secular rituals suggest a repeated investment in apocalypse. The reward for adherence to the practices of survivalism is a chance to start society anew. Those who are prepared will survive, and they will be the ones to reestablish society with the corruption and distortions of the status quo swept away. As Senator Richard Russell said in 1968, “[i]f we have to start over again with another Adam and Eve, then I want them to be Americans and not Russians” (“Russell Urges Antimissile Force”). This is the real enjoyment of apocalyptic violence—it is, as Frederick Jesset wrote, a chance to indulge the fantasy that one’s neighbors are gone and that the world can now be restored in whatever fashion we think best. The return to “true” American values was a perennial theme in the large number of post-apocalyptic stories that are essentially Westerns concerned with what Richard Slotkin called “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin). Heroic, independent protagonists, mostly men and usually capable of intense violence, defend the frontier values of democracy, self-reliance, and hard work.

The essentially racist nostalgia for the frontier and the “real” American life of the (white) suburbs was a common theme in fiction civil defense discussions, the regenerative supplement that accompanied destruction of otherized groups marked as sacrificial. Robert Heinlein’s novel *Farnham’s Freehold* is perhaps the best example of this whole dynamic in play. The titular character, Hugh Farnham, survives with his family, a few acquaintances, and a black servant in his suburban home bomb shelter, only to emerge into a pristine land with no evidence of war. Farnham is able govern himself and his family however he pleases, including a frank acceptance of incest in a
conversation with his daughter. Ultimately the group is discovered by technologically-advanced strangers, only to discover that they have been transported into a distant future where dark-skinned peoples who survived World War III rule the Earth. Discovering that whites are now kept as slaves and food for these villains, Farnham endeavors to travel back in time before the war and prepare himself with the means to prevent their domination of the Earth. His freehold is a libertarian dream, ready to defend white suburban values (while also transgressing them for pleasure) against threatening racial others. An extreme example for its time, the themes of white supremacy, racial fear, libertarian freedom, and utopian communities flourishing after a nuclear war are consistent with modern survivalist literature, as the next section will analyze in detail.

Even though government civil defense programs were limited in scope, fantasies of destruction have a powerful allure that has continued past the end of the Cold War as a popular private concern. Consistent with suspicion of government that characterizes the American right wing, modest government civil defense programs were supplemented with much more vigorous private efforts by survivalists, along the lines of Farnham’s fictional preparations. These fantasies represent judgment of one’s enemies and vindication of one’s beliefs, the obliteration of an oppressive order to make way for the birth of freedom. Again, the terror of nuclear war comes with its own attraction, but the mythic template laid by stories of the Bomb continues to serve as a site for communities to form around the sign of survival, and to large measure, the Bomb itself. Presented with an endless stream of predictions for the world’s destruction over the last seventy years, survivalists have embraced their own version of Pascal’s wager: the risk of destruction might be low, and the risk of survival might be low if nuclear war is to come,
but any risk of survival makes the preparation effort a sacred mission. The Bomb revealed an indifferent universe that could function perfectly well without human beings. Survival myths helped to salve the horror of the Real by asserting a reason to struggle against death.

The promise of renewal means attachment to the Bomb and access to the Real. It is easy to lampoon survivalist preparations as ineffective. Many prepare for a specific event—nuclear war, solar flare, supervolcano eruption, virus—rather than catastrophe in general. Many rely on bad science, optimistic assumptions about resource availability, or hopeless preparations out of scale with the events they are supposed to survive. This criticism misses the function of the survivalist myth as a means of access to the Real.

Enjoyment is a product of ritual adherence—in other words, repetition. Survivalists don’t seek to bring the comforts of society into a world of chaos. Rather, they continually practice living in a world without society as it is currently understood. They simulate a form of “genuine” sociality, an unmediated existence. They aren’t trying to make things easy. They are enjoying the idea that they might be hard. To illustrate this point, the next section will explore the paradoxical ways that survivalist communities form with the help of technological media around the fantasy of a total obliteration of that same media and the society that it supports. To show the distant and pervasive ripples of the survival myth, I have chosen two perhaps unlikely networks to exemplify the fantasy: electromagnetic pulse fiction and Internet dating sites.

Feeling a Pulse

Nuclear fear created the framework for other kinds of apocalyptic technological visions, most of which now seem to include the fear that technology, like an angry God, will abandon us. Widespread electrical failure from solar flares or electromagnetic pulse
EMP (EMP) attacks is a recurrent theme in survivalist fiction. EMP narratives are interesting both for the kind of work they do in organizing right-wing survivalist communities and because they show strong continuity with Cold War fears. Boosted by Y2K, 5/5/2000, and the “Mayan Doomsday” hype of 2012, survivalist communities have knitted together through movies, television shows, press coverage, and the World Wide Web. Their concerns mirror those of Jacques Ellul to some extent, who wrote that a society dependent on computerization would face disaster if some unexpected event suddenly undermined the technological life to which we are adapted (391). Its godlike structural position makes the Bomb a metonymic herald for the larger ills of technology and its omnipresence in modern life. Ira Chernus argued that the Bomb was the primary organizing symbol of a machine society that demanded sacrifice and total control (Dr. Strangegod 136-137). We are presented with another paradox: communities that set out to resist dependence on the global colonization of technique have become heavily reliant on electronic communication for their very identities. How do we explain why people who seek to live “off the grid” are largely connected by the system that they ostensibly fear and distrust?

In the Left Behind series of Christian apocalyptic novels, Chris Lundberg finds a “readerly sadism” through which devout Christians who see themselves as members of a marginalized victim community can enjoy the suffering of their persecutors without violating Christian injunctions against violence. The series combines themes of persecution (outlaw Christian groups victimized by the Antichrist’s regime), fear of global governance (the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, takes power as leader of the

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23 The 1962 nuclear test Starfish Prime revealed that electromagnetic pulse (EMP) effect of nuclear explosions had been greatly underestimated. EMP-caused electrical surges disable electronic equipment over a potentially very large area of the Earth’s surface, depending on yield, altitude, and other attributes of the explosion.
United Nations), and graphic apocalyptic violence. Evangelical communities form around these texts not simply because they are shared, but because they are read in a particular way to forge common links in sadistic violence (“The Pleasure of Sadism” 117-120). Evangelicals feel dispossessed by a dominant secular society that they interpret as hostile to their faith, but fantasies of revenge allow them to assert agency against it (Lundberg, “The Pleasure of Sadism” 127). Although one traditional Freudian reading of violent fantasies suggests that they are a form of catharsis that prevents aggression from being externalized on living victims, Lundberg argues that apocalyptic texts form communities based on enjoyment of violence. The conditions of societal disintegration allow characters to enjoy advanced technology, killing, and worldly commerce because Armageddon suspends the normal rules of moral behavior (“The Pleasure of Sadism” 126).

Three survivalist stories, all premised on the collapse of the North American electrical grid, display similar themes. The most widely-read of these, William Forstchen’s One Second After, takes place in an idyllic North Carolina town after an electromagnetic pulse caused by unknown agents destroys all modern electronics and throws the United States into nineteenth-century conditions. The main character, military history professor John Matherson, thinks to himself that he lives in a “Norman Rockwell painting” even before the pulse (18). Matherson’s town of Black Mountain is one that progress has passed by, where folks still leave doors unlocked and an ice cream truck still makes the rounds in summer. When told that he “can’t keep time back forever,” Matherson wistfully suggests that he “can try” (20-2). Matherson dislikes text messaging because it lacks the authenticity of phone calls and worries about being “left behind,” thanking God when his daughter’s new-fangled CD player dies (26-30). When
the pulse does hit, he observes that we were “all conditioned” by technology, so dependent that a “third-rate lunatic...with only one or two nukes” could “level the playing field against us” (64). Conservative ideology is plain throughout the book, although subtle by the standards of survivalist novels. Matherson asserts control as a somewhat reluctant military leader, carrying out executions of looters in the town square and ultimately organizing an army to fight off a gang of cannibalistic marauders from the big cities. Throughout the story he thinks of the lessons left by America’s patriotic founders, a theme that powerfully influences contemporary right-wing extremist groups like the survivalist Patriot movement. Matherson works to bring industrial and communication technology back to Black Mountain even though he decries the failure of America’s technological society.

It is the US Army that ultimately saves the day at the novel’s conclusion. The scene is probably supposed to be reminiscent of American soldiers liberating Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War, although it is also made clear that the United States will never regain its position as the world’s dominant power. Throughout the book, there is much praise for America’s military legacy and various characters are veterans of wars ranging from World War II to the Second Gulf War. Survivalists in the hills turn out to be valued community members, echoing the help that persecuted Christians play in Left Behind (159). The execution scene, where Matherson shoots two unapologetic tattooed punks for looting, is almost a metonymy for the whole book: we who have sinned have been judged and condemned. Only violence can cleanse us. Liberal academics get their comeuppance: “They’ll never make it now,” says the president of Matherson’s conservative Christian college. “I bet...they’re sitting around like the French nobles did at Versailles even as the mob swarmed over the gates. I bet they’re
singing ‘Give Peace a Chance,’ even as they starve to death” (212). It’s left up to conservative veterans and their followers to “rebuild America as we want it to be” (215).

*One Second After* thus shares significant elements with *Left Behind*, especially in its narrative of societal collapse, Christian reclamation, and the vindication of supposedly victimized conservatives. All of this is done without explicitly religious messages—no character in the book seems particularly devout, but conservative “Christian values” are essentially equivalent to the survivalist virtues of self-reliance, community, and sacrifice. Fortschen’s book is also significant for the continuity with Cold War nuclear fear demonstrated by its substantial foreword and afterword. The afterword, written by US Navy Captain Bill Sanders, explains that the dangers of electromagnetic pulse are real, all resulting from our “technologically oriented society” the vulnerability of which “increases daily as our use and dependence on electronics continues to accelerate.” The foreword, by conservative politician Newt Gingrich, explicitly links the story to *Alas, Babylon* and the movie *Testament*, “great classics of the Cold War” nuclear fear genre, which also influenced Gingrich himself (12). The book is therefore situated in a longer history of survivalist destruction-and-rebirth fantasy, cultivating enjoyment in the suffering of enemies (starving liberal academics, violently executed “punk” looters, and gruesome battles and executions involving ex-criminal marauders). It is explicitly intended as a warning call for preparation.

More explicit still is James Knight’s *The Pulse of Allah*, in which a conspiratorial Muslim Coalition unites the Islamic world, invades Europe, and launches an EMP attack on North America. Muslims are portrayed as rapists, murderers, cowards, and zealots who commit genocide in Israel and intend the same for Europeans. From a survivalist perspective, Knight’s portrayal of Americans is more interesting. Within a week the US
is reduced to rioting, murder, cannibalism, and rape, as the “underclass” rebels (106). Liberals are again an object of scorn and fantasized revenge, as the same people who “regarded them [survivalists] as gun toting Neanderthals only days before” are suddenly the victims of bloody and humiliating depredations (106). The government is equally bad, with the IRS, FAA, FEMA, and social welfare agencies described as variously meddling, breeding moral corruption, or simply ineffective. Americans are fallen. “Bloated government” is fortunately resolved by the pulse and attendant bloodshed (Knight 296).24 The military, however, is universally praised, and the book is littered with unnecessary acronyms and technical weapons specs, nearly pornographic when compared with equally lurid descriptions of rape and sexual violence (106, 196, 303). The author urges readers in a brief end note to take the threat seriously, and states in the dedication that he hopes that the story “inspires you to be a bit more prepared so that you can take care of yourself” should society collapse.

_Patriot Dawn_, written by “Max Velocity” and available (like _Pulse of Allah_) for download through Amazon, best embodies hardcore, right-wing survivalist fantasy. The prologue details America’s future collapse, beginning with the claim that the 2012 election “had been the mortal blow to the idea of America” (1). Following terrorist attacks, financial meltdown, and the collapse of America’s electricity grid, Patriot organizations and conservative groups like the Tea Party are outlawed by the government, which has changed the American flag (in ways that resemble Barack Obama’s campaign logo) and restyled itself as “the Regime” after the South secedes again. Survivalist “preppers” are specifically targeted for murder or interment in

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24 This sentiment recalls a similar musing in _Alas, Babylon_ when two main characters are cheered up after a Soviet-US nuclear war by the thought that they no longer have to pay income taxes.
“reeducation camps” if they are found to be stockpiling food (13-4). That all citizens are required to receive subcutaneous RFID chips mirrors a similar move in *Left Behind* and a long-standing Christian paranoia about the “mark of the Beast” described in *Revelation*, although *Patriot Dawn* is not explicitly religious.

The main characters, Jack and Caitlin Berenger, are two survivalists in the Washington D.C. area, both ex-military, who fight a bloody battle with the rapacious forces of the Homeland Security Department and are forced to flee. They take refuge with an old Army Ranger colleague who is organizing military resistance against the government using supplies of food, ammunition, and other materiel stockpiled by likeminded survivalists before the collapse. The character’s names are revealing. Jack Berenger (who seems to resemble *Platoon*’s Staff Sergeant Barnes, played by Tom Berenger) has a son named Andrew (Andrew, Jack’s son). The two youngest children are Sarah and Connor, perhaps in reference to the tough survivalist Sarah Connor of the *Terminator* franchise. The most prominent non-white characters are a Latino rapist and former gang member serving the regime and the evil Director Woods, who sounds suspiciously like Reverend Jeremiah Wright except for his violent sexual proclivities and membership in the Nation of Islam (Velocity 126). The book valorizes US Army veterans much like *Pulse of Allah* and *One Second After*, although its characters feel no remorse killing those who side with the Regime. Along the way, a number of other references appear that may be intended for a survivalist audience—the name “Red Dawn” and the phrase “Okay, Let’s Roll,” for example.25 The electronic book also contains ads for Max Velocity’s tactical manuals and nonfiction prepper books.

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25 “Okay, let’s roll” may be a reference to the final words of Todd Beamer, who apparently led the attempt to disrupt the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001.
Readerly sadism seems to be at work in all three novels. In all of them, a small group of people distrusts technological society to some extent, takes the threat of collapse seriously, is ostracized for its efforts, and is vindicated when weak liberals, complacent consumers, and the dependent underclass are plunged into violence and dismay. Normal injunctions against violence are suspended, and characters are even allowed to mimic oppressive governments when they execute evildoers, steal supplies, or impose their own versions of martial law. The context in which these books operate suggests that an analysis based only on their textual properties could miss their larger significance as loci of investment for the enjoyment of violence. Both their medium of delivery and the larger network that defines it are important. All three books represent different parts of a spectrum that defines right-wing conservatism especially as embodied in the Patriot movement. This millenarian survivalist movement coalesced in the early 1990s from elements in the gun rights, Christian fundamentalist, Aryan Nation, and evangelical apocalyptic movements. The Patriot and related militia groups are notable for being “arguably the first major U.S. social movements to be organized primarily through overlapping, horizontal, nontraditional electronic media” such videotape distribution, AM radio, and the Internet (Berlet and Lyons 289). The Internet is not just a new means to transmit right-wing survivalist messages to potential recruits, insignificant beyond the content of its messages. A material account of mediation should attend to the community-shaping role of the Internet itself.

All three survivalist books mentioned here are available electronically on Amazon.com. A customer searching for One Second After, the most mainstream of the three, will be directed to a set of other publications automatically. Amazon includes features that display other books that customers bought along with or instead of the one
revealed by a search, books “frequently bought together,” and a range of products with similar descriptions. In this case, Amazon’s algorithms will suggest a variety of nonfiction survivalist handbooks, Patriot-based electronic novels like *Patriot Dawn*, and even classic Cold War nuclear novels such as *Alas, Babylon*. Because Amazon sells a wide range of products, these suggestions are more than intertextual: they also include oxygen tablets for food storage, DVDs, military medical kits, and more, even nuclear simulation games like *First Strike*. Algorithms will refine suggestions over time based on what customers have rated or purchased, steadily expanding the range of survivalist products and media. Facebook groups, some like “Preppers World,” “Preparing For SHTF,” and “SHFT & Prepping Central” with over one-hundred thousand followers, then lead readers to endless articles about supposed signs of impending doom, from inflation in Russia to water shortages in California, often interspersed with pro-military or anti-Obama posts. With enough work, one eventually ends up with Shiguro Takada’s *Contingency Cannibalism: Superhardcore Survivalism’s Dirty Little Secret*.

The conditions of online commerce demonstrate how purely intertextual dissemination might benefit as an analytic tool from attention to the material forms of media, especially as commercial algorithms continue to develop in ways that resemble learning. Simulations make claims about the reality that they represent. Algorithms have a dual function. They pare down an overwhelming torrent of information, helping to navigate through the glut of data that we are inundated with. As Ken Hillis et al. argue in their work on Google, algorithms also represent reality in a particular way—search results derived from them present a sense of reality, or at least what is “relevant” in it, and therefore mediate the social world (20). Hybrid linguistic and material connections are co-produced by consumers and automated processes. The Symbolic order’s
unconscious is partly mechanical, with human connections augmented by computer calculations designed to foster sometimes more literal investment. Many products include vigorous forums where readers can meet likeminded peers or be directed towards other potential websites, purchases, and social media groups. Further, Kindle books allow readers to highlight passages and see what other readers have highlighted as well. This feature implicitly guides practices of reading—in *One Second After*, readers are directed to passages that deride Mohandas Gandhi, extol “peace through superior firepower,” recount seemingly practical survival advice, and explain how those dependent on medical technology are doomed after the pulse. In the popular highlights for *Pulse of Allah*, one is directed to warnings about Iran’s real-world missile program, statements about gun control, and warnings that society is already “close to the edge.” Searches in *Patriot Dawn* suggest tactical advice about vehicle convoys, the value of NATO standard 5.56mm ammunition, and equipment for evading thermal imaging. All of this suggests that attention to practices of reading should include the structure of media itself.

Communities do not only form around texts, but around a series of media and material objects. Instead of forming direct contacts with one another, it is possible to share a mutual connection with a medium or media object, like a dating site or survivalist board. Algorithmic connections are so powerful partly because of their mystique—they learn and process for us, without requiring us to understand precisely how they work (Andrejevic 14-15). The implications of this are explored more fully in the

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26 In the course of researching and writing this, the content of advertising I am exposed to through Google, Amazon and eBay has changed as the algorithms they run to note my activity and tailor promotions. I have been prompted to buy, for example, 32,000 servings of food in an “Emergency Cube” from Costco to sustain a family of four for a year without electricity; a “doomsday axe” through Amazon which comes in “Toxic Green Fallout Edition” and, for “lady preppers,” the “Pink Tomboy Edition;” and, to prove that the algorithms aren’t perfect, Fallout Boy concert tickets through eBay.
conclusion, but it is important to note here that the structure of the survivalist myth has changed as the artifice of myth makes itself absent and the complex of human and mechanical reference and comparison does the same. Amazon’s algorithms might still be understood as making fundamentally metaphorical or metonymic connections, but it is necessary to understand these tropes as principles of connection broadly, not just figural language. In this case, one might miss the full extent of a survivalist community animated by its enjoyment of violence, deeply concerned about the recession of technology from the world, and made real through the operation of that same technology with the help of corporate computer algorithms. In this sense technology has an aspect of the divine, promising to transcend humanity and reunite us with something like the godhead, giving it “a whiff of the holy” and a power to make connections seemingly without our direct involvement (Hillis et al. 144-5). It helps to shape a society seen as fallen and corrupt by those who imagine its destruction, but also helps to mediate the communities that form around this imagination.

**We’ll All Go Together When We Go**

Another aspect of survivalist sociality has attracted more popular attention of late: romance. A popular National Geographic Channel documentary series *Doomsday Preppers* interviews survivalists and rates their preparations according to “expert” analyses. The show is notable for its domestic, family-oriented themes. Households are the primary unit of analysis, and although the occasional tough ex-military loner shows up, the show focuses mostly on nuclear families centered on a loving couple. A number of web clips are available on the National Geographic website.²⁷ “Backup upon Backup”

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²⁷ Each episode is broken into smaller segments, some of which are online as short clips. I have chosen to reference Internet clips here rather than television programs in the hope that they will be more easily accessible to readers who do not subscribe to the *National Geographic* television channel.
features Johnny, his wife, and his sister-in-law (who is described as a “backup” parent, not a backup wife). “Doris Day of Doom” features a kindly older woman who involves her community in prepping activities, including the spacy Sy Schotz, who insists that survivalists pay too much attention to weaponry. If roaming marauders show up, says Sy, he will just make them a nice meal and “charm them” (if this doesn’t work or they don’t prove “useful”, however, he assures the viewer that he will poison them all or slit their throats as they sleep). A young woman featured in “Survival of the Fittest” plans to hole up in her apartment. As she holds her cat she demonstrates how her boyfriend intends to shoot it in the back of the skull (National Geographic). The National Geographic website also features advertisements for Atlas Shelters, a company that promises to protect families in the case of Armageddon (“better prepared than scared”). While the show tends to poke fun at the outlandish aspects of doomsday preparation, National Geographic also offers a range of books, iPhone apps, survival advice, and speculative documentaries intended to prepare audiences for the breakdown of industrial civilization.

The show’s depiction of happy (but prudent) families tends to be quite charitable. Never, for example, are profiled individuals shown to be overt white supremacists or members of violent Christian splinter groups, although as discussed above, these are strong themes in some survivalist communities. More openly mocking was a segment on Comedy Central’s The Colbert Report entitled “End of the World of the Week.” The show featured a report on SurvivalistSingles.com, an Internet dating site that caters to survivalists. Deriding the site as a place where singles can “Arma-get-it-on,” Colbert lampooned several profiles and joked about the apparent incongruity between the search for love and preparations for the end of the world. That the selected profiles are
fairly mainstream by the standards of SurvivalistSingles.com is not apparent in the episode.

SurvivalistSingles is only one of several dating sites designed for survivalists. These, like the web of connections involving Amazon.com, help to establish survivalist communities and reveal a great deal about their membership. SurvivalistSingles, whose motto is “Don’t Face the Future Alone,” sports nearly 8,000 members, claims to be the “fastest growing relationship site on the web” (SurvivalistSingles.com). The site also features a somewhat generic graphic of two shadows, male and female, holding hands, which in context is perhaps eerily reminiscent of the carbon “shadows” of Hiroshima. A little over two-thirds of the site’s members are male. Forty-eight couples are also listed, although most of them seem more interested in starting offline survivalist communities than pursuing romantic interests. Many profiles overlap with users at PrepperDating.com, an austere site with apparently many fewer members than SurvivalistSingles. Kwink.com, a site catering to niche groups, also has a survivalist page. Kwink is aimed at a larger audience although it contains many specialty groups (survivalists, self-described “beautiful people,” vampires, and so forth).

These online groups represent the larger trend of dating sites that cater to specific niches—besides obvious examples such as (possibly facetious) SeaCaptainDate.com, AshleyMadison (catering to married people seeking affairs), and Whispers4u.com (intended for people with disabilities), even mainstream sites have their own target

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28 All three survivalist dating sites discussed here allow nonmembers to view at least some parts of member profiles—full ones in the case of PrepperDating.com and SurvivalistSingles.com. The latter site also publishes fairly extensive membership data, although exact figures cannot be calculated due to “dead” and redundant profiles. Between SurvivalistSingles’s published data and interview results collected by Richard Mitchell offline, a surprisingly detailed data set exists for the study of survivalist demographics.

29 Numbers as of late December 2014. Having checked these numbers periodically for the last eighteen months, I have seen the group grow by roughly 2,000 members, although I have never seen more than one online at a time. All profiles on SurvivalistSingles are displayed for the public and do not require a login or site membership to view.
audiences. eHarmony.com has roots in Christian evangelism (D. Slater 87); OKCupid targets the hip urban crowd, and Adult Friend Finder, XXXMatch, and Tinder are for those who do not desire long-term relationships. Some 1,400 dating sites exist, and according to one executive interviewed by Dan Slater, a community of 60,000 is considered small even for a niche site (D. Slater 45-50).

Although SurvivalistSingles and its imitators may be small by dating industry standards, the sites are highly significant for the formation of survivalist communities. The mere existence of three such groups suggests this importance. Presence on the Internet does not simply reflect the size of an offline community—it plays a role in establishing and legitimizing communities in the first place. PrepperDating.com includes a “friend” system reminiscent of Facebook, its own practical survival forums, and advertising and links to survivalist products and pages. Many profiles on PrepperDating and SurvivalistSingles contain links to other Internet bulletin boards and forums, the most frequently linked of which is survivalistboards.com where members will find discussions about Christianity, conspiracy theories, and product advertisements from Condor Tactical Gear and other companies catering to security and paramilitary interests. SurvivalistSingles member AKPeakster, a 31-year old woman, report having read One Second After and fearing electromagnetic pulse attacks, as does Andrea Burke, who runs the site (Breyer).

Niche dating is about capitalizing on interests that might not be socially acceptable, creating a place where individuals can “mingle freely and furtively through a friendly flashing portal that screams: See how many people are just like you?” (D. Slater 137). When Rob Horning criticizes this view, arguing that online dating is about consuming the spectacle of dating rather than a “collaborative project riven with anxiety,
negotiation, and compromise...taking the first tentative feints toward building a collective social unit,” he overlooks the urgency of users like 56 year-old Stealth (“seeking Patriotic [sic] to watch my back as I will yours... [will] stand and fight oppression”), the loneliness of greyback (“Looking for the last love of my life”), the earnestness of jstme (“I am searching for my survivalist soul mate, a partner and companion”) and even the rage and confusion of seriousfunfortwo (Advanced Prepper...Unfortunately very few of the Sheeple (women) out there understand why i [sic] do this and they prefer to remain ignorant to what goes on around them...I am befuddled on [sic] how I might find a woman who shes [sic] my views on Prepping. It is a lifestyle and you both need to be on the same page”) (SurvivalSingles). It is hard to agree with critic Eva Illouz, who writes that “technology undermines...passion because of the way technology forces you to manage your relationships in a completely rational way and because of the way in which it creates a blasé attitude and cynical attitude towards the encounter” (Illouz).

Illouz and Horning may well be correct to describe most of the people who use dating sites the way that they do. The argument here is not that these characterizations are necessarily wrong, but that they do not apply readily to survivalism. Survivalist dating sites are powerfully linked to a larger imagination of catastrophe and survival, connected by the material links of various media and different, sometimes conflicting, ideologies. People with disabilities—or even raunchy sea captains—are not linked by the intensity of belief in the coming apocalypse that urges lovers to kiss under the sword of Damocles rather than the mistletoe. For those who are preparing to be the world’s last inhabitants after some catastrophe, the promise of finding love is a metonymy for overall fate of the human species. Some, like the 40-year old woman blyssless seem
excited. “Blessings,” she writes on her SurvivalistSingles profile. “The end of the world to me is a new beginning [sic]. I’m [sic] looking for someone who is looking forward to the coming tribulation and doesn’t want to fight it alone.” In her “favorite things” category, blyssless proclaims “I LOVE the HolyGhost! [sic]” (SurvivalistSingles). Others worry that things are “going south,” “about to get really problematic,” or as many survivalists say, “the shit is going to hit the fan.” Fear and welcoming bring users to the same places. Just as they rely on Amazon’s algorithms to deliver lurid disaster pornography in the form of badly written pulp novels, survivalists online count on the matching functions of dating site algorithms to deliver them rugged souls with whom they can weather Doomsday and once again go forth and multiply.

How does one both enjoy consuming the suffering of billions of anonymous others and sometimes desperately hope to connect with one’s soul mate among those same anonymous others? Recall the connection between Eros and Thanatos made by Bataille. Both are at heart a drive for continuity, and therefore a drive to exceed mediation. Alphonso Lingis argues that all community is based on the death of the other, and the possibility of human extinction must necessarily shape our subjectivities (Lingis 8, 176-7). Individual connections of love happen, he writes, not to soothe the pain of the other or merely to help him or her die, but are premised on a desire to “substitute oneself for the other in his or her pain and dying,” to share the solitude of an even that is simultaneously and unthinkably his [sic] own most proper possibility and his radical dispossession” (190). This, perhaps, explains why survivalist dating profiles so often express the fear of “dying alone.” It is not that we escape the bonds of mortality in love; it is that we imagine that when the world goes crashing down around us, we can at least
die together. PadmeFaith, another Survivalist Singles user, put it succinctly: “Perhaps it won't happen for a long time,” she wrote, “but it would be sad to go it alone.”

Survivalists, like evangelicals, create specific communities to compensate for the inevitable breakdown of community writ large. We do, in practice, distinguish between friends and enemies, and there is no such thing as a frictionless global community, so groups respond to this failure by forging their own units which must necessarily contain an excluded “outside.” Many—certainly not all—apocalyptic survival groups share the racist sentiments of *Farnham’s Freehold*, where the terrifying reveal that encourages the main character to travel back in time to prevent a nuclear war is that technologically sophisticated non-white races dominate the Earth and cannibalize their white slaves after the U.S. and USSR destroy each other. Hate groups enjoy hating others because to do so reaffirms one’s own superiority and allows one to express sentiments that would otherwise be unacceptable in a broader social context (Waltman and Haas 2). For survivalist fiction, enjoying the economy of death often means a joy in the death of outsiders and a counterpoised remorse for the deaths of “good guys.” What distinguishes survivalists from other apocalyptic groups is that their fantasy relies on gaining strength from these losses. Society does not end with them. It begins again.

Frederic Baumgartner has argued that apocalypticism assuages the fear of death that accompanies natural deaths for some people. Infirmity and old age do not matter if the world will inevitably end soon, so the thought of apocalypse can serve to recuperate the traumatic emergence of the Real (death) even in other contexts (Baumgartner 264).

This may also explain why survivalist plans are often so obviously flawed. Among survivalists studied by sociologist Richard Mitchell, even those like George Kassner, who spent $700,000 building a fortified mountain retreat—are often quite impractical
Survivalists do not all intend to survive. Instead, they find enjoyment in preparation. They consume the fantasy of survival. The technological links and media that form the survivalist community should be understood as proactive assertions of group identity, the affective investment in a particular identity that is not merely “a rejection or a protest against ordered social life” but an imaginative “reforming of social life” (Mitchell 9). The notion that survivalists may not be preparing fully for disaster even if they think they are is consistent with the idea of communities organized around death. When we seek to transgress the taboo against death, we do so by courting danger, by exposing our bodies to risk. Despite their professed fears of technological destruction and abandonment, survivalists may have a relationship with technique based not on fear but on boredom.

As rationalization proceeds and technological societies seek to propagate comfort and safety, courting danger—taking a risk—becomes ever more difficult. Survivalism is a fantasy of danger bred from excessive safety (Mitchell 210-2). Longing for the End of Days is really longing for a situation where our lives are not entirely safe, mediated, and comfortable, where danger still exists and death has meaning. Thus fresh_air_girl can write in her SurvivalistSingles profile “I'm not so freaked out about the end of the world, I am just tired of living in society the way it is” (SurvivalistSingles). fresh_air_girl is forty-three, which is perhaps a bit below the mean age on SurvivalistSingles, unlike many other dating communities. The members of this group tend to be older, financially comfortable, white, and relatively secure, just as the survivalists interviewed by Mitchell were (9, 200). Survivalist prepping can be seen then as a ritual of adherence to the myth, and that myth itself as a representative of the sacred Real, a world that exists beyond the confines of human society and is heralded on Earth by the Bomb. Survivalist
preparation understood as a cultural technology does two kinds of work: it allows its adherents to develop a sense of control (automaton) over their unpredictable fates (tuchë), and at the same time, fantasize about what that unpredictable, authentic existence might be like—to get both fort and da at once. Preparing for the apocalypse isn’t supposed to resist it by making (future) life easier. They are not trying to resist. They are trying to encounter resistance.

The sign of post-apocalyptic survival made possible by the Bomb speaks through these various groups and knits them together, organized around the enjoyment of the imagined violence that started with the threat of nuclear attack and now extends from zombies to avian flu. The myth of survivalism, whether its practices and products would be helpful in the face of disaster or not, responds to the injunction to survive. The myth brings some sense of order to the world rent by the schism of the Bomb at Trinity. It is a counterpart to simulating the apocalypse in war plans. Both allow subjects to enjoy a sense of control over the conditions of the world’s presence and absence, to have a fleeting taste of what might seem like the Real of the Bomb. Both try to tame the horror of human extinction, by fitting it into systemic rules on one hand, and preparing to defy it and start over on the other. Both are products of the allure and danger of risk. The war planner bluffs big to win, risking everything, while the survivalist tries to hedge their bets, imagining that after a bad beat there might still be a chance to win it all in the end. The nuclear age began with the overwhelming experience of the Real in nuclear explosions, which was then assimilated in the Symbolic economy of language, simulations, and games, and ultimately defied and venerated at once in the Imaginary of survivalism, itself made possible by the durable tropes and myths of the Symbolic, and repeated as an attempt to reach the Real.
CONCLUSION

Two menacing structures face each other today: the non-world of verbal machinery, which is out to dissolve everything into the noise of words, and the non-world of mechanized things, which, detached from language, is waiting only for a loud explosion to create a language of its own...so things crack and explode today as though they were trying to burst forth into sound—the sound of doom.
--Max Picard, *The World of Silence*

In my last year of college debate the national topic involved nuclear arms control. I would sometimes stay amongst the “U” call numbers in the basement of the Michigan State University Library all night reading books that hadn’t been checked out since the 1980s and walking home in the early morning. Every day I would pass the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the half light of dawn, which, long after the Cold War ended, had a prominent yellow “Fallout Shelter” sign bolted to its masonry, the old-fashioned triangular Civil Defense kind made of metal. Today that sign is gone. In its place is the deep-set rust stain that the sign left, indelibly marking its old place in that triangular shape, an enthymeme of death and hope for anyone who remembers its old message. The sign is literally absent, but its distortion remains. The Bomb is still with us. It’s the shelters that have disappeared.

This dissertation has explored the distorting influence of the Bomb as a means to understand the desire to experience the Real beyond mediation and the paradoxical refraction of that desire into fixation on various forms of mediation that come to stand in for the unspeakable. This is an issue raised by symbols in any form, as they must
necessarily stand in for something that is absent. The connection between any particular signifier and what it represents may be arbitrary, but it is held together by our investment in the tie, a kind of implicit collective agreement necessary for language to convey meaning, to provide the resources for one speaking subject to address another. These agreements accrete into broader myths, sustained and shaped to create cultural formations by specific ideologies that are themselves products of durable investments. I have argued that desire finds its point of attachment in the sense of the Real that a symbol conveys. Essentially, language works through a habitual confusion in which artifice is concealed by its own action and we mistake the Symbolic for the Real, attaching ourselves in those uncanny moments when it seems that the Real “shines through.” Even if the revelation of the Real cannot be transmitted in its full force from one subject to another, language can be the spark that refers one to one’s own memory of other witnessed eruptions. Nuclear weapons are an extreme case chosen to make these connections clearer, but they are by no means unique in this regard.

The uncanny is never a complete substitute for the Real, so the effort to reach it is frustrated and then repeated. Any object of desire understood as distinct from the subject must necessarily elude total incorporation. Were it to be attained, the motion of the drive would not stop because each object stands in for the return to continuity itself, a goal that the subject cannot attain and remain extant. Perhaps such a thing is possible, but if so, language cannot convey it. It is a currency that only serves up to a point. This basic dynamic is the first part of the death drive. The next phase is the enjoyment of our efforts to control presence and absence, not because we enjoy either state (although we likely enjoy them both), but because the subject can attach to the one thing truly available to it: itself, and specifically its capacity to enjoy. This is still a mediated path, as
the subject is a product of identification with the Symbolic order. We are again grasping at shadows.

This formulation situates the death drive as a problematic for communication studies. I have argued here that the death drive is not reducible to the desire, biological or otherwise, for death. Rather, it is the union of *Eros* and *Thanatos*: both are a desire for unmediated experience, for connection to all that the subject surrenders as the cost of its own coming into being. This current of desire is a product of the necessary conditions for the Symbolic, not the Real, even though it is a desire animated by the latter. The death drive is not a hidden structure that organizes the Real, but a dynamic observable in the Symbolic as it attempts to repair the rips and threadbare patches worn into it by the unimaginably vast world that exists outside our ken. The death drive itself might be silent and invisible, as Derrida argued in *Archive Fever*, but its passage leaves a wake of distortions in language. The attempts to mediate what is beyond mediation comprise the only evidence available for the motion of the drive, and thus the proper tools to analyze it are found in communication studies. Things that seem inexpressible, and the desire to encounter them, have a powerful effect on the human world. To neglect this is to miss one important factor that shapes our communication, and, in the uncanny sense of the Real, an attribute of signs that helps to explain why some might have traction and some might not.

The tradition most applicable to this understanding of the drive is the rhetorical tradition of the sublime.\textsuperscript{30} Edmund Burke, writing a century and a half before Freud, identified the sublime as the interplay of two drives, one for pleasure and one for pain, but both present in the sublime in some measure, the latter more powerful because it is

\textsuperscript{30} As opposed to its more aesthetic tradition
an “emissary” for that “king of terrors,” death (36). Burke borrowed from the tradition of Longinus which understood the sublime as an aspect of language, generally metaphor. It is to this understanding we should return with a difference: communication is more than language, and the sublime is an aspect of communication. The advent of the atomic bomb and its yet more terrible progeny, the hydrogen bomb, elevated human expression to a qualitatively new degree. It became possible to communicate through fission and fusion, through nations destroyed in minutes, through genetic and environmental legacies marked on a millennial scale. Cold War nuclear deterrence is a dialogue expressed primarily in enthymeme, and game theory is little but a guide for making and decoding its messages, now a conversation involving several more participants. The latent threat of total destruction is now promised by synthetic biology, artificial intelligence, asteroid collisions, and host of modern technological anxieties along with nuclear warfare. These still create deep metonymic channels through which association might flow between obscure signifiers covering the ultimate void of metaphysical groundlessness, expressed not in the question “why is there something instead of nothing,” but “why does it matter?”

In the case of world-ending weapons themselves, the medium is the message. The rhetorical tradition of the sublime exposes the intoxicating power of horror mixed with desire and the counterattack of language after the breakthrough of silence, as witnessed by the Trinity observers. The analysis of ensuing myths, such as the myth of survival and rebirth after Doomsday, is also facilitated by rhetorical tradition. These are excellent tools, but insufficient without an understanding of media that stretches beyond the spoken or written word. Nuclear war games in their various iterations draw us in and change us through form and function that exceeds text and persuasion. Cities are built
with the Bomb in mind, or justified by appeals to necessity and the lurking possibility of
destruction. In the case of the sublime, the need is to revisit a venerable and powerful
tradition by bringing to bear more contemporary understandings of communication.
The examples I have chosen are efforts to do this by showing how practices like
survivalism and games attempt to mediate the tears of the Real along with texts like
post-apocalyptic novels and oral histories. This approach was deliberately taken to
illustrate the ubiquity of the sublime by identifying many far-flung iterations and
uncanny resemblances.

I would like to conclude by outlining the implications that I see in this project for
communication studies and the politics of anti-nuclear activism. The significance of the
Real suggests that omissions, breakdowns, and silence are important objects of study.
We should not think of the inability to capture and translate something just as the
failure of mediation but also the triumph of excess. The former centers the Symbolic
order of human mediation as the key agent. The latter acknowledges that the universe
outside our ken sometimes evade our grasp. The silence of Trinity was not just an
absence of speech. It was the triumph of the Real, silence as its own revelation—an
affirmative force. It is not necessary to ascribe agency to the Real to recognize that it is
more than the space left outside of language. Neither should we ignore it because it is
beyond our ability to translate. Its deformations alter the Symbolic, giving us outlines
for speculation, even if we can never truly see what is behind the curtain. A theory of
communication thus should at least speculate about what exceeds mediation.

The word theory itself presents an opportunity. Nicolas of Cusa claimed that the
word derived from theoro, “I see,” which is also the origin of Theos, “God” (213). God
“looks on all things,” and thus does theory (Nicolas 237).” Theoria is the gaze that lights
the shadows to reveal the world. This understanding of theory is Bataille’s Sun of reason and truth, that rational source of enlightenment figurative and literal. But the Sun is also rotten, a harbinger of mania for those who stare at it too intensely (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 57-8). It can be supplemented with another tradition, one derived from téras and later therion, the Greek origins of our word “monster.” Monster, related to “demonstrate” was once a disruption, a revelation, an apocalypse in its original sense of unveiling. Theory should not only trace the order of the world. It should be a teratology of the Real, an acknowledgment that the monstrous world “bites back.” Teratology was once the “account of marvels” (“Teratology”). It was once pejorative: “when bold writers, fond of the sublime, intermix something great and prodigious in everything they write,” not altogether a positive thing (Bailey). The word evokes the sublime in a rhetorical sense, linked with “prodigious monsters” of thought and desire (Shipley 197).

The importance of the Real establishes the significance of the death drive for theories of communication. While the drive has generally been considered an aspect of the Symbolic order—the subject, formed through the alienation of the mirror phase, is driven to invest in objects (signifiers) that stand in for something lost that could make it whole. The formulation of the death drive here is somewhat different, drawing also from Bataille’s concept of continuity. The subject’s initial formation marks it as discrete from everything else, which is the necessary condition for death, since a change in state of a part of the whole does not destroy said whole. Eros, exemplified in copulation, momentarily merges the self with another, as does Thanatos more permanently in the state of death. The Symbolic is necessarily always mediated, and the Real is not. The emergence of the Real hints at a world beyond mediation, and thus towards continuity. Since the Real cannot be adequately captured, subjects cathect to whatever seems to
represent it, and thus the drive does operate in the Symbolic, which is often misrecognized as real.

Identifying the death drive as a desire to move beyond mediation shows the necessity of a broad view of communication. The connections that form between sites of investment for Lacan either proliferate meaning by referencing outwards (metonymy) or condense meaning by establishing a particularly saturated connection defines the sites involved by this strong relation (metaphor). These rhetorical tropes are typically used to analyze language, but they can be reframed to apply to mediation more generally, including the material aspect of individual media. This is not to say that everything is a text. Instead, it is a call to explore how concepts developed for language might be adapted to other media, and also how they must be changed to do so.

In their canonical book *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin identify a seeming paradox in media. There are “contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy...a double logic of remediation. Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (Bolter and Grusin 5, emphasis in original). Both immediacy and hypermediacy have a long history—the first in the evolution of Western European painting, for example, and the second in illuminated medieval manuscripts (Bolter and Grusin 11-12). The death drive enriches this observation by underpinning it with a theoretical explanation: we desire the Real (immediacy), but are frustrated in achieving it, as detailed in Chapter 1. Instead, we enjoy our seeming ability to control presence and absence, latching on to our own subjectivity and misrecognizing the Symbolic for the Real—hence the enjoyment of hypermediacy. These imperatives are contradictory in a sense, but they follow from one another according to the logic of the
death drive. Recall that Lacan’s argument for the primacy of the death drive is partly that all drives seek their own extinction. In the desire for immediacy, media also seek their own extinction. In its failure, it is redirected back on itself in hypermediacy.

Bolter and Grusin define a medium as “that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real” (65-66). This definition essentially makes various media metaphors for one another, containers that reference other containers. If metaphor is remembered as metaphor, then this process can be thought of as material metaphor. To say that remediation is the defining aspect of media as Bolter and Grusin do is consistent with metaphor as the “archet trope” of language, as Miller names it. The common element is mediation itself. Remedi ation is metaphor, in which significance is transferred from one container to another, as in Lacan’s pots, with the relationship of the two configuring the importance of the connection. Metaphor is also a kind of remediation. The importance of the vehicle is transferred to the tenor and vice versa, and both use language to stand in for something else—a concept, an object, a person, place.

The dynamic of the death drive should suggest a different, more porous, theory of metaphor. One term does not replace another and simply suppress it. Rather, it allows its users to enjoy the absent term which is always still present in the metaphor. The vehicle “countervalue,” for example, stands in for the tenor “nuclear attack against civilians.” This sense is not lost, but displaced. Metaphor is a dynamic process rather than a one-way substitution. One aspect is the replacement of one term by another, but this is not the end: the point of metaphor is that there is an cathetic investment in the relationship between two terms, the trait that enthymematically connects them.
Concealment is one part of the process, but making the principle that connects the concealed tenor to the expressed vehicle present is another, a *fort-da* dynamic. It is the mediation between terms which serves to anchor enjoyment. The sublime aspect of metaphor is the charge of the Real which makes a particular connection so bright as to conceal others.

At the same time, a broad understanding of mediation has implications for metaphor and metonymy. The trope is stunted when it is confined to language: not only does language stand in for other things, but different media create different conditions for investment. The simulated globe of *First Strike* stands in for the conglomeration of matter that constitutes the Earth itself, but the media of choice that videogames allow permits a different kind of investment. For a subject to read about the radioactive wasteland of a post-nuclear Earth is one thing, but for that subject to simulate its creation is quite another. Metonymy, the proliferation of meaning that gestures from one trope out towards others, is mediated in different ways by changing technology. As the example of survivalist online communities shows, some of the labor of connection is now done by automated systems based on aggregated data. An Amazon review of *Farnham’s Freehold* leads to a reviewer profile that leads to *One Second After*, where targeted ads lead to survival equipment, where reviews lead to message boards and message boards spin out across the Internet. Some of these selections are made by readers, while others are automatically generated, smoothing the paths between one thing and another. Communities form in part around these shared spaces, connected not directly but by their shared relationship to a message board, a particular electronic text, or a lifestyle. Users of *Survivalist Singles* are connected in part by electronic
means. The electronic connections of the Internet make possible an itinerary that begins with *Farnham’s Freehold* and ends with a marriage proposal made in a bunker.

The death drive as a desire for the Real also implicates anti-nuclear politics. As detailed in the Introduction, much anti-nuclear scholarship adopts the “concealment thesis,” the assumption that the nuclear weapons complex persists as it does because there is insufficient public deliberation. Deliberation is constrained in part because the language of nuclear war conceals its “reality,” the horror of destruction. Thus Jonathan Schell graphically imagined destruction in *Fate of the Earth*, Hilgartner et al. decry “nukespeak,” and what Carol Cohn calls “technostrategic discourse” is the subject of thorough critique for its use of euphemism and mind-numbing arcane terminology. If the terms were changed, if “God terms” were replaced with “devil terms,” as Brummett suggests, then unimpeded debate might occur, and as Schippa argues, nuclear forces might be constrained. However, anti-nuclear scholarship in this vein has an uncanny resonance with the sublime discourse of the Bomb. It too seeks an appointment with the Real and makes nuclear imagination a site of enjoyment.

Bataille argues that a taboo is necessary in language only because we desire to cross it in the first place, and the existence of the taboo is in itself enjoyable because it creates the possibility of forbidden, exciting transgression. This helps to explain the link between sex and death in strategic terminology, which is the subject of Cohn’s work on the language of defense intellectuals. Many nuclear euphemisms have a sexual connotation—“deep penetration,” “spasm war,” “hardening,” and “bang for the buck” (Cohn 693). These terms certainly reflect a particular exercise of violent masculinity. What they also share with terms like “countervalue” is the attraction to a forbidden Real, the continuity represented by both sex and death. A concept of the death drive as the
desire for unmediated experience suggests that changing the language of expression for this taboo—perhaps even changing the patriarchal terms through which taboo and desire were expressed in the nuclear age—would not automatically change the investments that pin together nuclear warfare as a cultural technology. Instead, critique aimed at making the reality of nuclear war present in language contributes to the movement of desire that sustains our investment in the myths and tropes of nuclear war in the first place. Metaphor operates like the cycle of fort-da, where changing one signifier to make the signified term absent can itself be a source of enjoyment, a sense of power over presence and absence. We like to have our yellowcake and eat it too.

The danger of seeking the Real of nuclear warfare in language is that the inevitable failures of this project have already proven to have uncanny consequences. The fear of human extinction that struck George Kistiakowsky at Trinity and was developed by Schell’s “infinite risk” formulation was a message inverted several times. All sacrifices are made acceptable by it. Survivalists took the supreme value of human life as an injunction to live at all costs, and communities formed around the fruits of this (affective) labor. The Real of nuclear warfare became a challenge and the promise of a new frontier, a strangely mediated means of escaping an overly mediated society. The themes of EMP novels show a prominent trend of anti-state sentiment in right-wing survivalism. Rather than inspiring revulsion, the imagination of nuclear horror has been met with anticipation and no small amount of enthusiasm. Instead of democratic engagement, it has resulted in a turn towards libertarian self-reliance, hostility to outgroups, and a refusal to engage in the fallen politics of a demos fated to burn when Armageddon comes. Even when the horror of nuclear war inspires political engagement, there is no guarantee that anti-nuclear initiatives result. That Reagan’s Strategic
Defense Initiative was justified on these grounds should be a warning, according to Jan Nolan, because “the public’s concern about nuclear weapons can be readily turned to fear. And this kind of public sentiment helped spawn the industry of nuclear deceit...Calls to public activism with unspecific objectives may thus not be the best approach. Frightened Americans looking for solace are a great constituency for clever political strategists” (283). Project Plowshare and its more contemporary echoes suggest that fear can also be transformed easily into a promise of salvation. The valence of the Bomb switches easily for those beholden to its power; our reverence for it does not.

This dissertation does not have an answer for Lenin’s most famous question. Nuclear warfare is still a possibility. Every few months a crisis occurs where the Bomb lurks in the shadows—the Korean DMZ, the Kashmir Line of Control, the Spratly Islands, the Kurile Islands, Iran, Israel, the Crimean Peninsula and Donbass. The major change from the Cold War might not be that nuclear war is less probable, or even less likely to wipe out humanity (if that was ever possible), but that it is no longer seen as the only likely threat capable of doing so. Climate change, itself identified and modeled with the help of simulations designed initially for modeling the effects of nuclear war, has become a more prominent issue. The term replaces “global warming” because it ostensibly reflects the Earth’s reality more accurately. It shares much with the Bomb: apocalyptic predictions, survivor and disaster fiction, and the sense of humanity destroying itself through advancements in technology. Both issues have inspired much spilled ink, many conflicts between politicians, news media, and public figures, solemn efforts for international cooperation, and very little effective change. The brief, euphoric atmosphere of global unity as the Warsaw Pact states dissolved did not result in a
permanent communion between the Earth’s peoples. But to expect harmony is to believe in the impossibility of an eventual triumph of automaton against the caprice of tuché.

The many pledges for global cooperation from Kellogg-Briand to Bush-Gorbachev have all unraveled. Continuity and order in this sense appear to be impossible so far, and in their failures the contingency of the Real emerges. We still attempt to bridge these rifts, but we also seem to enjoy the vertigo that comes with staring into them. We are enjoined to stay on the bridge, to step back from the edge. After all, one single mistake could destroy everything, and the logic of infinite risk is part of the sign of survival that disciplines us when we drift too far towards the forbidden enjoyment of apocalyptic imagination. The command to survive pins the discourse of nuclear weapons together. Survival is such an overwhelmingly powerful site for cathectic investment that it can outshine all others, allowing any risk to be run along the way.

The basic foundation of deterrence is the threat of nuclear retaliation, ultimately against cities. The United States, attacked by Russia, would detect incoming weapons and launch its own in return before they could be lost (“use it or lose it,” in Cold War parlance). Of course enemy military power would already be incoming; it would be pointless to destroy empty missile silos, so at least implicitly, the threat is against tens of millions of Russians who might not even know that the war had started. In other words, the basic national strategy of NATO, Russia, China, and other nuclear states relies on planning to commit genocide on an unprecedented scale against people that each of them argues are oppressed by their own government. The rational reason to threaten a nuclear war is to prevent a nuclear war. Thus, nuclear weapons threaten survival in the name of protecting it. Every atrocity and degradation of life that does not threaten
human extinction is tolerable to prevent one that does, in a “tyranny of survival” (Callahan 92-100). This tolerance for risk applies equally to disarmament—after all, the chief argument made against it is that it weakens deterrence and allows the “other side” freedom to initiate a nuclear conflict without fear of reprisal.

Nuclear strategists treated human survival like poker, but to seek a justification for this policy is closer to Three-card Monte. The investment in survival cannot be rational. Despite the immense importance we attach to it, at bottom, there is nothing but a void. Why survive at all? This might be one of the last truly forbidden questions to which we have failed to generate an answer. If there is some cosmic plan for humanity in the Real, it eludes us. Any assertion of value—that we are intelligent life, that death brings suffering, that we are obliged to future generations, and so forth—simply leads to another “why,” in the kind of game toddlers routinely play. Efforts to avoid nuclear war, both through deterrence and disarmament, rely on supposedly rational means to reach a goal that is fundamentally irrational. One reaction has been “virulent nihilism,” as in Nick Land’s book of that name, or Thomas Liggotti’s declaration that human existence is “malignantly useless” and consciousness a “long con.” Ray Brassier, who wrote an introduction to Ligotti’s book, expresses similar sentiments in Nihil Unbound. There is even a Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT, pronounced “vehement”) and a Church of Euthanasia which councils suicide and cannibalism, amongst other solutions. If there is no reason for survival, why bother? Why keep looking for something we will never find? The insights of the death drive seem to lead to a very bleak conclusion: we cannot live in the Real, at least not in a way meaningful to others. We are condemned to seek after an object that we cannot have, endlessly falling short,
endlessly cracking the artifice of the Symbolic walls that contain us, and, seeing the light filter through, repairing them rather than tearing them down.

It is in this place of despair from which we should understand the politics of the sublime. Because it is an inevitable byproduct of discontinuous subjectivity, the death drive cannot be wished away. We will probably always desire continuity that we cannot have and the object from which we are rent by our separation from the world as a whole. What the sublime offers is a reconfiguration of desire. We defer enjoyment questing after objects and ignore sacrifices in the meantime, whether it is global poverty tolerated for the sake of a middle-class material comfort or radioactive contamination for the sake of peace-through-strength. Todd McGowan argues that a recognition of the death drive might not remake the material structure of society—at least not immediately—but that it could have a profound effect on the way we understand enjoyment. Instead of seeking to overcome every limit as an obstacle to enjoyment (as I have argued we do with the limits of language in the Real), we have to enjoy the limits themselves as obstacles to the movement of the drive. Desire may be inevitable, but we can change the way we orient ourselves towards the frustrations and repetitions of the drive, learning to enjoy the partial challenges of our limits instead of deferring enjoyment for the achievement of some utopian state that we will never reach (McGowan, conclusion). Some of this enjoyment can already be identified in survivalism, for example, when preppers camp in the wilderness, practice skills they imagine using, or grow their own food. The problem is essentially temporal. What makes survivalism coalesce around violence is the understanding that the world needs to end for society to be remade. Suddenly prepping becomes just work, utility in Bataille’s sense, means to an end. Although there is obviously enjoyment in the sense of affective investment in the practices and tropes of
survival, it remains organized around the “big payoff” of a world-shattering disaster, and thus enjoyment is mostly deferred and attachment forms to the disaster itself, fabulously textual as it may be. What ruins the game of *fort-da* is the same thing that ruins other rule-bound games. As Roger Caillois argues, the assumption that games must then result in something else, some “real world” benefit, turns them into work. To avoid the “corruption” of games, play must be an end in itself, something useless in the sense of Bataille’s sovereign poetry (Caillois 44).

The sublime is a language suited for this change. The sense of being in the presence of silence, an active force that exceeds language, breeds both terror and fascination, but what results from this desire might be otherwise. Instead of deferring enjoyment for the eventual mastery of all contingent experience in mediation, the sublime draws a limit to the value of language used for productive work. That limit can be a source of enjoyment instead of (solely) frustration. Realizing that the Real cannot be mediated into the Symbolic does not have to mean that our attempts to do so have failed. Bataille’s distinction between poetry and other language revolves around the basic observation that poetry, in his sense, does not aim to *do* anything by organizing the world differently. It is expression without utility (“Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” 25).

The sublime is not a sufficient principle for any politics. It is useful instead to reveal the investments that cause political solutions to fail and repeat themselves serially. Ned O’Gorman’s argument that the sublime can have no politics because it cannot make practical differentiations is correct if one understands politics to be about the allocation of scarce resources and rhetoric to be about this conception of politics (“Political Sublime” 889). As Bataille defines it, politics is concerned with the handling of excess, not scarcity (*Accursed Share* 24-26). The teratology of rhetoric I suggest as a
supplement is directed towards excess rather than scarcity. Nuclear war is a problem of excess in a double sense: the excess of reality that is the Real, and the excess of energy that thermonuclear processes provide for warfare. Concern for the sublime should lead us to seek the places where the excess of the general economy tears through the scarcity of the particular economy. Doing so, and observing the distortions that appear in the Symbolic, is a step towards tracking the motions of desire that stitch together the tropes of nuclear myth.

Sublime language will not help much in figuring out the details of nuclear arms verification measures—or which Russian ICBM fields to target, for that matter. Instead, it should help us to accept the limits of our ability to map the world and reincorporate its breakdowns, and to appreciate these inevitable failures for what they are. An often overlooked theme in Longinus’s *On the Sublime* is the futility of accumulation for its own sake. Longinus decried what he saw as the decline of rhetoric into something meant to achieve specific goals rather than be admired for its own sake. The pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasure are not the only goals of rhetoric, and cannot be its only aim. We must enjoy sublime language for its own sake, not only for what it can get us. This is not desire without restriction, for “surely if our selfish desires were altogether freed from prison, as I were, and let loose upon our neighbors, they would scorch the earth with their evils,” because we perpetually desire something more beyond our grasp and thus cannot be satisfied (58). Words—mediation in general, we might now say—must be something to be enjoyed as artifice because “they are in truth the mind’s peculiar light” (41). The sublime’s most dangerous manifestations occur in attempts to control contingency with rational order and calculate the incalculable. The political implication
of teratology is that we should sometimes resist this violent recuperation and leave some mysteries alone.

To change our relationship towards the death drive means to accept that artifice can be enjoyed for its own sake, not just as a promissory note for the absent Real. There may be no ultimate, objective value for the human species that we can discover in the Real, but this does not need to be a council of despair. Instead of inventing reasons that the species must survive, we should admit that we have no good reason at all to do so. We don’t need one. If all values are arbitrary, then there is no reason not to live, assuming that we want to do so. To live without a reason is precisely the kind of sovereignty Bataille seeks through poetry, a sovereign life rather than a commitment to individual survival as a means to a perpetually deferred end. Learning to accept limits, even enjoy their impediment to the drive, is perhaps necessary but not sufficient to change our orientation towards nuclear warfare and the imagination of human extinction. To require rational answers to the ultimate questions raised by the Bomb is to play the wrong kind of game.
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