

Madness and Nuclear Drama on TV

A Postscript or Postmortem?

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Within the space of one week in March, two films dealing with different aspects of nuclear madness appeared on Network television. In "The China Syndrome," a film which had been released right at the time of the Three Mile Island blow-up, the viewer is confronted with an attempt to cover-up a dangerous accident at a nuclear reactor in California.

In "Special Bulletin," a made-for-tv film which employs videotape for its aura of cinema verite, we see the unraveling drama of a group of nuclear disarmament advocates threaten to nuke Charleston, South Carolina with their own "home-made" device unless all the nuclear detonators on the warheads in the Charleston area are dismantled.

Both films focus on the role of television and those who produce and report the news. In addition, both films rely on the characterization of madness in probing the violent actions of nuclear protestors who bring their message to the public through the media.

The points of similarity and differences in these two films reveal not only the hermeneutic terrain of tv reporting of nuclear protests, but also a subtext of the inherent insanity embedded in the power structure. Both films play on the image of the crusading young reporter whose courage to be where the stories are reeks of the rather smug liberal pretensions about journalists as the true tribunes of the people.

On the other hand, both films are not without their moments of media auto-critique. While "China Syndrome" takes a number of pot shots at tv executives for their timidity and corporate collusion, "Special Bulletin" zeroes in on how tv as a social spectacle "trivializes" (this charge made by the "mad" scientist) and decontextualizes political issues. While Special Bulletin makes some pithy and moving gestures in the direction of a radical analysis of the media and the lunacy of the political ruling circles, these thrusts remain disconnected, giving further evidence of the inability of television as a social form to facilitate reflective thinking.

"China Syndrome" does present a more sustained critique of the nuclear industry in clear anti-capitalist terms. Unfortunately, the crucial dialogue in the movie that drove home the point of a power-mad corporate world was edited out in the television showing. As far as I can determine (through calls to a sympathetic newspaper tv critic), ABC took out the scene so as not to appear too anti-business. Radical criticism obviously has its limits on television.

Where both films share the most common ground is on the dramatic device of the violent and media-grabbing tactics of the nuclear protestors. While this violence is met with the murderous firepower of the state, the sense of desperation and even "insane" fanaticism of the protestors as they try to bring their message to the public underscores the insidious function of the media as legitimizing agent.

What must be seen as failures of nerve and imagination and/or ideological distortion in American film and television is nowhere more evident than in these two dramatic representations of nuclear protest. The American visual image of protest reflects the one-dimensional sphere of American politics where anything that promotes combative politics is mad, and, hence, illegitimate. Moreover, the only way that combative politics is mirrored in these dramas is through some form of violent and self-defeating armed conflict.

If the choice in ending nuclear madness is between the sane path of reformist lobbying and electoral politics and the crazy road of armed terror, we might as well write off the fate of the earth now and blow our brains out. (Watching too much tv is an appropriate non-violent substitute to blowing one's brains out.) However, instead of surrendering both our planet and our intelligence to the mindlessness of this false choice, we must look beyond the little dramas of the media. Our ability to develop a radical strategy will be, in the final analysis, a measure of the creative disorders of our own minds.

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