

# The Apocalypse in Film

*Dystopias, Disasters, and  
Other Visions about the End of the World*

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## Chapter Three

# "Radiation's Rising, but One Mustn't Grumble Too Much"

*Nuclear Apocalypse Played as Farce in Richard Lester's  
The Bed Sitting Room (1969)*<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Prasch

A man (Frank Thornton) in tattered formal wear—proper only from the chest up—knocks on a door that no longer leads to any house to announce “I am the BBC,” and he sticks his head behind an empty television box to read “the last news.” Bules Martin (Michael Hordorn) sits on a ragged pile of shoes (Holocaust echoes unmistakable), searching for a pair that fits. The Central Line still works, thanks to a lone man on a bicycle (Henry Woolf), the island's sole source of power, but when a family that has been riding the circuit for years decides to leave (because the vending machines have run out of chocolate bars), the escalator drops them into piles of ash. When the family's roamings bring them to mounds of broken crockery, the mother (Mona Washbourne) declares that they should stop for tea. Policemen (Peter Cook, as the Inspector, Dudley Moore, as his sergeant) rove the ruined landscape in a Morris Minor dangling from a hot-air balloon, shouting warnings to the meandering nomads below to “keep moving.” A postman (Spike Milligan) carries a cream pie across the blasted landscape, through ponds of muck, across mountains of ruin; you know what will happen when it reaches its destination.

Bizarre nuclear mutations beset the population. Lord Fortnum (Ralph Richardson) fears (quite rightly) that he is turning into a bed-sitting room; Mother (Mona Washbourne) transforms into a chest of drawers (her change foreshadowed when she can no longer move and, weeping, opens a drawer in her chest to fetch a handkerchief); Father (Arthur Lowe) turns into a pigeon

(who then commits suicide, providing a dark last meal for the family), and the sergeant changes into a dog. Penelope (Rita Tushingham), the family's daughter, seventeen months pregnant, worries about the "monster" in her womb (when she tells her boyfriend, Alan [Richard Warwick], "I can't bear to go through with it . . . having this monster," he reassures her, sort of: "Well, no one else can have it, can they?"). Meanwhile, raucous instrumental music-hall tunes play constantly in the background, suggesting a sort of deranged Kurt Weill,<sup>2</sup> save when occasionally replaced by strains of "God Save Mrs. Ethel Shroake, of 393A High Street, Leytonstone," the awkward refiddling of the traditional tune to accommodate the queen's nearest surviving relation (played by Dandy Nichols in her brief appearance at the picture's close).

Such are the conditions for surviving Londoners (all twenty of them) in the wake of nuclear apocalypse in Richard Lester's dark farce *The Bed Sitting Room* (1969). Assembling a remarkable cast of comic actors, many with rich experience in theatre, music hall, and television comedy; adapting Spike Milligan's stage play<sup>3</sup> to the visual conventions of cinema; filming in a range of rubbish-heaped locations;<sup>4</sup> and then casting lurid red-to-green tints over many of the film's outdoor landscapes; mixing pun-heavy, prattalling music-hall comedy<sup>5</sup> with the bleakness of Samuel Beckett (or perhaps just amplifying the vaudeville side of Beckett's *Godot*)<sup>6</sup>, Lester's *Bed Sitting Room* offers a stark, farcical vision of postnuclear Britain. Comic and depressing in equal measure, the film tests the limits of genre in treatments of apocalypse. Can sketch comedy make nuclear apocalypse its territory for the length of a feature film? Does the end of civilization as we know it work as farce?

The short answer to these questions, at the time of the film's release, was no. Lester had, in the mid-1960s, established a name for himself with highly popular, inventive film comedies—the two Beatles films, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965); mod-London-set *The Knack* (1965); and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966)—which caught something of the mood of the decade. But Lester's next two films, the anti-war comedy *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1967) and a swinging San Francisco-set romantic drama, *Petulia* (1968), failed to spark at the box office, and *The Bed Sitting Room* truly bombed. Typical of the critical response was Vincent Canby's thrashing: "The movies of Richard Lester . . . seem to get worse in direct relation to the seriousness of their intentions. *The Bed Sitting Room* is Lester's most seriously intended film to date."<sup>7</sup> While making the film, Lester noted, "The fact that they don't know what a bed-sitting room is in America poses a problem, of course,"<sup>8</sup> but he seemed unconcerned. Perhaps he should have worried more, but the obscure title likely had less to do with the film's utter failure than the inability of audiences to appreciate Lester's tone and style. James Monaco assessed the response: "The huge audiences who had been enthralled by the musicals found the later films too

oblique and alienating; they left him and didn't come back."<sup>9</sup> Roger Ebert called the film "a total disaster at the box office. So great was its failure, indeed, that Lester didn't get another directing assignment until 1973 and *The Three Musketeers*."<sup>10</sup> The time was not ripe for apocalyptic farce.

### CRITICAL HERITAGE OF A CULT CLASSIC

The film eventually developed a cult following, although even later praise tended to be qualified. Monaco claimed that "*How I Won the War* (1967) and *The Bed Sitting Room* (1968) are among the few English language films to employ Brechtian techniques successfully" while also conceding that both films "were commercially unsuccessful."<sup>11</sup> The failure, Lester came to believe, could be ascribed to those filmmaking tactics: "What we tried to do in the film is essentially use this trick of what they call 'Brechtian' alienation. . . . This alienation worked. It alienated the audience and they went home."<sup>12</sup> Success on Bertolt Brecht's terms proved a double-edged sort of triumph.

Monaco called Lester's three commercial failures "all brilliant, unique films"<sup>13</sup> and wrote of the group of films Lester made from *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) through *The Bed Sitting Room* that they were all "among the best films in the English language—complex works that are rich, intelligent, witty, caring, daring, moving, and wise."<sup>14</sup> But Monaco significantly qualified his praise for Lester's nuclear farce:

*The Bed Sitting Room* is his most mannered film, but there are some good reasons for its relatively cold and intellectual mode. . . . Maybe Goonish farce is the only fitting mode for such a subject. But there is something too precise, too well-figured, about *The Bed Sitting Room*.<sup>15</sup>

Monaco insisted, however, "If the film is not puppy-dog warm, it's still full of wit," and he concludes: "It shows us an absurd world whose universal dream of easeful death would be nearly perfect it is was not for the almost equally absurd—but irrepressible—life force that insists on bubbling up, even as Western civilization settles comfortably in the void like a pig squatting in a mud puddle."<sup>16</sup> That might not bring many flocking to theaters (or, by 1976, to film-rental outlets), but it is, at least, praise.

Ebert wrote: "The movie's doty and savage; acerbic and slapstick and quintessentially British. . . . It's an after-the-Bomb movie, but like no other. . . . All of the characters are mad, of course, but that's not the point; this isn't a heavy-handed anti-war parable, but a series of sketches that gradually grow more and more grim."<sup>17</sup> Neil Sinyard underlines how "the film is flawed in some ways," complaining of its bad puns and less-than-coherent casting ("an amalgam of actors who cannot play comedy and comedians who

cannot act"). Somewhat more oddly, given the actual landscape of the film, Sinyard writes, "One of the problems is that the film has a landscape characterized by absences, whereas Lester's films tend to thrive on an abundance of detail." But he insisted: "There is much to admire in the film, nevertheless. One always admires the quality of Lester's intelligence, even when one is not completely convinced by what he is saying."<sup>18</sup> Filmmaker Steven Soderbergh, categorizing Lester's output in 1999, ranked *The Bed Sitting Room* among Lester's "three Really Fascinating Films That Get Better with Age," short of his "three Masterpieces" and "four Classics" but of more interest than his "six worthwhile divertissements."<sup>19</sup>

Evan Calder Williams highlights the film in his discussion of "salvagepunk," which he identifies as a politically informed aesthetic critique of late capitalism, "the postapocalyptic vision of a broken and dead world, strewn with both the dream residues and the real junk of the world that was, and shot through with the hard work of salvaging, repurposing, détournement, and scrapping."<sup>20</sup> Williams asserts, "If there stands, tottering and joyful, a single cultural object of salvage-thought at its best, it is Richard Lester's 1969 film *The Bed Sitting Room*." For Williams, the film was "a sort of dark precursor" of salvagepunk, "funnier and crueler, sloppy and razor-sharp, an under-watched and unmatched template that deserves its due forty years on" and in which can be found "a staggering vision of waste and remnant, of frozen, necrotic social relations, of what we keep doing to keep ourselves busy after the end of the world."<sup>21</sup> But again, such an endorsement seems unlikely to lead to skyrocketing DVD sales.

### ON BOMBING

Lester seemed to have second thoughts about the work even as he made it. He explained to Mark Shivas, in an article tellingly titled "Well, the Bomb Is Always Good for a Laugh":

The film will be much more barren than the play, much sadder and less frenzied. There are moments of people sitting alone in an empty field, hungry and trying to eat grass. It's sad, and I didn't feel sad at the play. I hope, though, that it'll be as funny as the original as well. . . . I'm not able to tell whether it's funny, because I feel terribly sorry for these people, cartoons though they may be.<sup>22</sup>

Lester even shared some concerns about box office potential during filming:

Farce seems to me one of the best ways to do this, partly because more people are inclined to see a farce and partly because the result of the bomb can perhaps be more easily suggested by giving surrealist parallels than by showing actual realistic desolation. The sensation of seeing forty million dead can

perhaps, and only perhaps, be better achieved by showing a man sorting out a 12-foot-high mountain of boots, trying to match the rights and the lefts. Actually, I'd have felt much more confident about this had *How I Won the War* been seen by a larger number of people.<sup>23</sup>

Decades later, talking to Steven Soderbergh, Lester recalled the source play was "funnier. . . . It's very musical-ish. On the stage there were no things, no props." Soderbergh asked, "Do you think literalizing stuff hurt it?" and Lester responded: "The only way we could try to literalize it was to produce excesses like a huge pile of boots and teeth and things like that. . . . Spike didn't like the film particularly. He felt it was bleak and that worried him. . . . [T]here was a desperation that the film had because we're trooping up and down in these landscapes that had been destroyed by man. . . . It was a depressing film to work on. It was painful. And that came over."<sup>24</sup> Lester's remarks go to the heart of the problem of the anomalous generic positioning of *The Bed Sitting Room*.

Lester's film was not the first to imagine the world in the wake of nuclear war, although such depictions were relatively rare even within the realm of critiques of Cold War politics (certainly far more rare than radiation-mutated monsters roaming the deserts of the Southwest or *Fail Safe*-style scenarios of how we get to apocalypse). Tony Shaw notes, "[V]ery few British films made during the 'first Cold War' [through c. 1965] sought to portray the nature of the nuclear holocaust and the possibility of life afterwards."<sup>25</sup> Shaw highlights only two exceptions: *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), although there apocalypse resulted from nuclear testing, and Peter Watkins's *Near Game* (1965), although that film was both generically different (a documentary) and given highly limited distribution (after almost being suppressed).<sup>26</sup> Beyond Britain's shores, relatively few examples stand out: from Hollywood, one major studio production, *On the Beach* (1959), a handful of B-movies like *Five* (1952) and *The Day the World Ended* (1955), a couple episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, and in a rather different vein, just a year before Lester's film, *Planet of the Apes* (1968);<sup>27</sup> beyond Hollywood, another small handful of works, most notably Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962).

But the tone of these other films differs markedly from Lester's. As Kim Newman notes, "The first wave of serious nuclear war films are regretful and elegiac, the second wave are furious and violent."<sup>28</sup> Comic apocalypse would be another thing altogether. The clearest precedent was Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964), but as Tony Shaw observes, that film "effectively ends when Major 'King' Kong (Slim Pickens) rodeo-rides his bomb into oblivion. What the 'end of the world' looks like is left to the audience's imagination."<sup>29</sup> Lester's film allows no such unseeing of End Times but still pushes a comic agenda. Newman, clearly not quite convinced, comments, "Lester's vision of a raped landscape

is so harrowing that the film's non-stop jokes barely raise a laugh."<sup>30</sup> A slapstick failure of fail-safe that leads to nuclear war differs substantially from a pratfall approach to survivors wandering a desolate postnuclear landscape.

#### A MATTER OF COMIC TIMING

The timing of the film's release also proved problematic in two different respects. Neil Sinyard suggests, interestingly, that in both its comic style and its political focus, the film's time had both passed and not yet come:

Many felt its Goon-like humour was as anachronistic as its nuclear disarmament theme. Both elements were to come back into prominence, the success of the Monty Python films making the humor of *The Bed-Sitting Room* look fresher than before . . . and the renewed Cold War hostilities of the 1980s once again bringing the possibility of nuclear confrontation to public consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

For Lester, the anachronism of the film's political argument reflected a deliberate choice: "I was interested in how the Bomb has become a sort of period piece, how it's almost 'that old thing' we mention rather apologetically after we've discussed violence, civil rights and Vietnam. . . . I thought it would be nice to remind the audience that the B-52s go on flying, and farce seems to me one of the best ways to do this."<sup>32</sup> Audiences, however, did not want reminding.

Commentators have noted the abatement of nuclear fear by the later 1960s. Lawrence Wither dates the "decline of the movement" to 1964–1970 and notes in particular "[t]he powerful British movement waned rapidly," with the Committee of 100 that had spearheaded much British activism dissolving in 1968.<sup>33</sup> Paul Boyer similarly argues, "This second period of nuclear fear and activism [1959–1963] ended abruptly in 1963" after the Cuban missile crisis and the signing of the Test Ban Treaty.<sup>34</sup> From the mid-1960s, activism refocused its energies, especially on antiwar mobilization.

But antinuclear movements reenergized a decade later. As Wither argues: "During 1979–80, escalating great power suspicion and rivalry led to the deterioration of the U.S.-Soviet relationship and to the reversal of the modest progress against the nuclear arms race made in preceding years. . . . These ominous developments provided a spur to further growth and development of the nuclear disarmament movement."<sup>35</sup> In Britain, a new mass movement against nuclear arms crystallized, spearheaded by historian E. P. Thompson's advocacy on the issue.<sup>36</sup> The revitalized movement was reflected in renewed film focus on such themes. As Boyer notes, "After years of neglect, the movies and television rediscovered nuclear war in the early

1980s, dramatizing the ways such a conflict might begin."<sup>37</sup> While the tone of most of this new wave of cultural reflections on atomic war tended toward the serious—one searches in vain for a good punch line in *The Day After* (1983), for example—in at least some cases, hints of dark humor emerge (as in *A Boy and His Dog* [1975] or the Mad Max trilogy, perhaps especially in *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior* [1981]). At least the moment presented an opening for postnuclear comedy.

Ebert follows Sinyard in suggesting that in terms of style of comedy, the film was released before its time: "If *Monty Python's Flying Circus* had never existed, Richard Lester would still have invented it. In 1970 [*sic*] he directed *The Bed-Sitting Room*, a film which so uncannily predicts the style and manner of Python that we think for a moment we're watching television. The movie's dotty and savage; acerbic and slapstick and quintessentially British."<sup>38</sup> Monty Python's show in fact debuted on BBC in 1969, the same year as *The Bed-Sitting Room's* release, but it really only took off in the mid-1970s with its first American showing and the release of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).<sup>39</sup> Pre-Python, however, the humor of Lester's film would have seemed backward-looking, recalling Spike Milligan's *The Goon Show* and its assorted televised spawn.<sup>40</sup>

#### SEARCHING FOR MEANING

Beyond the question of its box office failure and the criticisms and defenses that failure prompted, as well as the matter of what it does to Lester's directing career (more than merely postpone it)<sup>41</sup>, the central question is: What is this film about, finally? Usually, the answer could begin with a quick outline of the plot. But here there is no plot to speak of, merely disconnected characters or small groups whose courses intersect in arbitrary ways as they meander across the devastated postwar landscape.

We can notice some minor character arcs, perhaps most notably the romance plot between Penelope and Alan, although complicated by her already being pregnant and by her father's decision to marry her off to Bules Martin. Still, the film's longest monologue connects to the romance plot, when Penelope talks about the boy asleep in her lap, although the declaration of love rings rather oddly: "I will say this for him, I can't really say anything for him, except he's like a sheet of white paper. I haven't seen a sheet of white paper for years I could draw a face on." Another romance develops as well, between the bed-sitting room and the cabinet of drawers.

Beyond such stray bits, however, the only arc is downward. Conditions worsen, and near the film's close, as a radiated fog arrives (made only slightly amusing by gas masks with funny animal faces), as Penelope's finally born baby dies, as starvation looms, things look very bleak indeed until the

deus ex machina (very ex machina if not so clearly deus: the police inspector dangling from his balloon) quick-fix resolution clears everything up:

I've just come from an audience with Mrs. Ethyl Shrooke and I'm empowered by her to tell you, that in the future clouds of poisonous nuclear fog will no longer be necessary; mutations will cease any day. . . . All in all, I think we're in for a time of peace, prosperity, and stability. The earth will burgeon anew, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and the goat give suck to the tiny bee. At times of great national emergency, we often find that a new leader tends to emerge. Here I am, so watch it!

Even the rosy ending is undercut, however, by a BBC news flash: "I have great news for the country. Britain is a first-class nuclear power once again." (Never mind that the status is only earned because one undelivered bomb has been returned by the postman, fees due; it still suggests something about lessons not learned.)

Over the course of this unstory, three broad targets for Lester's satire emerge. The first attends to the dynamics of nuclear war. The BBC makes this clear, reporting "the last recorded statement of the Prime Minister, as he then was" (Bill Wallis): "I feel I am not boastful when I remind you that this war was without a shadow of a doubt the very shortest war in living memory: 2 minutes and 28 seconds up to and including the grave process of signing the peace treaty. The great task of burying our forty million dead was also carried out with great expediency and good will." The nature of this new war is such that no one fought or is even sure what happened. Bules Martin says, when Lord Fortnum tells him he slept through the war and never got to serve: "Neither did I. Mind you, I was standing by, ready to face the enemy, whoever they might be, but I couldn't find them. Tell me, do you know, who was the enemy?" When Lord Fortnum complains to the policemen, who tell him to "keep moving," that he is turning into a bed-sitting room and needs a place to stop, he is told: "We don't want to stop in one place long enough for the enemy to have another shot at us, do we, sir? Not before our pre-emptive strike, do we, sir?" This leads Lord Fortnum to lament: "Have we not struck back, has England not? We should have struck back three years ago, if not before," in a dying gasp of patriotic fervor.

But the broader focus of *The Bed Sitting Room*'s comedy is about two aspects of British society thrown into comic relief by the new conditions of the postapocalypse: deeply rooted institutions and even more deeply rooted traits of character. The institutions range from formal political ones like the National Health Service to social constructions like the class system. That political institutions have now tended to be reduced to single persons—a one-man army (Ronald Fraser) who carries out both sides of a conversation just to make up for the fact that there is no one to follow his orders; a single nurse making up the National Health Service (and one played alarmingly by

Marty Feldman); that man on the bike who is the Electrical Board and who has to keep peddling to keep the juice flowing—makes the institutional comedy a bit easier. That they are still filling out forms (even for a custard pie's delivery) or that when only twenty people are alive in Britain, it would be anyone's concern who was closest in line to the throne seems absurd, but this absurdity makes us question those conventions in our own time as well.

Social conventions like the class system are similarly undermined. When everyone is ragged and starving, the logic of titles and privilege seems especially unclear (particularly when the distribution of titles is also fuzzy; Lord Fortnum reports that he "acquired the title from a social person who had found himself on hard times"). Thus, when Lord Fortnum learns in what neighborhood he has made his final transformation (Paddington, and never mind that it no more looks like Paddington than the swamp of Regent's Park or the half-submerged St. Paul's resemble their former selves), he pleads: "Put a sign in the window. No coloured. No children. And definitely no coloured children." That such views are voiced by someone who is now a bed-sitting room—and, frankly, a rather shabby one, much improved when the chest of drawers joins him—makes them seem absurd but again in a way that opens them to question outside the limited realm of the film's postapocalyptic time frame.

Beneath these satiric targets, and informing the structure of them, is the film's most central target and interest: that stiff-upper-lipped British character. Bules Martin, looking somewhat dubiously at the odd color of a bottle of milk, comments: "Radiation's rising. Still, musn't grumble too much." The theme is picked up by Alan, when he tells Penelope, "We'll just have to keep going." "What for?" she wants to know. "Because we're British," he tells her. Penelope will have none of it: "British, what a lot of use that is. We don't even know who's won the war. Run out of food, no medicine, we're eating our parents, British!" Even her protests serve to accentuate the theme: the peculiar character of the British to soldier through whatever the circumstances and to pretend that nothing is wrong.

That Britishness makes these characters endearing, connects us to them in ways that their roles do not quite justify. That Britishness makes this story more tragic, since no one is ever truly convinced by deus ex machina as a way out of hopeless situations (this is why Aristotle panned Euripides, after all). But that Britishness also makes the film more insular, since audiences outside of Britain not only are unlikely to know what a bed-sitting room is but will have dim, if any, connections to the institutions that the film mocks, the comic stylings it borrows from music hall conventions and *The Goon Show* bits, or the locations it ravages.<sup>42</sup> That Britishness is thus the film's great virtue and the source of its box office doom.



## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Kevin Flanagan, David Gray, and Peter LoPinto for comments on earlier drafts.
2. Lester himself claimed he was aiming to echo Weill's sound; see Neil Sinyard, *Films of Richard Lester* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 73; rev. ed. retitled *Richard Lester* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 81.
3. Lester recalled the complex adaptation process: "John Antrobus, who wrote the play with Spike Milligan, did one version, and then Charles [Wood] did one. . . . Spike was not involved in writing the screenplay at all." Steven Soderbergh with Richard Lester, *Getting Away with It: or: The Further Adventures of the Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 89. This followed in part from the film's genesis as a substitute project after the murder of playwright Joe Orton derailed a planned film; see "Ask a Filmmaker: Richard Lester" clip from 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WMin-eYXLY>, accessed 17 March 2014.
4. "Lester is making *The Bed-Sitting Room* in desolate landscapes all over England. Now he stands, in sneakers and white slacks, on a pile of broken cups and saucers in a huge china dump in the pottery district of England." Mark Shivas, "Well, the Bomb Is Always Good for a Laugh," *New York Times*, 25 August 1968, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com>. Shivas, quite proper in his treatment of compound adjectives, hyphenates "bed-sitting room." Rather less proper in all respects, Lester, in the actual film titles, does not. I have followed Lester in all my own references to the film but allowed those whose propriety insists on hyphens to use them when quoted.
5. How bad are the puns? Try one: Bules Martin, a sort of doctor, gives a starving Lord Fortnum a prescription for breakfast: "I'll have it made up in Boots," the lord says. "It's more hygienic in bottles," Martin replies.
6. Think, in particular, of the routines with shoes and hats in *Godot*. Other critics have drawn attention to the resemblances between Lester's vision and the postapocalyptic sensibility of later Beckett works like *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. See, for example, James Monaco, "Some Late Clues to the Lester Direction," *Film Comment* 10, no. 3 (May–June 1974): 31; Donald W. McCaffrey, *Assault on Society: Satirical Literature and Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 47. Evan Calder Williams quotes one critic's response, that the film is "like Samuel Beckett, but with better jokes" and suggests the summary "should be modified: it's like Samuel Beckett with more obvious jokes." See Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypses* (London: Zero Books, 2010), 45.
7. Vincent Canby, "Lester's Surrealistic Farce," *New York Times*, 29 September 1969, accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com>. Similarly, Jeffrey Richards writes: "Lester's films began to go away as he tried to tackle 'the big questions' (war and nuclear threat), and to do so in the form of black comedy." Jeffrey Richards, *Film and British National Identity: From Dickens to 'Dad's Army'* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 160.
8. Shivas, "Well, the Bomb Is Always Good for a Laugh."
9. Monaco, "Some Late Clues," 25.
10. Roger Ebert, "The Bed Sitting Room," RogerEbert.com (1976), accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.rogerebert.com/>.
11. James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 270; 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 324; see also Sinyard, *Richard Lester*, 8. Monaco also argues that *The Bed Sitting Room* had "a style whose distanciation serves to protect him from emotional involvement" (Monaco, "Some Late Clues," 31), although protecting the creator (rather than the audience) from involvement was not what Brecht had in mind when articulating his ideas about the *Verfremdungseffekt* (on which see John Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1964], 91–99, 143–45, 191–96; Peter Brooker, "Key Words in Brecht's Theory and Practice of Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 191–95). Lester recalled of *How I Won the War*: "[W]hat we tried to do in the film is constantly use this trick of what they call Brechtian alienation. . . . The minute anybody began to become sentimental about what was

- happening, they would . . . drop their character and become actors talking to the screen about themselves." Richard Lester with Christopher Frayling, "BFI Fellowship Award: Richard Lester," British Film Institute (2012), accessed 17 March 2014, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/941>. If filmic devices that expose the mechanics of film production mark Brechtian influence, Lester had been toying with such devices at least as far back as *It's Trad, Dad* (1960), released in the United States as *Ring-a-Ding Rhythm*. See in particular the moment, early in the film, when the male lead looks to the camera and pleads, "Can you help?" The narrator responds, "I'm just a simple narrator, but okay," and the scene changes (complete with a glimpse of film sprocket holes as the backdrop shifts). This places Lester several years ahead of Jean-Luc Godard's deployment of the tactic, typically traced to *Pierrot le Fou* (1965); see Jan Uhde, "The Influence of Bertolt Brecht's Theory of Distanciation on the Contemporary Cinema, particularly on Jean-Luc Godard," *Journal of the University Film Association* 26, no. 3 (1974): 28–30, 44. Uhde ignores Lester while insisting that "Godard has been the first director with an international reputation to use the distanciation techniques deliberately and consistently throughout most of his work" (29). Whether Lester is denied credit for using the technique in comedies or for not being French is not entirely clear.
12. Lester, "BFI Fellowship Award: Richard Lester." He provided Sinyard a similar explanation: "One has learnt over the years that Brechtian alienation is a euphemism for audiences' backs seen disappearing down the street" (Sinyard, *Films*, 54; Sinyard, *Richard Lester*, 63).
  13. James Monaco, "The Richard Lester Sitting-Still Film: Interview by James Monaco," *Movietone News* 49 (April 1976), reprint online in *Parallax View* 13, no. 22 (2 July 2012), accessed 17 March 2014, <http://parallax-view.org/2012/07/02/the-richard-lester-sitting-still-film-interview-by-james-monaco/>.
  14. Monaco, "Some Late Clues," 25.
  15. Monaco, "Some Late Clues," 31.
  16. Monaco, "Some Late Clues," 31.
  17. Ebert, "The Bed Sitting Room."
  18. Neil Sinyard, *Richard Lester* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 71, 72, 73; in the revised edition (2010), 79, 80, 81. The complaint about "absences" is especially odd given the visual abundances of the film. The detritus of apocalypse that fills the film—the mounds of broken crockery, the pile of old shoes, the dead cars on the highway, the salvaged heaps of junk in which people live—hardly seem like "absences." Evan Calder Williams points out "the unfathomable amounts of waste filling this world, in the oceans of trash, slabs of concrete, rusting infrastructure, all the hallmarks of a catastrophe that left its mess to be cleaned up by the survivors" (Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypses*, 46).
  19. Soderbergh, *Getting Away with It*, 216. By the time Sinyard revised his account in 2010, he would "make some minor adjustments" to Soderbergh's listing but not about *The Bed-Sitting Room* (Sinyard, *Richard Lester*, rev. ed., 13).
  20. Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypses*, 19–20.
  21. Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypses*, 45.
  22. Shivas, "Well, the Bomb Is Always Good for a Laugh."
  23. Shivas, "Well, the Bomb Is Always Good for a Laugh."
  24. Soderbergh, *Getting Away with It*, 90.
  25. Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 132.
  26. Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War*, 135–41. On the controversy about *The War Game*, see James Chapman, "The BBC and the Censorship of *The War Game* (1965)," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 75–94, and Tony Shaw, "The BBC, the State and Cold War Culture: The Case of Television's *The War Game* (1965)," *English Historical Review* 121, no. 494 (2006): 1351–84.
  27. For fuller listings of nuclear apocalypse films, see the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/>), under the "Nuclear War" tag; the annotated list of "resources" for chapter 5 ("Nukes") in Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *Cold War Fantasies: Film, Fiction, and Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 217–21; and the lists of films about "Experiencing Nuclear War and Its Immediate Effects" and "Survival Long after a Nuclear War" in Mick Broderick, "Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the Imagination of Disaster," *Science Fiction*





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## FILMS

- The Bed Sitting Room*. Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1969.
- A Boy and His Dog*. Directed by L. Q. Jones. United States, 1975.
- The Day After* (TV movie). Directed by Nicholas Meyer. United States, 1983.
- The Day the Earth Caught Fire*. Directed by Val Guest. United Kingdom, 1961.
- The Day the World Ended*. Directed by Roger Conman. United States, 1955.
- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. United States/United Kingdom, 1964.
- Fail Safe*. Directed by Sidney Lumet. United States, 1964.
- Five*. Directed by Arch Oboler. United States, 1952.
- The Four Musketeers (The Revenge of Milady)*. Directed by Richard Lester. United States/United Kingdom/Spain/Panama, 1974.
- A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1966.
- The Goon Show* (radio series, with varied TV offshoots). Created by Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers, and Michael Bentine. United Kingdom, 1950–1959.
- A Hard Day's Night*. Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1964.
- Help!* Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1965.
- How I Won the War*. Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1967.
- It's Trad, Dad* (US title: *Ring-a-Ding Rhythm*). Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1962.
- Jailhouse Rock*. Directed by Richard Thorpe. United States, 1957.
- La Jétée*. Directed by Chris Marker. France, 1962.
- The Knack . . . and How to Get It*. Directed by Richard Lester. United Kingdom, 1965.
- Mad Max*. Directed by George Miller. Australia, 1979.
- Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome*. Directed by George Miller and George Ogilvie. Australia, 1985.
- Mad Max II: The Road Warrior*. Directed by George Miller. Australia, 1981.
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. United Kingdom, 1974.
- Monty Python's Flying Circus* (TV series). Created by Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam, and John Cleese. United Kingdom, 1969–1974.
- On the Beach*. Directed by Stanley Kramer. United States, 1959.

- Penultima*. Directed by Richard Lester. United States, 1968.
- Phantom from 10,000 Leagues*. Directed by Dan Milner. United States, 1955.
- Pierrot le Fou*. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France, 1965.
- Planet of the Apes*. Directed by Franklin J. Shaffner. United States, 1968.
- The Three Musketeers (The Queen's Diamonds)*. Directed by Richard Lester. Spain/United States/United Kingdom/Panama, 1973.
- The Twilight Zone* (TV series). Created by Rod Serling. United States, 1959–1964.
- The War Game*. Directed by Peter Watkins. United Kingdom, 1965.