

# Lack of poetry nukes ABC's *The Day After*

by Ken Burke

It sure wasn't perfect. The November 20 ABC-TV screening of the film *The Day After* reveals almost as much about the problems of network TV in the States as it does about the dangers of nuclear war. Watched by an incredible estimated 100 million Americans, the film deserves being looked at as a real "event" in society.

The film takes several characters in today's Kansas City and nearby Lawrencetown, Kansas, and places them in a rapidly deteriorating world situation. In one day of jaggedly observed escalation, a nuclear war begins ... and ends between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the attack, many of the survivors begin to die the slow death of radiation sickness. At any rate, civilization is no more, and the film ends with no real assurance of the human race's survival.

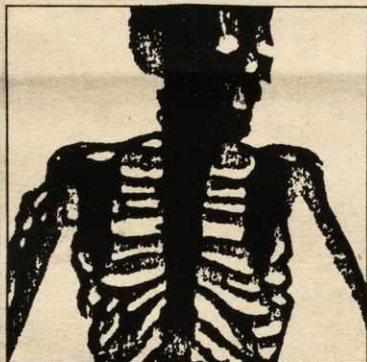
Given the powerfully emotional promise of the film, it's a genuine pity the end result was no better than *The Day After*. On the film's positive side, it in many ways ruthlessly torpedoed the



I suppose the real question to ask is whether or not it could have been done any other way, under the circumstances. Given the overall quality of made-for-TV films, the attitude of network execs towards "controversial" subject matter, and the need for advertising, the film's fate may have been sealed from the very beginning. I don't suspect the two or so hours cut from the film to reach its just over two-hour running time would have made the film any better emotionally or politically—just longer. There wasn't great inspiration present in the first place.

That's especially sad, as the idea for the TV-movie had tremendous potential. Imagine millions of people all over the U.S. and Canada, sitting in their homes, with families, friends, pets, favourite possessions ... and watching the very image of their safe existence destroyed forever through a perfectly plausible, regardless of what Mr. Schultz or Kissinger would like to have us believe, situation. Perhaps the movie was blunted because some heavy people somewhere feared the power potential of the event. It should serve to foster discussion, at any rate.

Afterwards, ABC was certainly proud of what it had done. Fifteen minute news reports became important examinations on "Good Morning, America," all checking out the impact their product would have on the nation known as the United States. But best of all, a hundred million people in one night just destroyed Martin Sheen's



notion that nuclear wars will allow thirty days' advance warning to provide for calm evacuation of cities. The film is deliberately unclear as to whether the Americans or the Soviets began the nuclear exchange, although the first radio report on a nuclear attack attributed that strike to the NATO forces of Europe. And it definitely shows nuclear war isn't something to be lived through, like past wars, with little endurance and faith in your leadership.

On the other hand, the movie simply falls apart as a drama of any sort. The film's seven million dollar budget was well-used in attaining scenes of crowd despair, pain, and suffering as well as physical views of the devastation of nuclear attack. But little energy was spent on creating human characters or involving situations or dialogue. To paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield's line about violence in hockey, "I went to the nuclear holocaust and a TV-movie broke out."

The film also warns after the ending that the events imagined in the film are "In all likelihood less severe than those of a full nuclear strike." In the heart of missile silo country, a large hospital remains basically intact thirty or so miles outside Kansas City.

None of the recently-published effects of a major

nuclear war, such as a "Nuclear winter" with a great and lengthy drop in temperatures and blocking of sunlight by particles in the air, occur in the film. In fact, within a week after the attack, radiation is indicated as being safe to venture outside.

It's also interesting to note the reaction of Secretary of State George Schultz and President Reagan to the film.

"It dramatized the unacceptability of nuclear warfare," says Schultz, adding that "neither we nor the Soviet union would use nuclear weapons." Reagan says, "It didn't tell us anything we didn't know," and "We're trying as hard as we can" to prevent nuclear war. So which way peace? Follow the Reagan Administration? The film takes a no stand on such issues.

Then you have the artistic merits of *The Day After*.

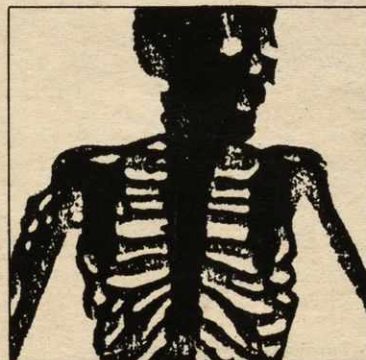
Not only does the film rely on the most simple character types for its cast—young lovers, dedicated doctor, hardworking, crusty farmer, etc.—but it goes blatantly out of its way to do nothing interesting with them. There are no human mannerisms, no particular quirks or bare hints of anything outside the obvious "types." The dialogue provides only the bare minimum needed to keep things moving along.

The end product of Nicholas Meyer's direction is also needlessly sexist. This is a film with no strong women in the foreground; instead they follow men about in the post-bomb mess. Since the film dares not venture outside traditional TV-movie characters, the devoted, hardworking woman doctor/nurse (the film wasn't clear) of JoBeth Williams and a pregnant young woman were the only strong woman characters and even they were in decided secondary support.

As for the situations the char-

acters find themselves in, again the filmmakers/ABC have gone to great lengths to ensure nothing out of the ordinary happens. We all know there's going to be a devastating nuclear attack—from the first scene, it's obvious there must be some reason to be following these people about—but it's incredible how little dramatic tension they even attempt to stir up in the plot. When the characters interact, they carry the accumulated dialogue and plot combinations of TV-movies' entire history as huge albatrosses round their necks. Interesting lines or situations rarely poke their inquisitive noses into the ghastly sobriety of the film.

All this no-risk, no-fault filmmaking places the weight of the film almost completely on its visual representations of nuclear war in North America. While these are well-done, and probably very powerful to viewers who saw little or no footage of Hiroshima, even these images work



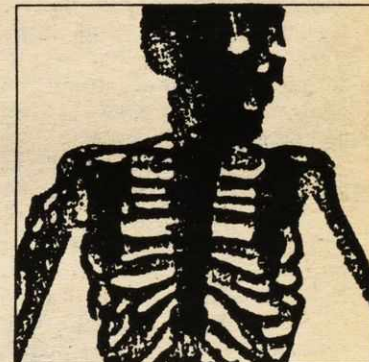
on only the most basic levels. The special-effects mushroom clouds we see twist and smirk above Kansas City are striking, but are not effective past a simple "these are mushroom clouds." The carnage that is everywhere in the film is far more immediate and striking than, say, the damage done in an *Airport '75* or *Earthquake*, but the only real difference is the

infinite volume of woe a nuclear war provides.

From time to time, the movie picks up effective scenes, but never capitalizes on these opportunities. Symbolic of this is the in many ways climactic radio broadcast of the U.S. President. As the camera pans over scenes of human desperation amid the rubble of a no-longer-existent society, a voice sounding uncannily like R.R.'s somewhat cheerily announces, "America has survived ... there has been no retreat from the principles of liberty, democracy ... We remain undaunted before all but Almighty God." The truly obvious irony of the speech plus other encounters with authority is at least a welcome change from the otherwise plasticized environment.

What, then, of the film? Its sole value is as a plain electroshock jolt for the slumbering sheep of the continent. For those who were shocked at its conservatively antiseptic view of the aftereffects of a nuclear war (only two charred corpses and no graphically severe cases of radiation burns), the film may rouse action only in a scene in a blown-apart church where a young woman's internal bleeding shows clearly through her white dress is the horror given real justice.

*The Day After* falls apart because it is a film with very little poetry in its images and situations. By playing their anti-nuke venture along a safe, TV-clean format all down the line, the makers robbed themselves and the audience of an opportunity to express something so horrific, so ... other, that it cannot be communicated except through the world of art. The extinction of the human race is no easy thing to conceive, although other films, such as Peter Watkins' *The War Game* of 1960, come far closer and are much more powerful than this product.



"Kennedy" across the neighbourhood at NBC. It was a highly effective piece of television, and that's probably how the ABC execs who approved the idea thought of it.

Just as undoubtedly, the hundred or so million who spent Saturday or Sunday nights watching *The Day After* could have done worse things with their time. But it is a damnable shame they also could have done a whole lot better.

In many ways it must be irony most perfect that the only television program in history to snare more viewers was the final episode of "M\*A\*S\*H." Both dealt with ends of the world and a fixture of a series, and both rode bareback on galloping pre-show hype. In years to come, if years do come, it may also be questionable which made the most social impact.