DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 516 CS 504 649

AUTHOR Rybacki, Karyn Charles; Rybacki, Donald Jay
TITLE Visions of Apocalypse: A Rhetorical Analysis of "The Day After."
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (34th, San Francisco, CA, May 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; Audiences; Auteurism; Film Criticism; *Films; *Mass Media Effects; *Popular Culture; *Programing (Broadcast); *Rhetorical Criticism; *Television Research; Television Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Day After (The)

ABSTRACT

To examine the rhetorical vision of nuclear war presented in the television show "The Day After," it is necessary to consider (1) the motives of those involved in producing the film, (2) the debate over the film that preceded its presentation, (3) the effect of the film's message, and (4) how the film's rhetorical structure contributed to those consequences. An examination of public statements made by network executives and others connected with the production of the film reveals a number of motives for airing it. These include ABC's desire to boost its ratings during a critical period and the wish to provide a national dialogue. Critics viewed the film as a free advertisement for a nuclear arms freeze, and faulted it--despite the debate and warnings preceding its showing--for its cursory treatment of reality and as a drama in which the viewer's only motive for watching was to wait for the bombs to drop. Surveys of viewers revealed that the film changed few opinions about nuclear war, as the percentage of viewers who thought that nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union was not likely rose slightly, as did the percentage of those who thought the United States was doing all it could to prevent war. Finally, an analysis of the enthymematic structure of the film, in which the rhetor (the film) makes maximum use of what the audience already knows or believes, reveals that the film was so open-ended it allowed viewers to regard the film as pro- or anti-nuclear freeze, depending on their personal frame of reference. The lack of drama in which agents are included was also determined to contribute to the film's distortion of reality. (CRH)

VISIONS OF APOCALYPSE:

A Rhetorical Analysis of *The Day After*

Karyn Charles Rybacki, Phd
Associate Professor of Speech
Northern Michigan University

Donald Jay Rybacki, Phd
Assistant Professor of Speech
Northern Michigan University

Paper Presented at the 1984 Convention
of
THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

San Francisco, CA

The dawning of the nuclear age provided film makers with new themes to explore. During the 1950s, The Bomb was portrayed as an instrument of peace. *Above and Beyond* (1952) told the story of the bombing of Hiroshima which ended World War II. *Strategic Air Command* (1955) described the Air Force's deterrent capabilities, while *Bombers B-52* (1957) was a quasi documentary about its newest instrument of peace. However, in 1959, Stanley Krammer's *On the Beach*, showed that The Bomb as something to be feared (Suid, 1978).

During the 1960s, a series of "anti-war" films focused on man's ultimate inability to control nuclear weapons. With darkly comedic style, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) explored the possibility of a few deranged individuals in sensitive positions carrying out a preemptive first strike. *Fail Safe* (1964), by Max Youngstein, was more realistic in depicting the danger of a breakdown in the means used to recall bombers. In *The Bedford Incident*, James Harris showed the effects of prolonged tension on an American destroyer's officers and crew during an encounter with a Russian submarine (Suid, 1978).

In 1982, NBC television offered a view of *World War III*, in which the nuclear threshold is crossed when neither the American President nor the Soviet Premier are "any match for the tricky, implacable red dogs of the KGB," (Gitlin, 1983, p. 199). On November 20, 1983 ABC broadcast *The Day After* touted to be "the most important movie we or anyone else have ever made" by ABC's Brandon Stoddard, and termed likely to anesthetize viewers with its mediocrity by *Time*. This paper will examine the rhetorical vision of nuclear war presented in *The Day After*, considering the motives of those involved in producing the film, the debate over the film which preceded its being aired, the effect of the film's message, and how the film's rhetorical structure contributed to those consequences.

THE MELANGE OF MOTIVES

The cynic might say that ABC's motive was to boost its ratings during a critical period, the November sweeps. The network had originally scheduled the program to air in May 1983, but pulled it back at the last moment, claiming it required more work (Duffy, 1983). In the interim, bootlegged copies of the film found their way into the hands of pro-freeze groups and controversy surrounding the film's purpose began to grow. ABC rescheduled the film to air against the first night of an NBC mini-series on John F. Kennedy.

One week before it aired, ABC Motion Pictures President Brandon Stoddard told viewers of CBS's *60 Minutes* that *The Day After* was a "what if movie," designed to explore the consequences of a nuclear war. Vice President of ABC's motion picture and mini-series division, Stu Samuels, stated "we made this movie for the sake of examining something that in a terrible way is the most important issue of our time," (Duffy, 1983, p. 1E). Its only message was that "nuclear war is horrible." Network executives told the press that the film's purpose was to provoke national dialog. Director Nicholas Meyer said his purpose was "to inspire debate. From debate comes consensus--a consensus we all hopefully have been involved in," (Waters, Karlen, Doherty, Huck, & Abramson, 1983, p. 72).

In responding to criticism that the film propagandized on behalf of a nuclear freeze, ABC executives asserted that *The Day After* contained no political statements and did not take a position on how a nuclear war might occur (Waters, Stadtman, & Twardy, 1983). Director Meyer told *Time*: "*The Day After* does not advocate disarmament, build-down, buildup, freeze. I didn't want to alienate any viewers. The movie is like a giant public service announcement, like Smokey the Bear," (Cocks, Ainslie, & Worrell, 1983, p. 84).

In developing the project, ABC executives told the production staff that they were not concerned about the ratings. Meyer became convinced that they

were motivated by the same fears about nuclear war as anybody else (Meyer, 1983). But for the director, the work fulfilled a sense of mission: "I cannot live with myself if I don't make this movie. How often do you get the chance to put your work in the service of your beliefs . . . If this film could sober the world and slow the pace with which we seem determined to turn our planet into a nuclear porcupine, then I guess I'm signing up," (Meyer, 1983, p. 8). He doubted the film would significantly affect those who had already made up their minds, but that for the uncommitted, "for people who've simply avoided the issue, there, perhaps, it might do some good," (Meyer, 1983, p. 12).

In an interview with *60 Minutes*, both Meyer and writer Edward Hume stated they opposed further development and deployment of nuclear weapons. Hume indicated that when he had been approached by ABC to develop the screen play he had made no secret of his political views. Meyer conceded that in making the film he had had to keep his own biases in check. "If the film is perceived as propaganda, it will be useless. Let the facts speak for themselves without editorializing . . . "*The Day After*" is a preview of coming attractions. As such, accuracy, not political prejudice, is all-important," (Meyer, 1983, p. 9).

Was the film an apolitical statement on the horrors of nuclear war, or an argument for a nuclear freeze? Whatever it was, as a ratings booster, *The Day After* was a huge success. "ABC's estimated share of the prime-time audience was remarkably high: 100 million viewers, second only to the farewell broadcast of M*A*S*H," (Morganthau, 1983, p. 62). Whatever the motives, *The Day After* was one of the most watched and discussed entertainment offerings in television history. The film itself only lasted two hours and five minutes.

THE DEBATE OVER THE DRAMA

After all of the attention which preceded it, the film's presentation was almost anticlimactic. Talk shows, news programs, editorials, magazine articles and newspaper stories bombarded the potential audience as 8:00 PM, EST on November 20, 1983 approached. Surely no American was unaware that on Sunday night they would witness the devastation of Lawrence, Kansas. But that was far from all they had learned about the film.

Psychologists, therapists, and educators, offered advance warnings about *The Day After*. A family therapist informed readers of *TV Guide* that "The important thing is not who should view it, but how it is viewed . . . No one--child, adult or teen-ager--should watch it alone. It's a profoundly disturbing film" (1983, p. A-1). It was even suggested that children under 12 not be allowed to watch (Williams, Robinson, Burgower, & Rotenberk, 1983). Press coverage indicated that many schools and parents' groups were planning special viewings of the film to allow discussion of issues with older children. Not only was the question of "who should watch" raised, the question of "what will you be watching" was discussed in detail.

Film critics seemed to appreciate the fact that the movie made a powerful statement, but were unimpressed by how it was made. *Time*'s reviewer stated:

> Political immediacy is just about all *The Day After* has going for it. By any standards other than social, it is a terrible movie . . . Nuclear annihilation may be the subject, but the film appears to have been the victim of an editorial chain-saw massacre. (Cocks et al., 1983, p. 86).

The film was faulted for its cursory treatment of reality, and as a drama in which the viewer's only motive for watching was waiting for the bombs to drop.

Newsweek considered the film risky for a network known primarily for its "escapist fluff" since its contained "four minutes of the most horrifically searing footage ever to pass a network censor," (Waters, Karlen, Doherty,

Huck, & Abramson, 1983, p. 66). *TV Guide*'s critic described the film as an admirable production with "a realistic vision" (Mackenzie, 1983). The *Detroit Free Press* called the film one of "good intentions, bad art, but a powerful message," characterizing it as "The Towering Inferno Goes Global," which risked trivializing the nuclear horror it addressed (Duffy, 1983). The *Detroit News* characterized the film as "sometimes searing, sometimes flat," but a film that would become "one of the most absorbing and controversial films ever made for TV," (*Detroit News*, 1983, p. 1E).

According to Paul Dietrich, president of the conservative National Center for Legislative Research, the film communicated the message of the "radical freeze people" (Duffy, 1983). The Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell told 60 *Minutes* viewers that "ABC has shut down debate" and that the objective of this film is to persuade its audience to support the freeze. Representatives of the Young Americans for Freedom charged that ABC had been duped by the members of the freeze movement, that the film's producer, writer, and director were all agents of, or sympathetic to, the freeze. Phyliss Schlafly demanded equal time from more than 100 ABC affiliates under the fairness doctrine saying that "this film was made by people who want to disarm the country and are willing to make a $7 million contribution to that campaign," (Waters, Karlen, Doherty, Huck, & Abramson, 1983, p. 69).

ABC's denials not withstanding, members of the freeze movement seemed to agree with Mrs. Schlafly. According to one activist: "it would take us 150 years to get the same message out with our small budget . . . All our meetings are just a teardrop in the bucket compared to the number of people who will see this film," (Waters, Karlen, Doherty, Huck, & Abramson, 1983, p. 66). Appearing on *60 Minutes*, Congressman Ed Markey called the film a "public service" that would persuade voters to elect candidates in November 1984 who would support the freeze.

For others, the film's probable effects were no less clear but more troubling. A *TV Guide* editorial called it "an intensely political film," without assigning it a side in the nuclear debate. "The movie plays on our emotions. What it does not do is help us to decide which policies can bring us closer to, or take us farther away from a nuclear confrontation," (*TV Guide*, 1983, p. A-3). Lillian Genser of Wayne State University's Center for Peace and Conflict Studies hypothesized that the film would create "hopelessness" and "psychic numbing" on the real issues (Duffy, 1983). In addition to labeling the film as unequivocally pro-freeze, Paul Dietrich also criticized it as tantamount to "yelling 'FIRE!' in a crowded theatre . . . The movie creates a terrible sense of anxiety, a sense of hopelessness and a sense that nothing can be done . . . viewers will just become anesthetized to the horror of nuclear war," (Duffy, 1983, p. 8E).

Was the film too terrifying for young children to see, was it the victim of "chain-saw editing"? Whatever it was, *The Day After* had become more than a made-for-TV-movie by the time it aired. It had become a media event, in and of itself, and viewers approached it with expectations built up during the preceding weeks. What was the result on the day after *The Day After*?

THE EFFECT OF THE FILM

Time's nationwide surveys determined that the film changed few opinions. Viewers "were questioned before and after the film. The number who thought a nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was *not* likely by the year 2000 actually rose slightly after the film, from 32% to 35%," (Kelly, Miller, Nelan, 1983, p. 39). The film didn't persuade viewers that present U.S. policy would lead to the film's "what if" scenario. "Those who felt that the U.S. was doing all it could to avoid a nuclear conflict rose from 37% to 41%, while 58%, up from 54% before the movie, approved of Washington's defense

policies," (Kelly et al., 1983, p. 39). Although the film was set in real time with a "Reagan-like" President, Ronald Reagan did not lose popularity as a result of the film's characterization of the presidency. "Ronald Reagan was bombproof: paired against Walter Mondale, he actually did better after the film (53% to 37%) than before (49% to 38%)," (Kelly et al., 1983, p. 39).

The viewer's interpretation of the film's message was dependent on the predisposition they brought to it (Morganthau, 1983). Nothing illustrated this more clearly than ABC's panel of experts' discussion at the film's conclusion:

> . . .Most of the experts claimed that it supported their own differing views. Just as Secretary of State George Schultz argued that *The Day After* should inspire Americans to rally round President Reagan, Astronomer Carl Sagan foresaw real danger of all life being extinguished in a state of freezing darkness. There was Robert McNamara arguing that the number of missiles must be reduced, and there was Kissinger explaining the need for tough strategic thinking. The only panelist who laid no claim to being an expert on nuclear strategy was the writer Elie Wiesel, and to Moderator Ted Koppel's question of what should be done to prevent nuclear war, only he offered the answer that no expert, understandably, ever gives. Said Wiesel, "I don't know." (Friedrich, 1983, p. 100).

Letters to the editor in *Time* and *Newsweek* indicated that non-experts possessed the same ability to see the film as an affirmation of their pre-existing beliefs:

> ABC's film *The Day After* is not a movie. It is a three-hour commercial for the nuclear-freeze movement and free propaganda for the Soviet Union. (*Time*, December 26, 1983).

> If we ban our bombs without the Soviet's banning theirs, *The Day After* will come true, and we will deserve it. (*Time* December 26, 1983).

> In an era when people would rather stick their heads in the sand and ignore their most threatening problem, it is refreshing to see you--and ABC--confronting it. (*Newsweek*, December 5, 1983).

> I wonder if ABC will do a two-hour special about what life would be like living under Soviet tyranny after we abandoned our nuclear deterrent. (*Newsweek*, December 5, 1983).

The Day After did not create the ground swell of support for a nuclear freeze which some had predicted; it did not affect sweeping changes in viewer's opinions; it did not provoke public debate on a long term basis as some had hoped. How can we understand what happened? How can a message movie be viewed as supporting two entirely opposite courses of action: a nuclear freeze and an increase in nuclear arms?

First, message movies employ enthymematic reasoning in attempting to accomplish their persuasive ends. Second, message movies offer a dramatic vision of the relationships between elements of the drama that focuses the message. Why *The Day After* produced diametrically opposed reactions is best understood by examining how it employed argument drawn from an enthymeme and how its dramatic vision focused the message. In the next section of this paper, we will examine the structure of the film's message on these two levels.

THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE FILM

While both the public speech and the movie may offer a message, the structure of that message differs significantly since the medium shapes the message. In the public speech, listeners expect the use of specific lines of reasoning and proof. A "well made" speech for or against a nuclear freeze would include detailed arguments supporting the speaker's position. Movies cannot use the same format.

First, like a speaker, a movie must attract an audience. This is accomplished through on-air promotion, "so, if you have a movie that takes a long time to explain, or it is a movie that is somewhat diffuse, you're going to have a very difficult time telling the audience about it," (Gitlin, 1983, 160). In the process of attracting viewers, the film must be shown to possess "television [illegible]sm . . .. clear stories that tell viewers instantly whom to

care about and whom to root for," (Gitlin, 1983, p. 161). For a message movie to meet these standards, it must necessarily sacrifice the detail of argument that a public speech would use in attempting to accomplish the same end. Message movies, therefore, employ an enthymematic structure in making their suasory statement.

The nature of the enthymeme and its function in persuasive speaking has been bandied about for years. In essence the enthymeme may be described as an argumentative form in which logic does not exist independent of the listener (Delia, 1970). When the rhetor uses an enthymeme he makes maximum use of what the audience already knows or believes about his subject. Enthymematic arguments are salient for listeners because they allow them to participate in the persuasive process by validating their preexisting beliefs. "If arguments are to be built using the audience's existing predispositions, those predispositions become the place where many arguments must be sought. Those arguments would, then, be arranged within the listener's system of existing beliefs and values," (Delia, 1970, p. 148). The problem facing the message maker is to discover what will tap the desired internal states of the listener.

Just as the members of the speaker's audience bring their beliefs, attitudes, and values to the event, the members of a message movie's audience view it through perceptual filters imposed by those same beliefs, attitudes, and values. In addition, the experience of having been exposed to television and movies shapes the viewer's perceptual system relative to the medium. The television audience is intimately familiar with the system of plots, characters, fundamental beliefs, attitudes, values, and world views employed in programing (Thorburn, 1981).

Viewers know what "should" happen in a television program before they actually see it based on their experience with similar characters, actions, and themes. Television drama functions enthymematically by "calling-up

previous knowledge" (Gronbeck, 1983, p. 233) and the calling-up of that knowledge is more important than the actual telling of the story. When the viewer participates, he uses his knowledge of the customs, habits, and actions common to society to make sense of the drama (Gronbeck, 1983). For *The Day After*, pre-knowledge derived from other movies about war in general and nuclear war in particular.

War movies have become staples of the premium channels, independent stations, late night programing, and the like. Hollywood has been fighting America's battles since movies like *The Unbelievers* became popular during World War I (Guid, 1978). Americans viewed themselves as a peace loving people who engaged in war only to defend themselves or democratic ideals. War movies reflected the perception: "The United States won its independence violently and has continued to exist and expand through selective but regular use of its military power, not always justified, but usually approved by its people," (Guid, 1978, p. 2). This meant that war movies generally ended with an American victory.

In war movies, viewers generally could expect to learn certain fundamental information whether the enemy was British, German, Japanese, Russian, or a crazy general: (1) Who fired the first shot, (2) What caused the shot to be fired, and (3) How is the shooting stopped. Films on nuclear war have also offered their viewers information relevant to these three key questions. In fact, the central issue in nuclear war films has been the "causes" confrontation. In *Fail Safe* and *The Bedford Incident*, cause is the dramatic focus. Even in *On the Beach*, which begins after nuclear war has obliterated the Northern Hemisphere, an explanation of cause is provided through dialog. Thus, viewers have reason to expect that they will be told, or will be expected to provide their own explanation of, the cause of the conflict. This,

along with what they had learned prior to the broadcast, comprised the pre-knowledge that viewers brought to *The Day After* on November 20, 1983.

To function persuasively, *The Day After*, had to make a broader statement than "nuclear war is horrible," which few members of the audience were likely to contest. It had to address the issue of cause directly, or allow the audience to call it up from their pre-knowledge. The film focused on characters and the devastating effect of nuclear war on them. The war's cause was only suggested by fragmentary news reports which comprise 4:26 of the broadcast's first 60:00 minutes and functioned as a kind of "oral scenery". From a nearly inaudible newscast in the film's opening sequence, we learn of a massive buildup of troops with nuclear weapons along the Elbe River and the Soviet Ambassador's accusation that this is a "provocative" action. Later, fragmentary newscasts tell of three Soviet tank divisions placed along the Fulda Gap, the blockade of West Berlin, and the revolt of "several" divisions of the East German Army. The U.S. issues an "ultimatum" with the warning that by 6:00 AM Berlin time, this will be considered an "act of war." Tensions build in Europe and the viewer hears partial reports of troop movements, bombing, and the evacuation of Moscow. An emergency broadcast system "take shelter" warning to the people of the Kansas City metro area is followed by a news bulletin that three nuclear weapons were air burst over advancing Soviet troops and that the President is in direct communication with the Soviet Premier, followed by the announcement that regional NATO headquarters was hit with a nuclear weapon. Exactly one hour into the broadcast, missiles are launched from their silos.

Since the reports themselves were incomplete and the director seldom brought them center stage, the viewer was free to "create" cause, an enthymematic process in which the only information commonly held by all audience members was that nuclear war had occurred. Persuasion did not take place

because the film was form without substance. The viewer was subjected to gruesome consequences which imply that something must be done to prevent them. But since *The Day After* was purposely vague regarding the war's cause, the viewer was left to call-up his own explanations of cause drawn from his pre-knowledge of other war movies and the "real world" to make sense out of the drama. This allowed the viewer great latitude in answering the question, "What should be done?"

Thus, the film's enthymematic structure enabled its viewers to regard its message as either pro- or anti-nuclear freeze, depending on the personal frame of reference from which pre-knowledge was called-up. For those who supported a strong deterrent, cause could be explained by filling in a scenario in which the Russians shot first because our ability to deter them was not great enough. For freeze proponents, cause could be found in the mere existence of weapons which, by their very nature, increase tension and make negotiating a step back from the brink more difficult and delicate. *The Day After* allows both sides to make an equally convincing case for their interpretation of "what happened" and "how can it be prevented."

While audience members normally possess differing predispositions, a successful enthymeme calls up only those which will move the audience in the direction its creator intended. In addition to the film's failure to employ enthymematic structure effectively, it is also flawed in its dramatic structure. *The Day After* provides a rhetorical vision of the probability of nuclear war as unpersuasive as its core argumentative structure.

The rhetorical vision of *The Day After* is an old one: man's tragic flaw is that he is stupidly brilliant. From Frankenstein's monster to slow death by radiation poisoning as depicted in *The Day After*, a host of films have dealt with this theme. Man's technological brilliance destroys him when his stupidity blinds him to the fact that he is only technology's creator not its

master. Man is ultimately undone when he allows the technological genie to escape its bottle and only then realizes that he cannot put it back.

The rhetorical vision in *The Day After* can best be understood by using Kenneth Burke's (1969) method of analyzing persuasive motives. In such an analysis, the identification of critical ratios among the elements of the pentad provides an assessment of the potency of the rhetorical vision. For a rhetorical vision to have impact, "the central focus is *how* man is acting. By describing how man acts, the critic is able to trace the attitude behind the action, for an attitude is a pre-disposition to act or respond," (Chapel, 1975, p. 86). Ascertaining this attitude is central to understanding why *The Day After* provoked such disparate reactions among viewers.

Previous films on war in general, and nuclear war in particular, focused their rhetorical vision on *how* man is acting. The typical act-agent ratio in war movies is one in which the agent, the military and/or the government, acts to gain control over a situation. The rhetorical vision is typically: man loses control, man acts to regain control, the act either succeeds or fails. Even when control is lost, it is as a consequence of acts by specific agents (the KGB, hawkish bomber pilots, or a Navy commander caught up in the thrill of the chase). The development of the attitudes of these agents which cause their acts are central plot elements and are typically related to their geopolitical construct system. As the dominant dramatic theme, act-agent ratio provides a clear cut explanation of why conflict occurred, even when it is due to technological malfunctions. As a result, the motive of persuasion is to encourage the audience to "fix" the human or technological gremlins so that they cannot compromise man's ability to maintain control over his creation.

The Day After shifts its focus to a different ratio: scene-act. We do not see the agents at any point in the film, and only learn of their existence from the fragmentary "oral scenery" of news reports. During the first 60 on

air minutes, the viewer watches 27 commercials and the daily lives of those who are going to die: "There are no people here, only targets, stick figures on a Midwestern landscape waiting to be wasted," (Cocks et al., 1983, p. 86). The film provided a detailed vision of the scene aspect of scene-act ratio. The viewer saw Lawrence, Kansas and surrounding areas, and average American families engaging in typical American activities expressing their normal American beliefs, attitudes, and values. Two of the "targets," the surgeon and his wife, see the events being reported on the news as "1962 all over again," when "Kennedy didn't bat an eye." The act "didn't happen then; it's not going to happen now," since the newscasts have given them the impression that the agent is in control. This proves to be a false hope when the missiles are launched.

The depiction of agent as impotent, which viewers knew to be the case, meant that the impending act dominated the drama and its critical ratio during the first 60 minutes of the broadcast. In fact, there never was a clear indication that agent was in control or worked to regain it. ABC's Ted Koppel described the inherent distortion which this imposed on the film's rhetorical vision:

> What *The Day After* makes no attempt to do is to show how a crisis evolves. One is left with the impression that everything happens very quickly--boom, boom, boom, there's the crisis and here come the missiles. There's no sense that the leaders made any effort to resolve the crisis (Anderson, Redman, & Samghabadi, 1983, p. 41).

The preeminence of the act conveys a rhetorical vision which "misses dramatic force because it has no center," (Cocks et al., 1983, p. 86).

Even after the devastation of Kansas, the critical ratio remains scene-act. The thermonuclear Frankenstein has transformed the scene so profoundly that the "villagers" are rendered impotent to cope with it, and the agents who were incapable of preventing the act are no better equipped. The American President tells the people to have Hope, he too has suffered personally, but

he's doing everything he can to alleviate the devastation. The military tries to restore order and distribute food. Agriculture agents try to help farmers restore productivity. But their efforts make little difference and less sense in the face of what has happened. The rhetorical vision is one in which act remains dominant, man--the agent--cannot assert any meaningful control.

The broadcast of *The Day After* concluded with a crawl offering ABC's plea for action:

> The catastrophic events you have just witnessed are in all likelihood less severe than what would actually occur in the event of a full nuclear strike against the United States.
>
> It is hoped that the images of this film will inspire the nations of this earth, their people and leaders, to find the means to avert the fateful day.

Unfortunately, the film's rhetorical vision is not particularly well suited to achieving ABC's motive--creating dialog on how to prevent nuclear war. To achieve such an end, the critical ratio of the drama must suggest some role for the agent other than impotent victim. That possibility appears to have been precluded by *The Day After*'s scene-act focus.

While the braised new world depicted in the film's the final hour may have been a terrifyingly accurate vision of nuclear war's consequences, it is not a particularly effective vision for stimulating informed consideration. The film's critics pointed to its failure to address the critical aspect of the agent's role in this vision:

> "The Day After," powerful as it is, increases our horror of nuclear war but not our understanding of the basic problem. We *do* need to understand the subtle and complex elements of the nuclear puzzle, such as deterrence, verifiable arms control and a strategic nuclear policy that shows the Soviets we mean business, but are always willing to compromise so long as they are too. (*TV Guide*, 1983, p. A-3).
>
> The best way to reduce the risk of nuclear war, of course is to improve relations between the superpowers, not just communications. In that respect *The Day After* did nothing to lighten the international mood of improve the possibility of discourse. (Kelly et al., 1983, p. 40).

CONCLUSION

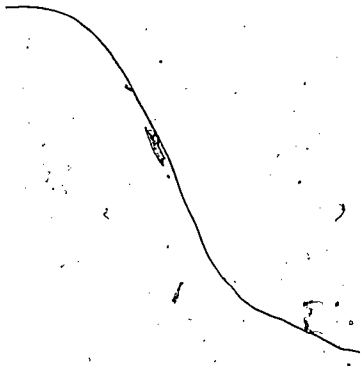
The Day After was something uncommon in the annals of television, a film with no happy ending, no hope for survival, and no indication of how such a holocaust could be avoided. While the film may have succeeded in gaining ratings and in portraying the aftermath of nuclear war as so horrible that its prospect demands our immediate attention, it offered neither a cogent argument as to the causes of nuclear war, nor rhetorical vision which suggested man's ability to play a role in preventing it.

Whether the resulting message moved or failed to move the uncommitted to action may yet be determined. While expecting a film to have an impact one year later may be unrealistic, if Congressman Markey was correct, *The Day After* could stimulate voters to elect pro-freeze candidates in the 1984 elections. Its immediate impact demonstrated that the "true believer" in peace through strength was moved to see this film as an argument for more weapons spending; the "true believer" in a nuclear freeze was equally able to find confirmation for the wisdom of his position in the film's enthymematic development of the causes of nuclear war.

Perhaps the problem lies not within the structure of this particular film, but within this medium as a suasory instrument. For fear of loosing ratings, network executives are leary of offering any "entertainment" program with a serious political message (Gitlin, 1983). Television's greatest strength is in communicating visual and emotional elements of a message, which *The Day After* may have done. But as an instrument for suasory communication on critical issues:

> Perhaps it's just not possible to illustrate with complete faithfulness, either in photographs or on movie film, a big complicated, largely non-visual situation . . . at some point you have to qualify your way toward the truth with words, narration, facts--all that boring prose that tells you how something works, and why. (Arlen, 1969, p. 11).

Perhaps our criticism of *The Day After* should conclude by applauding ABC's entertainment division for giving us something with more to think about than *The Love Boat* or *Three's Company*. Even the audience for the most carefully prepared persuasive speech is not necessarily moved to action by the quality of the argument or the clarity of the rhetorical vision. In the words of an ABC network spokesperson: "The expression of concern is up to the viewer," (Duffy, 1983 p. 8E).



REFERENCES

Andersen, Kurt; Redman, Christopher; & Samghabadi, Raji. New Theatre of War. *Time*, December 5, 1983, p. 41.

Arlen, Michael J. *Living Room War*. New York: Viking Press, 1969.

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Chapel, Gage William. Television Criticism: A Rhetorical Perspective. *Western Speech Communication*, Spring, 1975, pp. 81-91.

Cocks, Jay; Ainslie, Peter; & Worrell, Denise. The Nightmare Comes Home. *Time*, October 24, 1983, pp. 84-86.

Delia, Jesse G. The Logic Fallacy, Cognitive Theory, and the Enthymeme: A Search for the Foundations of Reasoned Discourse. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, April, 1970, pp. 140-148.

Detroit News. A-Bomb "Not for Kids." November 20, 1983, pp. 1A & 10A.

Detroit News. Why the Fuss? It's Good Drama. November 20, 1983, pp. 1E & 4E.

Duffy, Mike. The Day After Furor. *Detroit Free Press*, November 13, 1983, pp. 1E & 6E-7E.

Friedrich, Otto. The Reality is Always Worse. *Time*, December 5, 1983, p. 100.

Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time*. New York: Random House, 1983.

Gronbeck, Bruce E. Narrative, Enactment, and Television Programming. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, Spring, 1983, pp. 229-243.

Kelly, James; Miller, Tim; & Nelan, Bruce W. Fallout from a TV Attack. *Time*, December 5, 1983, pp. 38-40.

Mackenzie, Robert. Review: The Day After. *TV Guide*, November 19, 1983, p. 56.

Meyer, Nicholas. Bringing the Unwatchable to TV. *TV Guide*, November 19, 1983, pp. 6-12.

Morganthau, Tom. After "The Day After." *Newsweek*, December 5, 1983, p. 62.

60 Minutes. The Day After. CBS Television, November 13, 1983.

Suid, Lawrence H. *Guts & Glory: Great American War Movies*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1978.

Thorburn, David. Television Melodrama. In Richard P. Adler (Ed.), *Understanding Television*. New York: Praeger Press, 1981, pp. 73-90.

TV Guide. As We See it. November 19, 1983, p. A-3.

TV Guide. Educators Worry About Effects of "The Day After." November 19, 1983, p. A-1.

Waters, Harry F.; Stadtman, Nancy; & Twardy, Chuck. Fallout Over "The Day After." *Newsweek*, October 24, 1983, p. 126.

Waters, Harry F.; Karlen, Neal; Doherty, Shawn; Huck, Janet; & Abramson, Pamela. TV's Nuclear Nightmare. *Newsweek*, November 21, 1983, pp. 66-67, 69-70, & 72.

Williams, Dennies A.; Robinson, Tracey; Burgower, Barbara; & Rotenberk, Lori. Should Kids Watch the Show? *Newsweek*, November 21, 1983, pp. 68-69.