

The Bomb's just the beginning

Do we need reminding periodically that it is quite likely most of our futures will consist of much suffering and horror as to defy understanding?

On Sunday September 23 BBC2 will spend 112 minutes shocking us with *Threads*, a drama-documentary which covers the weeks before and the years after a nuclear war.

It is set in Sheffield. As drama it focuses tightly on the experiences of the local population. There is no attempt to provide world round-ups once the war has happened.

As a documentary it is given credibility by the voice of Paul Vaughan of the *Horizon* programmes and computer print-outs which provide a convincing build-up to the war and statistics of the effects of a 210-megaton attack on Britain.

Seen first as an update of *The War Game*, the film has two obvious advantages: first it will be televised, and secondly it is able to draw on more up-to-date research about the precise effects of nuclear weapons and the social conditions following large-scale disasters.

Seen as an English version of the same event covered by the Americans with *The Day After*, it has two further advantages. It does not feel obliged to adopt the neutralizing film language of soap opera and it is, at this stage, unlikely to be followed by a disclaimer from Michael Heseltine or George Shultz.

But where *Threads* is really different is in its determination to establish what a nuclear war would actually be like without driving towards any polemical conclusion.

This means first of all dispelling two preconceptions - that there will be one big bang and then it will be all over for most of us, and secondly that a relatively sophisticated industrial society can be recreated reasonably quickly.

In contrast, according to the film, the most common experience for people will be initial survival followed by slow death from radiation, disease, cold or starvation. Indeed the maximum rate of population decline is shown to be some years after the war. After 13 years the British population is predicted to be around four million.

Bryan Appleyard
previews *Threads*

a television

film showing

the aftermath

of nuclear war

In other words nuclear war, if it happens, will be an experience through which most of us live.

On the evidence of *Threads* this is bad news.

Death within seconds looks like the most attractive alternative on offer, certainly better than long-term survival in a disease-ridden, agrarian economy seemingly inhabited by teenagers speaking a decayed and abrupt version of English. The persistence of a few Sainsbury's carrier bags will be small consolation.

But, such hypothetical considerations aside, what are we supposed to do with a programme such as *Threads* once we have mullered over its aftermath projections?

It pounds into us the message that our world is a fragile one, held together by delicate social and economic webs (hence the title which, once destroyed, are all but irreplaceable).

Its intention is to leave us feeling insecure, from which position there are two possible exits: impotent despair or a renewed determination to consider the best way of preventing war either by deterrence or disarmament.

With its harrowing concentration on family life, the film also evidently intends us to look away from the screen and to visualize the same horrors happening to those closest to us, thus feeding an insecurity, infinitely worse than that inspired by the prospect of mere obliteration of oneself.

This is where the whole motive for such programmes becomes problematic. Mick Jackson, the producer, feels there should be one such every so often and regrets both the

coincidence of *The Day After* and the rash of nuclear war movies under production in Hollywood. He was merely engaged in making *The War Game* for his age.

But, however often we are reminded, the effect is the same: to insert a hopelessness into the conduct of human acceptance that the continuity of our civilization can be erased at a moment's notice. And, perhaps worse, the conviction that our children are hardly likely to be relieved of the same burden of dread.

The respectable arguments against Jackson are either political - the Russians do not see such films and we weaken our defensive determination by subjecting ourselves to them - or psychological - Jackson's painful drama of lingering death backed by carefully researched evidence is, in the long run, depraving, removing people's ability or will to behave constructively.

There is, of course, the slightly less respectable argument that, as we can do nothing, it is best just to forget and get on with living and to persuade our children to do likewise instead of feeding their sick fascination.

But none of these responses seems quite human. You cannot expect people to live with nuclear weapons and not to be curious. The exact details of the end of our civilization will inevitably carry an imaginative charge. And, besides, merely telling people not to worry is a well-known device for producing the opposite of the desired effect.

Jackson is perhaps being over-optimistic in his belief that the pressure from such programmes all helps to drive the Russians and Americans back to the negotiating table as well as over-idealistic in assuming that people will watch to be taught. Nobody ever lost in the ratings by overestimating the coefficient of ghoulishness in the population at large.