

Nuclear Housekeeping

Marketing and the Aesthetics of the Atom Bomb in the 1950s

“A house that’s neglected is a house maybe
doomed in the Atomic Age...”¹

The documentary-style short film *The House in the Middle* (1954)² opens with three houses, or rather, small cabins, standing in a desert environment. Of similar build, they seemingly differ in color only. The viewer hears a stentorian countdown from five, and the picture suddenly cuts to a full-blown atomic explosion. This powerful imagery of destruction is underscored by dramatic music usually reserved for stirring cinematic content, further emphasized by the main title’s typography, which echoes the style of science fiction film posters from the 1950s. All points toward a narrative of nuclear apocalypse, when the viewer is stunned by the announcement that the film was produced by the (fictional) “National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau,” in association with the Federal Civil Defense Administration. It soon becomes apparent that the nuclear catastrophe is but a guise for an elaborate “paint commercial,” and in a broader sense, an appeal to the American public to keep their properties clean and well-furbished, at best an odd combination. In this essay I will explore how this blend between cataclysm and cleanliness was a natural combination in the postwar decade, and how a narrative formula that plays on the collective anxiety of nuclear paranoia during the Cold War era can be effectively used as an appeal to consume.

The Apocalypse – synonymous here with the cataclysmic destruction of humanity – has been a staple in cultural discourse since the earliest written sources in Western culture: Sumerian fragments of the story of the Flood – later incorporated in the epic cycle of the Gilgamesh stories – have survived from the early 2nd Millennium B.C., and also form one of the basic myths of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While the epic of Gilgamesh still portrays the divine decision to annihilate the human nuisance – people had become too numerous, and thus too loud and bothersome to Enlil, the chief deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon – as the whim of the gods, the Biblical story of the Flood imbues the deluge with a moral dimension. Humanity has to perish as a consequence of its moral corruption, and the cataclysm is a form of punishment, an aspect that modern stories of cataclysmic destruction readily retain even today.

“Terminal visions,”³ as Warren Wagar calls them, have by no means remained within the sphere of the sacred. They have been a staple in secular literature, namely

1 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up–Paint Up–Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

2 The essay will refer to the 1954 color version, which was named to the Film Registry in 2001.

3 W. Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

science fiction narratives, since the advent of the genre. Mary Shelley – today best known for her novel *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) – published *The Last Man*, a vision of humanity's doom, in 1826. The second half of the 19th century saw a marked proliferation of (post)apocalyptic texts, and the formula established itself as one of the most prolific text groups within science fiction. Wagar refers to these texts as “secular eschatology, a worldly study of world's ends that ignores religious belief or puts the old visions to use as metaphors for modern anxiety.”⁴ The 20th century, which saw a shift from natural disasters to human-induced causes for destruction, supplied a wide array of endgame scenarios, and the nuclear apocalypse is arguably the most spectacular of these. Arising from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and fueled by the collective anxiety during the Cold War, narratives of nuclear destruction dominated the end time narratives until the late 1960s. One of the peculiarities of (post)apocalyptic narratives is that the urban environment features as the site of the cataclysm, the demolition of the architectural element often standing in for the annihilation of the human component. Apart from the metropolis – which is the most recurrent victim of the cataclysm for reasons ranging from the unease felt towards accelerated urbanization at the end of the 19th century⁵ to the spectacular visual potential of toppling skyscrapers in disaster cinema – authors also like to situate their terminal visions in sites that are associated with a utopian quality in their respective societies. This is one of the reasons why H. G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) has the aliens land in Woking, the embodiment of rural idyll in late Victorian England,⁶ where not only humanity's physical existence is threatened but also the core values of the archetypal “British way of life.”

When analyzing the postwar United States, we see the emergence of the suburb as the locus of the American utopia: the white, middle-class nuclear family, a patriarchal construct with the husband as the main authority figure, a homemaker wife, and preferably two or three children.⁷ This notion of utopia has become part of American popular culture to the extent that sitcoms which focus on families will most often be placed into a suburban setting – from *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) to *Modern Family* (2009–present) – even today, when shows with young, independent people like *Friends* (1994–2004) or *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014) will feature a metropolitan environment. Although contemporary series set in suburbia will often reflect on the utopian legacy ironically – see for example *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012) or *Suburgatory* (2011–2014) – they simultaneously reiterate and uphold the nostalgic longing for the golden age of the American family idyll. When the atom bomb obliterates the suburb in postwar

4 Wagar, 4.

5 Nick Yablon, “The Metropolitan Life in Ruins: Architectural and Fictional Speculations in New York, 1909–19,” *American Quarterly* 56.2 (June 1, 2004): 308–47.

6 Patrick Parrinder, “From Mary Shelley to *The War of the Worlds*: The Thames Valley Catastrophe,” in *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and Its Precursors*, ed. David Seed (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 61.

7 Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse University Press, 2003), 69.

science fiction, it is thus not only an attack against the United States, but also metaphorically a threat against the ideal way of life. Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains"⁸ portrays human demise through the post-nuclear lingering of an automated suburban house, whose AI poignantly exhibits post-traumatic denial by continuing to function without regard for the death of the family – father, mother, daughter, son and the trusted family dog – during a nuclear strike. The house finally 'dies' by fire, the self-same danger *The House in the Middle* is warning against.

There are actually two versions of the film under the same title. The first, released in 1953 under the production of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, is half the length of the 1954 version, filmed in black and white, and is a fairly straightforward documentary on "the possible effects [of a nuclear explosion] on the homes of America."⁹ Although the announcer makes the connection between threat and personal reality explicit, the tone of the film remains distanced, and concentrates on the test carried out in the Nevada Test Site¹⁰ on May 8, 1953, during Operation Upshot-Knothole.¹¹ The emphasis here is on "good conditions" and "safe housekeeping,"¹² and the basic message is to urge the public to make an effort in order to minimize the conditions of possible home fires in case of a nuclear attack. The narration is distanced and soothing, gauged to be calming and matter-of-fact. Its target audience are the inhabitants of "homes located some distance from the major target areas,"¹³ and although it subtly uses the trope of the nuclear apocalypse as the vehicle for an appeal to clean up around the house, the major focus still seems to be civil defense. Its documentary style is stressed by the choice of the announcer, a middle-aged white man with a resonant voice, seated in an office: both the person and the environment exude authority, and the script calls for this authority figure to get the message across without causing a panic.

The 1954 color version – the subject of this essay – uses the same nuclear test footage, but doubles the length of the film by extending and changing the frame story. Beyond adding extra footage, it significantly alters the tone of the narration from objective to dramatic, and the focus shifts from the emphasis on safety to social commentary. The producer of the film is "the 'National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau' [which was] a folksier name for the National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association, which had a vested interest in people buying lots of house paint."¹⁴ Thus it becomes a drawn-out

8 First published in the May 6, 1950 issue of *Collier's Magazine*, collected in Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (Bantam/Spectra, 1984).

9 *The House in the Middle* (Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1953).

10 This test was part of a whole series of tests which sought to assess the effects of nuclear bombs on civilian targets.

11 U.S. Department of Energy Nevada Operations Office, *United States Nuclear Tests July 1945 through September 1992* (United States Department of Energy, 2000), 4; 110–111.

12 *The House in the Middle* (Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1953).

13 *The House in the Middle* (Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1953).

14 Mike Mashon and Kelly Chisholm, "The Cold War Meets Commerce: The House(s) in the Middle," *Now See Hear!* webpage, March 10, 2015, <http://blogs.loc.gov/now-see-hear/2015/03/the-cold-war-meets-commerce-the-houses-in-the-middle/>.

paint commercial with a thinly disguised plea for consumption. This first version of *The House in the Middle* has its own interesting points,¹⁵ but what will be examined in this essay is how a fairly straightforward narrative of pre- and (post)apocalypse is utilized as the context for a home-repair advertisement.

The film opens with the bombastic title sequence already described in the first paragraph. Then we switch to an aerial view of a residential area while the narrator – the same as in the 1953 version – announces “one American town looks like the other when you see it from an airplane window.”¹⁶ Although he goes on to describe the suburban idyll, the image carries the same duality as Miklós Radnóti’s poem “Nem tudhatom” [I Cannot Know], where the street-eye view of caring familiarity is contrasted with the bird’s-eye view of the bomber pilot.¹⁷ As the Hungarian landscape in Radnóti’s poem, the suburban utopia, when seen from above, becomes a possible target for a nuclear attack. Gone are the reassurances from the first film that residential areas are not likely targets, and the visual execution uses the viewers’ inherent knowledge of (post)apocalyptic iconography to drive the message home. The image of the house destroyed by the nuclear blast at the very beginning of the film overlays the following pastoral imagery of small-town America, and the utopian panorama also carries within it the prospect of (post)apocalyptic wasteland. There is no need to explicitly draw the parallel as viewers in the 1950s, well-conditioned by the iconography of disaster in science fiction literature and film, could supply the narrative of the atomic cataclysm themselves.

Instead of concentrating on the test and its effects, the focus has shifted to the presence of disheveled properties in the suburban community: the announcer goes on to call out these estates as “run-down” and “eyesores” that you can find within SLUMS! – you can almost hear the capitals and the exclamation marks at the end.¹⁸ The film repeatedly denounces messy housekeeping, both in reference to the exterior – most likely a male responsibility – and the interior – this being traditionally the woman’s domain – of the property, much more so than the first version of the film. This difference can not only be observed in the content of the narration, but also in the diction, marking a change from objective-distanced to exclamatory-dramatic. The iconography further emphasizes the fact that it is not only objects, but also a way of life that is on the line here: the house on the right, run-down and cluttered with litter, features a toy pram with a toy doll, both of which fall victim to the post-explosion blaze. This points to the possible loss of the family’s children, and thus the future, all because of neglecting the necessary repairs around the house. This is the narrative arc along which the tests themselves

15 It would be interesting to analyze all nuclear tests conducted on domestic models like family houses, complete with dummies constituting a diorama of suburban family bliss, but such an investigation goes beyond the limits of the present paper.

16 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

17 The Encore test during Operation Upshot-Knothole, which supplied the footage for both films, simulated a nuclear bomb dropped from an airplane (*United States Nuclear Tests July 1945 through September 1992*, 110–111).

18 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

– three fences in diverse states of repair, and three miniature frame houses with “varying exterior conditions”¹⁹ – are related. It comes as no surprise that the heat wave following the atomic explosion leads to the destruction to all fences and houses except for *The House in the Middle*, whose victory over the flames is announced by triumphant music.

The description of *The House in the Middle* had also been added to in comparison with the first version of the film. We are assured that the house is “in good condition [...] the exterior has been painted with ordinary, good quality house paint.”²⁰ If this was not enough to get us going to the hardware store for our bucket of paint to start redecorating right away, the narration goes into full advertisement mode, saying that “[l]ight-painted surfaces reflect heat, paint also protects the wood from weathering and moisture damage.”²¹ To emphasize the connection between far-away test houses and the viewers’ own environment, the narrator asks in a slightly accusatory voice: “Two houses a total loss, but the well-kept and painted house in the middle still stands [...]. Which of these is your house?”²² As said above, the first film ends here, with the presenter calling for better housekeeping practices to aid the civil defense. The second film adds a whole sequence of scenes from the American suburban neighborhood: children are cleaning up the litter found on the streets, and you can see ordinary citizens working around their houses, in their gardens and homes. The announcer delivers the message: “trim your shrubbery and trees, weed and plant flowers [...]. Beauty, cleanliness, health and safety are the four basic doctrines that protect our homes, our cities.”²³

This may well seem a plea to the American nation as a whole. But instead of the multiethnic reality that was the United States in the 1950s we are exclusively presented with images of middle-class white citizens. This interestingly rhymes with the practices of the television family sitcom, also coming to prominence during this part of the 1950s.²⁴ As Mary Beth Haralovich points out, “[t]he working class is marginalized in and minorities are absent from these discourses and from the social economy of consumption. An ideal white and middle-class home life was a primary means of reconstituting and resocializing the American family after World War II.”²⁵ This not only means that the suburban white middle-class family was the epitome of all that America stood for, and thus the threat to its destruction also entailed the metaphorical threat to the cultural essence of the United States. It also means that this was the medium which was thought to be able to most effectively drive home the message of the advertisement. Again, corresponding to the practices of the family sitcom, direct consumption is not part of the film: the viewer does not see the act of buying, and neither does the narration mention any particular product. Yet several ‘characters’ are shown performing reparations around

19 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

20 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

21 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

22 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

23 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).

24 Haralovich, 70.

25 Haralovich, 70.

the house, including a prominent shot of a man painting his home's exterior walls. One might come to the conclusion that the target audience of this film was quite narrow, directed at the selfsame stratum of society it featured: white, middle-class Americans.

But if we view it from a symbolic angle, the cultural essence referred to above, the picture becomes more complex. If we identify the suburban utopia as representative of the ideal family setting – which Haralovich points to in her essay – the setting and thus the message may have been endorsed by a much wider portion of the American public than portrayed in the film. By aligning home decoration with the archetypal context of American home life, renovation and the utopian promises of an idealized middle-class lifestyle go hand-in-hand, and may lead viewers from other social classes to buy the products advertised, as well. While the family sitcom retains its relative proximity to – an idealized – reality, what makes *The House in the Middle* so interesting is that it combines imagery of fantastic horror and destruction with the message to consume. The visual arc ranging from the nuclear blast at the beginning of the film to the image of suburban bliss at the end subverts the formulaic (post)apocalyptic narrative, which usually exhibits a narrative arc from the image of a prospering world towards the post-apocalyptic wasteland. In *The House in the Middle* the message “Buy paint!” is associated with the promise to avert this catastrophe: hence the elimination of the distance between possible target area and the majority of the residential communities to make the threat more imminent, and hence the pastoral idyll as the endpoint. The nuclear cataclysm becomes the looming shadow of the disheveled family home, while home renovation is presented as a counterpoint to ward off this threat, and transplants the soothing objectivity of the first film's narration as the agent of sanity. Here the rhetorical devices are meant to incite panic, only to immediately present the antidote, as well: buying paint will get you through the nuclear war. The presenter makes this connection explicitly clear at the end: “You’ve seen the tests, you know the story. Join up with your friends and neighbors for a better, safer community. It’s also a good civil defense, which is everyone’s responsibility [...] it’s your choice. The reward may be survival.”²⁶

26 *The House in the Middle* (National Clean Up – Paint Up – Fix Up Bureau, 1954).