

THE LISTENER

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There was something desperately reassuring about the lingering handshake between President Reagan and Mr Gromyko at the UN this week. One wanted them to hold hands for ever after the bombardment on television about the dangers of nuclear warfare. Readers may get the same feeling after reading the lead articles in this issue from Russell Hoban and Dr Tom Wilkie. Tom Mangold pieces together the background to the current terrorist trial in Israel and describes the 'fog of moral ambiguity' which surrounds the proceedings. Anthony Clare spots 'hopeless ambivalence concerning drink and drunkenness'. Derek Cooper meets the most written about chef Michel Roux, and Fritz Spiegl offers advice on the new etiquette—how to address live-in lovers. R.T.

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Russell Hoban: A personal view of 'Threads' It cancels all distance between our unthinking and the unthinkable



On Sunday and Monday, BBC2 showed two programmes about the effects of nuclear war, based on the latest scientific predictions: *Threads*, a harrowing drama-documentary depicting a nuclear attack on Sheffield, and *On the Eighth Day*, which dealt with the devastating results on the Earth's climate. On page 4 Tom Wilkie, of the *New Scientist*, traces the development of scientists' belief in a nuclear winter. Below, Russell Hoban—author of *Riddley Walker*, a novel which vividly portrayed the South-East of England several generations after a nuclear holocaust—gives his impressions of these programmes.

By reasonable degrees those who govern the world have achieved madness. At the Pentagon and, I suppose, in other official places with extensive underground accommodation, they call it by its right name, MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction). These people, presumably, have the comfort that professionalism gives, but there remains the matter of how the rest of us are to live with the madness. It may be that we can only die with it.

On 23 September BBC2 showed a film called *Threads*, written by Barry Hines and produced and directed by Mick Jackson. The designer was Chris Robilliard; photography was by Andrew Dunn; the editor was Jim Latham.

Threads was followed on 24 September on BBC2 by a *Natural World* documentary called *On the Eighth Day*, produced by Michael Andrews of the BBC's Natural History Unit. The title comes from the theory that what is now called nuclear winter would begin on the eighth day after the outbreak of even a relatively modest nuclear war. This film examined the effects on our natural world of the catastrophe towards which our natural history is heading. *On the Eighth Day* offered solid scientific confirmation of the horrors seen in the first film.

Threads is based on current estimates of the effects of a nuclear attack on Britain; it follows its protagonist, Ruth Beckett (played by Karen Meagher), through the devastation of the city of Sheffield and the nightmare years afterwards. Alone in the ruins, months after the attack, Ruth gives birth to a daughter; in the last scene of the film this almost feral child (Victoria O'Keefe), by now 13 and pregnant by a stranger, howls in the pangs of her miserable labour and in her turn gives birth. Then she looks at what has come out of her and pushes it away. The preview audience left the cinema in silence.

This is not a film to be reviewed as film; its art is that it cancels all aesthetic distance between our unthinking and the unthinkable: here is the death of our life and the birth of a new

life for our children, a life of rats and maggots, of slow death by radiation sickness and plagues and starvation and quick death by violence. Does the heart—how perverse the heart is, how secret!—leap a little at the thought of no more civilisation-as-we-know-it? Is there something in us that runs joyfully towards the rats and the maggots, like a child let out of school? Think, do think: there must be some joy in the prospect, else why are we doing what we're doing and not doing what we're not doing?

No, no, there can't be any joy in it, we're not mad, surely. We don't want anything dreadful to happen and of course nothing's going to happen. Look how long it's been since the last big war. We've got deterrents now and they deter.

And yet it's difficult sometimes to know how things really are. Look out of your window, look at the picture of the world in your eyes. How does reality look to you? Are the shops and houses all there is to it? Or might they be only an appearance on a very thin membrane of apparent reality behind which something else moves.

And you yourself, how do you experience yourself? Are you simply that particular person with your name who lives your life? Or might it be that something nameless and other looks out through the eyeholes in your face and lives you?

The shops and houses look real, don't they? And the buildings in Westminster and Whitehall and Downing Street, they look perfectly all right. And there are policemen about too, that's very reassuring. And the people in Westminster and Whitehall, they're well-educated people who speak well and they know how to run things, they've made a career of it. So if they tell you when you hear the sirens to put a paper bag over your head and crawl under the bed with a bottle of water and a can of beans and five Elastoplasts, then that must be the thing to do, mustn't it. Because they won't let anything bad happen really, and they only want us to keep the paper bag and the can

of beans in reserve as any sensible person would. Everybody knows that if you're ready for an emergency it's less likely to happen.

On the other hand—one can't help having doubts sometimes—what if there is something moving behind a thin membrane of the apparent? Yes, something that animates the universe, something that continually offers itself to our perception; it offers the atom for our discovery and it offers what can be done with the atom: it can't help it; it's the nature of this something to do that; it is its nature to offer new possibilities continually, it is its nature to want all possible action. And what if there is some nameless thing looking out through our eyeholes, and this nameless thing must make everything possible happen? Will the paper bag and the can of beans be sufficient? Does Whitehall know about the thing behind the membrane and the nameless thing in itself?

Twenty years ago the BBC made a film for television, *The War Game*, written and produced by Peter Watkins. It was based on all available data, including information obtained from the bombings of Dresden, Darmstadt, Hamburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *The War Game* was never shown. The smoker turns away from photographs of cancerous lungs; the heroin addict doesn't want to see pictures of needle-bruised corpses in squalid rooms.

Threads has been shown and it has turned away from nothing. The data it makes use of are newer and more horrific than those on which *The War Game* was based. In this projection, war comes when a confrontation in Iran between the Soviet Union and the United States results in a nuclear exchange and attacks on NATO targets in Western Europe and Britain.

A one-megaton warhead exploded 150 miles above the North Sea disrupts electrical and communications systems. In the first attack on the UK, 80 megatons are dropped. The Home Office estimates there would be 2.4 million blast-casualties; SANA (Scientists Against Nuclear Arms) estimates 9.2 million.

Words and numbers, the treachery of language! 'The horror!' whispered Kurtz, keeping it short and to the point. As soon as the door of language is opened to the first loathsome statistic, the reality disappears. How many statisticians have seen a corpse, even what you might call a normal corpse, a battle-casualty killed by normal bullets or shell fragments? They go green and yellow and purple; bloated by internal gas, they swell like inflatable toys in the worst possible taste. There is, of course, the blood; often the bladder empties; your standard-issue untended corpse stinks and rots aggressively as if it wanted to offend. Some of the MAD generals have undoubtedly smelt corpses, more than a few. Perhaps they like the smell? (And still I'm being too polite; still I'm helping with the perfuming of a grave as big as the world.)

Over four months, 210 megatons of nuclear explosives are dropped on the UK. (The Home Office estimates there would be 17 million dead; SANA estimates 38 million.) In Sheffield, as elsewhere, people die in various ways: the blast catches them in the street and melts their upturned eyeballs; they are burnt alive in firestorms; buildings fall on them; they are trampled in panics; they lie rotting quietly behind childish shelters of doors and cushions in their houses. The Chief Executive and his staff



die slowly in stench and darkness in their control centre under the rubble of the town hall.

Medical facilities and supplies are quickly exhausted; doctors can do nothing for most of the sick and wounded. (The Home Office estimates there would be ten million unburied corpses; SANA estimates 20 million.) Epidemics of cholera, dysentery and typhoid are inevitable. There are riots over food supplies guarded by soldiers and armed police. All emergency procedures fail and there is violence and looting everywhere, as law and order break down.

And again these words and numbers obscure the essential phenomenon of the thing: to find it I must go to other words in a quieter place, to Rilke's poem, *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes*,

and those three figures on the ascent out of Hades. Eurydice . . .

. . . thought not of the man who walked ahead,
and not of the way that climbed up into life.
She was in herself. And her having-died-being fulfilled her like fullness.
Like a fruit of sweetness and darkness,
so was she full of her large death
that was so new, that she understood nothing.

She was already undone like long hair
and bestowed like fallen rain
and shared out like hundredfold provisions.

She was already root.

And as suddenly
the god halted her and with pain in his voice
spoke the words: he has turned round—
she understood nothing and said quietly:
Who?

That's what *Threads* is about: the question is not whether we're bound for Hell; Hell is where we are, all of us in our Eurydice world that from far off in space gleams like a green jewel. The question is whether we want to get out of where we are, whether we're so full of our large death that we have forgotten about life.

Who or what is Orpheus in this metaphor? Perhaps, it's that something that lives us; perhaps it thinks we belong in Hell. And yet that same thing that lives us has shown us that it wants everything that can happen to happen. Is survival something that can happen? Is there a cure for MADness? Maybe we ought to look into it. There's no one else.

Tom Wilkie: After the bomb

Winter of our destruction

Dr Tom Wilkie examines the increasing evidence that nuclear war will be followed by a winter of freezing temperatures and darkness. What will the repercussions of that long winter be?

Visions of the apocalypse have always been popular. People enjoy being frightened, as the book and film industries well know. The 'nuclear winter' has become our current version of the apocalypse, and many people seem to relish as much as they fear the prediction that the world will end not just with a bang but with a winter too.

The prediction is dire. In the aftermath of a nuclear war, clouds of dust and smoke would blot out the sun over most of the Northern hemisphere. The clouds would scatter or absorb the Sun's rays, and neither heat nor light would penetrate down to the Earth's surface. There would be darkness at noon, and cold of a severity unparalleled since the last ice-age. Many plants would die in the darkness, for they need sunlight for photosynthesis. Animals would freeze or starve. Any human survivors of the nuclear blasts, weakened physically and psychologically, would perish by the million.

In some versions of the tale, the normal currents of the atmosphere would be so thrown out of kilter that the dust and smoke would move across the equator into the Southern hemisphere. Tropical plants are very sensitive to small changes in temperature, and the tropical forest could largely disappear. If that happened, most species of plants, animals and micro-organisms on the Earth would follow them into extinction. Like the wrath of some hideous god, devastation would stalk the whole globe.

But will it happen? The end of the world has been predicted often enough in the past, and still the catastrophe has not happened. Recent studies have estimated that about 1.1 billion people may die from blast, fire and radiation alone. And, however horrible that figure may be, it does mean that the majority of the world's population would survive. The nuclear winter scenario predicts that at least another billion will die in the aftermath. But is that not just another example of people revelling in gloom, and exaggerating the destructive effects of nuclear weapons, just as in the past pessimists exaggerated the effects of the machine-gun or the military aeroplane?

In fact, scientists and strategists have consistently under-estimated the effects of nuclear weapons. They carefully studied the radioactive fallout produced by the bombs dropped on

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Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, but a year later, an underwater test-explosion made the lagoon at Bikini Atoll intensely radioactive for days and presented far more problems than had been anticipated. Much worse problems arose in 1954 when the US exploded a hydrogen bomb at Rongelap Atoll.

In 1955, prompted by international concern, the United Nations set up a Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR). According to UNSCEAR's most recent report, 423 tests have been carried out in the atmosphere or underwater since 1945, with a total explosive power of 545 megatons (one megaton [MT] is equivalent to the explosion of one million tons of TNT). In 1963, Britain, the USA and the USSR bowed to international pressure and agreed to stop testing weapons in the atmosphere or underwater. But the cessation of testing did not mean the end of risk. Yet again nuclear weapons held an unwelcome surprise: according to UNSCEAR '50 per cent of the impact of the fallout will be delivered . . . in the next 2,000 to 3,000 years.' (Testing did not stop completely, anyway. France and China have continued atmospheric tests since 1963, and Britain, the USA and the USSR have refined and developed new weapons by testing underground—at a combined rate of one test explosion a week.)

In 1958, the superpowers agreed a temporary moratorium on testing. Had that developed unbroken into a complete ban, we might never know today of another important effect of nuclear weapons, the so-called 'electromagnetic pulse' (EMP). If a hydrogen bomb explodes high above the Earth, the intense burst of X-rays and gamma-rays it produces interacts with the atmosphere in a complex way. At ground level the effect is felt as a burst of electromagnetic energy which burns out transistors and other electronic components, rendering all modern telecommunications useless.

At the first ever A-bomb test, scientists are rumoured to have placed half-joking bets on whether the atmosphere would ignite. Only just over a decade ago, however, did scientists fully realise that the intense heat of a nuclear fireball could cause the normally inert nitrogen in our air to 'burn'—to combine with oxygen. The effect would be limited to the neighbourhood of the fireball—it would not ignite a global conflagration—but the blast would throw the oxides of nitrogen produced up into the stratosphere. There they would damage the ozone layer which filters and protects us from the Sun's ultraviolet radiation. Without the ozone layer's protection, some plants will die; animals and humans will go blind; and many people will develop skin cancer.

It seems as if, once every decade, scientists reassess the effects of nuclear weapons and come up with some more dreadful side-effect: fallout; EMP; ozone-layer damage; and now, the possibility of the nuclear winter. In contrast to some of the earlier episodes, scientists have discussed the nuclear winter and published their results in the open scientific literature. Trying to predict the global consequences of nuclear war is an awesome task, and it has brought together scientists from many disciplines. At least five separate computer models have now been published, each of them emphasising some different aspect. Editorials in the British science journal *Nature*, and some scientists—among them Edward Teller, the so-called



'father of the H-bomb'—have disputed the whole idea.

Is the 'nuclear winter' an exercise in hype that detracts attention from and minimises the true horror of the prospect of 1.1 billion people dying from blast, fire and radiation? Or is it the latest, in a long series of revelations that nuclear war is possibly more horrible than we are able to comprehend?

The possibility of a nuclear winter was discovered, almost by accident. A group of scientists in the USA had, separately, been studying dust-storms on Mars, and the effects on the Earth's climate of the dust clouds from volcanic eruptions such as Mount St Helens and El Chicón. From their studies, they realised that the clouds of dust kicked up by nuclear explosions could affect the Earth's climate, and so they pooled their resources and began to adapt their computer models of the atmosphere to study this new problem. The group has come to be known as TTAPS (Turco, Toon, Ackerman, Pollack and Sagan).

At about the same time, in an article published in 1982 in the Swedish environmental journal *Ambio*, Paul Crutzen, of the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry at Mainz in West Germany, and John Birks of the University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, tried to assess the environmental pollution resulting from a nuclear war. To their surprise, they discovered that the fires set off by nuclear explosions would generate massive amounts of smoke, and that, although this was the most important environmental consequence, previous studies had neglected this effect. The TTAPS group then put smoke as well as dust in their model of the effects of particles in the atmosphere, and found that smoke had a greater impact on the climate than dust. Black, oily smoke absorbs the Sun's rays, whereas the very fine particles of dust scatter the light without absorbing it. Moreover, the particles of smoke will, in general, be smaller than the dust and so the smoke will stay in the atmosphere for longer.

Turco and his colleagues ran their computer programs through many times, using different assumptions about the likely number of warheads that might be used, and the different patterns of fires and dust clouds that might result. Because smoke is so important, and because attacks on cities would start a large number of fires, they discovered that even a 100-MT attack could set off the nuclear winter. Currently, the nuclear arsenal is around 18,000 MTs; less than one per cent of it would destroy

every large and medium-sized city in the world. But the important point here is not the total megatonnage. The trend in nuclear armaments today is towards many, 'small' warheads: were these targeted on cities, then it matters little if 100 MTs or 5,000 MTs falls, the cities will burn just the same.

The TTAPS group chose a 5,000-MT exchange—less than a third of the world's total stockpile—as their 'baseline scenario'. The computer's predictions were horrifying: surface temperatures would drop by 35°C within a month, and would remain below freezing for about three months. In the days after an attack it would be too dark to see, even at midday. The ground would be permanently covered by snow and ice, and all surface water would be frozen. The example of Mars, where gigantic dust-storms start in one hemisphere and then envelop the globe within ten days, suggests that on the Earth, monsoon-like winds may blow clouds of smoke, dust, and radioactive debris across the equator, bringing winter to parts of the globe hitherto untouched.

The TTAPS group reported their findings at the conference 'The World after Nuclear War' in Washington, DC, late in 1983. The conference also examined the long-term biological consequences of nuclear war. The biologists noted that if war occurred in spring or summer then even those crops unaffected by blast or fire would be lost. Even if the harvest was gathered in before war broke out, it would still be too cold to expect much of the following growing season. In Europe, North America and the USSR, stocks of seeds for subsequent years are normally stored, not on individual farms, but in bulk, predominantly in or near target areas. Most major crops are annuals which, because they yield so much for human consumption, need fertilisers, irrigation and protection from diseases and insect pests. But without tractors to till the land, energy to pump water through irrigation schemes—and, indeed, with water frozen solid for many months—agriculture in the Northern hemisphere, as we know it, would, for all practical purposes, come to an end. The seeds of trees in tropical forests tend to be much more short-lived than those of temperate zones, and few tropical plants can

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Next Week

Mary Goldring on the pensions lottery in Britain

Christina Dodwell on her journey down the river Sepik

Ellen Fairweather's Langham Diary

Benjamin Woolley investigates the investigative journalists

Richard Cork on Vermeer

Fritz Spiegl * John Naughton
John Wain

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tolerate cold seasons (even at temperatures well above freezing). If the cold and the dark spreads to these regions, vast areas of tropical vegetation would die.

The biologists and the atmospheric scientists each had one, minor, compensation to offer. The biologists thought it unlikely that, even after a full nuclear winter, the species *Homo sapiens* would be forced to extinction immediately. But they do warn that eventually there might be no human survivors in the Northern hemisphere, and that the possibility of the extinction of *Homo sapiens* cannot be excluded. Although the atmospheric scientists predict conditions unparalleled since the last ice-age, they do not think that nuclear war will trigger a new ice-age. The clouds will eventually disperse and, after more than a year, temperatures will return to near-normal levels.

No one—we hope—will ever carry out the ultimate experiment by which we could judge the accuracy of the TTAPS group's computer models. The group did check their methods against the clouds of dust ejected by El Chicón, and got reasonably good agreement. But there were some weaknesses in their computer model. In fact, they had three programs. One was a nuclear 'war game' model which they used to simulate the different ways in which nuclear war might be fought. The second program used a particle microphysics model to estimate how the millions of tons of dust and smoke would move up and down in the atmosphere. Particles would settle out under gravity, coagulate or be washed out by rain and snow differently, depending on their size. Knowing the density of material at different levels in the atmosphere, the TTAPS group then used a radioactive-convective model to work out how much heat and light would get through to the Earth's surface.

One serious objection to the TTAPS model is that it treats the Earth's atmosphere as a one-dimensional, vertical column of air. It ignores the way in which smoke and dust would be spread horizontally in the first crucial days after the nuclear exchange, nor did it properly deal with the effects of the oceans or of the winds. Because the seas take longer to cool down than the continental land masses, the temperature drop due to the nuclear winter would be less over the oceans.

Four other computer models have now been published, some of which address the weaknesses of the TTAPS model. The overall picture remains the same. However, Alan Robock, of the University of Maryland, found that if he included feedback effects due to the polar ice-caps, the computer predicted that the nuclear winter could last up to four or five years.

Depending on one's viewpoint, it is reassuring, or deeply depressing that all the models yield results consistent with one another. There is certainly no common interest among the modellers. One set of predictions came from Mike MacCracken, who works at one of the USA's premier weapons laboratories—the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory; on the other hand, the Director of Climate Modelling from the Computer Centre of the Soviet Union's Academy of Sciences, Dr Vladimir Alexandrov, reported a 'nuclear-winter' effect from his computer models at the 1983 Washington meeting. Earlier this year, Curt Covey and co-workers published in *Nature* details of the most sophisticated climate model yet, →23,

John Cole: A year of Neil Kinnock

The problem of having to learn at the top

Neil Kinnock and his deputy, Roy Hattersley, are their parents' only children, and bear the stigmata of parental ambitions for them. Perhaps some university psychology department might offer as a thesis subject: 'Influence of the absence of sibling rivalry on the political careers of only children'. It should go down a treat at the British Association.

Kinnock's wife, Glensys, reports that he was always very conscious of his parents (now both dead) and of his family background. She is quoted in Robert Harris's biography, *The Making of Neil Kinnock* (Faber and Faber £9.95 and £4.95): 'He's a great believer in roots and background and decency and clean shoes and looking smart and all those aspirations for their children which his parents and my parents represent.'

The remark catches the Kinnock enigma. One part of him is dominated by the super-ego his wife describes, the other is self-indulgent. The former drove him up the shaky ladder of Labour politics—MP at 28, Leader at 41—and has produced a tough fighter on party discipline and policy. The latter raises suspicions that he is intellectually supine, quick but not deep in mind, inclined to substitute the values of a Welsh Gabfest for the real world: in fact, inebriated—as Churchill once said of an opponent—by the exuberance of his own verbosity.

Yet it is the exuberance of his politics that made Neil Kinnock Leader. While rivals like Roy Hattersley and Peter Shore devilled away in the Commons, Kinnock was stumping the constituencies and union branches with his evangelistic oratory. At times he had a poor voting record at Westminster.

But when he fought the Devolution Bill of his mentor, Michael Foot, he showed capacity for the grind of long committee stages. Paradoxically, but typically, when the collapse of devolution undermined the Callaghan government and it lost a confidence vote to an alliance of Conservatives, Liberals and Nationalists, it was Kinnock who led the defiant singing of the 'Red Flag' below the Labour gangway.

Many of his choir that night have not survived the electoral disasters of 1979 and 1983, and it was a demoralised Labour Party that Kinnock and Hattersley took over when they raised their hands together at Brighton last October. It has been a tough and unrewarding year.

Kinnock's first compelling words as Leader were a demand that disunity should end. He soon discovered that too many of his MPs were fighting de-selection by far-Left caucuses to make for a happy party. So he launched a subtle scheme to widen the franchise: voluntary



as far as each constituency committee is concerned, but Kinnock has shrewdly guessed that once it starts the tide will be irresistible.

Despite union backsliding last week, he will be surprised if the new rule does not carry at Blackpool. Mobilising a majority is what he is good at. Although Jim Callaghan, Labour's ultimate Old Pro, never managed to persuade Kinnock to join his government, he admires him as 'a politician to his fingertips'.

The new Leader has also impressed his party by his handling of the Government's local government fiasco. There were pitfalls for Labour in this also, notably at Liverpool. John Cunningham and Jack Straw did the donkey-work, but Kinnock, instead of leaving them to take the political risks of confronting the Militant-led caucus, put his own leadership on the line.

'He's a loyal and brave fellow who fights for his friends,' says an old adversary. When the Liverpool councillors came to Westminster, with what seemed to him outrageous plans, Kinnock calmly asked them whether they had day-return tickets, and suggested if they were going to behave so dafly they had better save money by going home at once.

Any new Leader of the Opposition who has, not been Prime Minister faces a herculean task in establishing himself in the House. He has, basically, only two quarter-hours a week to do this. A House bitterly divided by the longest strike in modern times has created a hostile environment. So has a Prime Minister whose hatred of Labour produces aggressive rather than defensive performances each Tuesday and Thursday.

Kinnock's staff do their best to match Whitehall's massive briefing of the Prime Minister for these cockfights. Some of them wish Kinnock would use Glensys's present of what she self-mockingly calls 'a Sony Walkerson' to listen not to music but to the World Service, 'obsessionally, like Denis Healey'. (If Healey is spotted wearing earphones, he's probably listening to *The Ring* for the umpteenth time.)

Kinnock has made only two set-piece speeches at Westminster since becoming leader—one on NHS cuts, the other in the end-of-term 'upmarket knockabout' (a happy description by the Leader of the House, John Biffen, who delights in such extravaganzas).

Aneurin Bevan, Kinnock's hero, was one of the few modern orators who could succeed both in the House and on a platform. Churchill once ordered his whips to stop Tory backbenchers interrupting Bevan, because he scored points by making fools of them. A number of Conservatives were prepared to be foolish to Kinnock's advantage, but he wouldn't let them. He has been much criticised for prolixity, so he