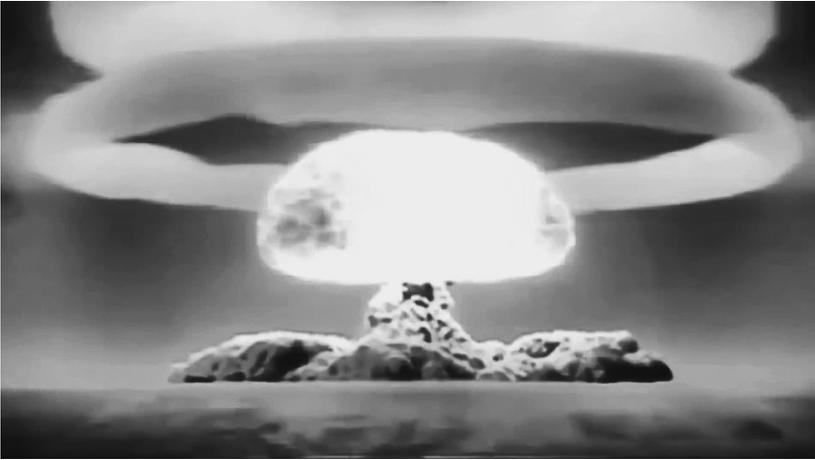

Terminal Radiance



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Among the many billion diversions accessible on YouTube is video footage taken through the window of a Soviet bomber on October 30, 1961, moments after dropping Tsar Bomba on the island of Novaya Zemlya above the Arctic Circle. The film records what is by far the largest human-caused explosion ever on the planet, that of a fifty-eight-megaton hydrogen bomb, four times more powerful than any prior or subsequent blast. When set against the hundreds of films of other nuclear explosions, its singularity isn't visually obvious. One listens to the narration of stupefying statistics: the mushroom cloud is over forty miles high, the fireball five miles in diameter, it is thirty-eight hundred times the destructiveness of a Hiroshima-size weapon, ensuring the annihilation of anything living within a sixty-mile radius of its impact. But to watch this film and gape at the colossal radial symmetries of the detonation and its ghostly luminosities is to succumb to an aestheticization of this extreme limit of nuclear terror.

Beginning in the 1950s, film clips from U.S. nuclear tests were woven into the kitsch of Cold War consumer culture. Images of the South Pacific blasts were part of an iconography of scientific mastery that partly domesticated nuclear savagery and aligned it with fantasies of material progress and middle-class affluence. In his explorations of the links between kitsch



Tsar Bomba. Still from YouTube.

and death, Saul Friedlander remarks that kitsch produces “the neutralization of extreme situations,” by making death into something ritualized or stylized that effaces the actual horror.¹ He identifies, in Nazi kitsch, a consistent presentation of death as “paroxysm” or “explosion.” The atomic test films obviously are the product of different historical factors, but their fascination can clearly be traced to some of the same psychic processes. The video of an atomic bomb explosion replicates a pornographic image in its endlessly repeatable display of a convulsive discharge of energy on an unimaginable scale, and the Tsar Bomba film is the ultimate, unsurpassable “money shot” of a potency and expenditure beyond measure.

Steven Shaviro has noted the interconnection between pornography and horror as crucial to understanding the attraction of the cinematic image.² His association of film spectatorship with “the extinction of sight” is extravagantly demonstrated by film of an event that is, from a human vantage point, literally unseeable: even distant viewers of a nuclear blast will be blinded by third-degree burns on an unshielded retina. Part of the obscenity of the test films, made solely for analysis in the development and enhancement of future weapons, is the making visible of the unwatchable. A viewer occupies the vantage point of the recording device, the mechanical eye of the perpetrator, of the weapons designers. Using the formulation of Rey Chow, these films position the world itself as a target, and thus an object to be destroyed.³ The formal properties of

the spheroidal fireball or the swirling undulations of the mushroom cloud lodge the event within the confines of the image and spectacle. The unthinkable, unutterable violence of this outer limit of the real is deleted.

It's perhaps understandable, if not justifiable, that Alain Badiou chose to omit any reference to the leveling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (or to the nuclear arms race) in his book *The Century*, on the implacable violence that he sees as the defining heart of the twentieth century.⁴ Badiou postulates a pervasive and quasi-heroic "passion for the real" that sanctioned remorseless violence in the name of various emancipatory dreams, militant programs, or aesthetic experimentations. But his imagined history of "an absolute politics" of purification and antagonism is hopelessly irreconcilable with the visionless, futureless, biocidal madness of nuclear war. The Tsar Bomba, built by a team led by Andrei Sakharov, is the culmination of a "project" that points only to the annihilation of historical time and the vaporization of any space of social or political relations.

The filmic representation of a nuclear explosion is an erasure of its invisible lethality. The physics of the bomb are inseparable from the scientific investigations of the nonvisible wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum beginning in the late nineteenth century. During the years 1886 to 1914 there came a cascading accumulation of research discoveries that spawned nuclear weapons and many other features of the techno-political-social world we inhabit more than a century later. A very cursory outline of these years would include the names Hertz (radio waves), Roentgen (x-rays), Becquerel and the Curies (radioactivity), Villard and then Rutherford and Bohr (gamma rays). Of course these discoveries and their irrevocable remaking of visibility did not occur fortuitously or as part of some inevitable advancement of objective scientific knowledge. Rather, the devaluation of human sight happened within powerful institutional complexes specific to the nation states who were, during the same years, competing for military and economic domination on a global scale.

One of the most important developments of that 1886 to 1914 period was the research on the radioactive properties of uranium, which culminated over two decades later with the discovery of nuclear fission and the making of an atomic bomb. The use of these weapons brought into being, for the first time, conditions in which both visible and invisible wavelengths of the spectrum were directed against human life. In the initial

microseconds after a nuclear blast, invisible gamma radiation is the first to hit the human body, destroying it at a cellular level, ripping apart DNA molecules. Following the gamma ray burst are intense and blinding levels of visible light accompanied by the thermal flash of heat that sets clothes and hair on fire and melts eyeballs. Human vision becomes irreversibly exiled from a world in which this threshold of technological terror has been crossed, in which forms of radiant energy are manipulated to produce harmfulness on an unimaginable scale. This is the energy that Akira Lippit refers to as “the catastrophic light of atoms.”⁵

When the Tsar Bomba detonated, the temperature of the five-mile-wide fireball reached 150 million degrees Fahrenheit, hotter than the sun. That human enterprise was able to rival, even briefly, the heat of the sun on earth might tempt some to invoke the “technological sublime.” But there is no possible standpoint from which a ruinous demonstration of malevolent scientific tinkering can be framed by aesthetic categories. The supposed disabling of the imagination by the sublime and the accompanying inadequacy of representation become irrelevant, preposterous problems. Referring to the accumulated consequences of Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and Fukushima, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that human life, in its capacity to think and to create, “is precipitated into a condition worse than misery itself: a stupor, a distractedness, a horror, a hopeless torpor.”⁶ It’s amid such a pervasive collective stupor that Barack Obama’s 2016 authorization of a trillion-dollar program to “modernize” America’s nuclear weapons arsenal elicited not even a whisper of protest from his admirers.

Notes

- 1 Saul Friedlander, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 42–43.
- 2 Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 54.
- 3 See Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 4 Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
- 5 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 81–84.
- 6 Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 11.