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Making the Fictional Believable: Mock Documentary Imagery in *The War Game*

Abigail E. Jones

On 30 October 1938, the day before Halloween, CBS Radio broadcast The Mercury Theatre on the Air's adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*. Using a series of station interruptions that seemed to be disrupting a radio program already in progress, and broadcast without commercial breaks, the show was so convincing to some listeners that they thought an invasion from Mars was actually taking place, and panic ensued. One reason the broadcast seemed so realistic was because the actors playing the part of the radio announcers enacted breaking down in the face of what they were seeing, no doubt influenced by the record of the real thing produced by the *Hindenburg* disaster that had occurred just over a year earlier. Blurring the line between journalism and entertainment, *The War of the Worlds* broadcast was an important precursor to what is now called the mock documentary, the use of documentary codes and conventions to represent a fictional subject (Lipkin, Paget, and Roscoe 14). As the genre of mock documentary evolved and transferred to film, not only were conventions of documentary and news reporting put to work in the narration, but also in the imagery.

In the study *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight differentiate between what they call "drama-documentary" and actual mock documentary. In their minds, rather than presenting "a dramatized representation of the social-historical world" by fictionalizing reality like a "drama-documentary" would, a mock documentary seeks to make fiction plausible by presenting "a fictional text, with varying degrees of intent to parody or critique an aspect of culture or the documentary genre itself" (Roscoe and Hight 54). Thus the distinguishing feature of the mock documentary is its self-reflexive relationship to the documentary form. For these writers, a mock documentary creates a "tension" between "factual expectations" (documentariness) and "suspension of disbelief" (fictionality).

One particular mock documentary film that exemplifies imagery's ability to help viewers suspend disbelief is Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965), a depiction of the aftermath of a nuclear attack on Britain shot in black and white. The film draws from the British film traditions of both documentary and science fiction by exhibiting a tension between iconography and spectacle. Film, as its most basic function, both tells a story and describes the elements of that story using images, and by doing so can blur the line between fiction and reality. Andrew Higson states that an image can be used either to narrate or describe; if it is narrating, it is iconographic and only part of a whole meaning, and if it is describing, then the single image is a spectacle—enough in itself to be complete (135). A mock documentary applies the aesthetics of a documentary to a fictional setting and story, using images to make the fictional believable. However, *The War Game* goes a step further, adding spectacular images that have their roots in science fiction. Narration and description, the two seemingly contradictory uses of imagery in film, are actually complimentary in *The War Game*'s unique depiction of realistic yet fantastic

disaster. I propose to explore this mock documentary's use of images as drawing from two earlier cinematic movements: Italian Neorealism and British Kitchen Sink Realism.

In the years preceding *The War Game*, disaster movies such as *Gorgo* (1961) and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961) were released in Britain. *Gorgo* portrays a pre-historic monster come to take revenge on civilization, tearing through London, while in *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, the earth is knocked out of orbit by nuclear experiments gone awry. The destruction of London portrayed on screen eerily reflected the wartime Blitz, not so far in the past in the collective memories of British viewers. Neither *Gorgo* nor *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* was filmed in a documentary fashion but these films' popularity illustrates the British preoccupation with possible disaster. Of course, these movies used images that were meant to shock and create an impression in and of themselves—spectacles. *The War Game* took the concept of disaster playing out close to home to a whole new level by portraying the contemporary menace of nuclear destruction in a documentary format as though it were a historical event.

The War Game (1965) shows the hypothetical effects of nuclear warfare on Britain. The type of nuclear tragedy depicted in *The War Game* has happened in real life and had the potential to happen in the places that serve as the movie's setting. Watkins takes pains to be as realistic as possible with the content that he chooses as he shows the effect that nuclear weapons would have on Britain. He also tried very hard to make his depictions conservative so that the movie and his conclusions could not be dismissed as “random fantasy” (Muntean 281). After all, Watkins' research included a study of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the film was actually awarded an Oscar for best documentary (Murphy). Obviously, the movie has no lack of verisimilitude or realism. Key to achieving this realism, the film's images show the events happening in real places and depict events as they would really happen—in other words, for a narrative purpose.

The stylistic documentary tradition that *The War Game* descended from can be connected to Italian Neorealism, which peaked a decade earlier, and the more contemporary phenomenon of British Kitchen Sink realism. *The War Game* uses imagery that both narrates and describes in order to not only investigate and “record” realistic events but also to uncover the human reaction to them, much like Italian Neorealism did. British Kitchen Sink Realism also employs this kind of imagery to create a moral realism that transcends both narrative and spectacle. In the case of these two movements and *The War Game*, the goal of using images in this seemingly contradictory manner is to tell a story in a compelling way that will force the viewer to debate an issue, make a decision, and act. As a result, *The War Game*, and mock documentary, can be viewed as a continuation of a trend that had been established long before rather than a break with tradition.

In order to allow *The War Game*'s storytelling to reach its full potential and fulfill its purpose, some of these same images that narrate are also spectacles in themselves which provoke thought about their individual implications. *The War Game* is a well-researched documentary but one whose subject is hypothetical and quite literally imaginative. One would think that if the goal

were to depict the scenario realistically and conservatively, there would not be much spectacle for its own sake in the movie. However, there is much spectacle involved in the film's imagery which, while realistic and contributing to the overall storytelling, also gets the viewer to stop and think about what is happening. The authorities at the BBC who pulled the film from television stated that they worried that those watching would be disturbed by the content or perhaps believe it was actually happening (Muntean). The fact that both of these effects could be happening simultaneously underscores the idea that the seemingly contradictory uses of imagery are working together to accomplish some effect. When Nick Muntean says that *The War Game* "might be the most terrifyingly realistic depiction of nuclear war and its aftermath ever committed to film," he captures its essence (280).

Central to *The War Game*'s effectiveness as a documentary is its use of images that both narrate and describe at the same time. In order to accurately depict a nuclear holocaust, Watkins had to employ images to tell the story, particularly images that would describe to the viewer what the experience would be like. Since this is film, the story is really told by spectacle. Watkins is not merely telling a story about how nuclear warfare would affect Britain, but is showing what those results would look like. For example, in one scene the film both tells how a city would be affected by a firestorm after it is bombed, and it shows what this would look like. Those with firsthand memory of London burning during the Blitz would keenly remember the terrible power of a firestorm. The narrator calmly describes the causes and effects of the nuclear firestorm, and the viewer sees a firestorm on the screen. However, the audience does not only see a firestorm; they see dramatic scenes of people being blown over by the wind and firefighters unable to control their hoses in the face of a building being consumed by fire.



One would find the sequence depicting the firestorm visually arresting and incredibly interesting even if one did not understand the context or how it fit into the overall story of the film.

Similarly, if one only understood the narrative from basic images and did not see the spectacular ones, one would come away with the knowledge that in the scenario being described an uncontrollable firestorm would break out. Having both of these elements present, however, gives the image purpose and allows the story to be told completely. Not only does one have all the necessary facts to understand the situation but one has also been forced on an emotional level to come to grips with the situation and make a judgment about it.

The War Game's form and stylistic qualities actually have much in common with Italian Neorealism. The use of images in Neorealist films is similar to *The War Game*'s use of them, and both Neorealism and *The War Game* try to achieve the same purpose by their use of images. Neorealism was a film movement that started in Italy shortly after World War II, and its goals were to be a "...force for cultural renewal and social change" by showing everyday events realistically, often critically examining recent history (Bordwell and Thompson 415). Furthermore, Neorealism had an "ethical and moral position" that was dedicated to seeing things as they really were in contrast to the so recently overthrown Fascist philosophy of suppressing reality (Overby 10). The goal of this was to get audiences to reflect on reality "precisely as it is," and as a result to see the significance in everyday events (Zavattini 68). *The War Game* also clearly has a social agenda. Muntean states that Watkins' films "squarely take aim at repressive forces" (276). Of course, rather than critically examining recent history, Watkins critically examines a possible near future. As a result, *The War Game* uses imagery techniques similar to those used by Neorealist filmmakers to accomplish similar goals.

One of Italian Neorealism's pioneers and greatest directors, Roberto Rossellini, employed a technique that combined "reportage with fiction." His intent was to record not only events but also the mind's involvement in the events (Rhode 457). Recording the mind's involvement in events, of course, involves some degree of imagination. "Imagination," says Zavattini, "therefore, is allowed, but only on the condition that it exercise itself within reality and not on the periphery" (70). The "reportage" aspect is analogous to narration, while recording the mind's involvement with events involves the use of spectacle. Neorealism prided itself in making a spectacle from any narrative image. "...when we imagine a scene, we feel the need to 'stay' there inside it; we now know that it has within itself all the potential of being reborn and having important effects" (Zavattini 71). Instead of just letting one image thrust forward into another in order to move the story along, this use of imagery prompts analysis of what is happening. Overall, this technique enhances both the narration and the spectacle, just like in *The War Game* as discussed above.

For example, in the scene in Roberto Rossellini's Neorealist film *Rome Open City* (1945) in which Don Pietro is executed, both aspects are at play. Of course, the images show the



execution but not without also prompting the viewer to examine what is happening at a human level. Images of Don Pietro being led to the firing squad, the firing squad purposely missing him, and images of a group of boys gathered at the fence watching are shown to the viewer in succession. David Forgacs says that this “careful linking of images” draws the spectator “into a series of emotionally involving identifications: with the boys and Don Pietro primarily, but also with the nervous younger priest and the reluctant firing squad” (59). Not only are the images telling the story, but they are also recording the interaction of the characters with the story and how it affects them.

In *The War Game*, Watkins’ technique of giving facts and quotations from real life and then setting up fictional examples which show the real scale of suffering and the impact of nuclear warfare on people also combines reporting and fiction. Often, these images are very graphic in nature and are therefore fascinating in and of themselves. *The War Game*’s bending of images for a purpose was certainly nothing new at the time it was made. The difference between it and Neorealist films is that the events depicted in *The War Game* are not “everyday events,” but certainly events that could happen in reality. Also, *The War Game* is presented in a documentary format rather than as a fictional story as neorealist films are. This is why *The War Game*’s use of imagery not only to narrate but also to describe is so jarring and so very effective.



In a fictional story, like those portrayed in Neorealist films such as *Rome Open City*, *Umberto D.* (1952), and *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), one expects analysis of the human interaction and response to the events, but not so much in a documentary. Really, *The War Game* just takes the techniques of Neorealism a step further and applies them to more serious events narrated in a more serious format. No longer is the film merely suggesting that these events are plausible and might be similar to events that happened in the past, it is actually implied that this is the way that events would unfold if certain conditions were met at some point in the future.

One can find another piece of the answer to what Watkins is trying to do with his blending of genres and use of image by looking to British Kitchen Sink cinema. British Kitchen Sink Realism peaked in the early 1960s and depicted the lives of rebellious working-class youths in the style of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave (Cook 487). Although *The War Game* is not a Kitchen Sink film, it was made near the time of the movement's peak and shares the earlier European film-style characteristics of trying to depict a plausible but fictional scenario as realistically as possible. Kitchen Sink films and *The War Game*, once one accounts for the difference in subject matter, both have the same iconographic tension and collaboration present to accomplish the same goal, which is to produce a moral realism that will challenge the viewer.

To make the fictional Kitchen Sink films plausible, Higson argues that they must be set in a real place and portrayed as realistically as possible in order to “anchor” them (137). Higson refers to this as “surface realism.” Of course, key to establishing this surface realism is “an iconography which authentically reproduces the visual and aural surfaces of the ‘British way of life’” (Higson 136). This is evident in the film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960)

which is set and mostly filmed in Nottingham in Britain's industrial midlands. *The War Game* is also set in a specific place, Kent, and was mostly filmed there as well. Setting and filming these movies in real places makes their stories more plausible, helps the viewer to suspend disbelief, and is an example of imagery used for the purpose of narration.

The real settings in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The War Game* are not only iconographically displayed to create surface realism but they are also portrayed as spectacle. The image of the space is not merely used as a place for action, it is also used on a psychological and discursive level to set a poetic tone (Higson 139). For example, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, a long shot of Arthur's town is shown from the top of Nottingham Castle. This is not necessary in the narrative but it is there to represent Arthur's state of mind, and it invites the viewer to linger and contemplate that singular scene "almost against the grain of the narrative" (141). The presence of the poetic image, though tied to the narrative, nearly disrupts it, creating tension. In *The War Game*, the poetry takes an even more insistent and disturbing form.



One scene which depicts a family trying to survive the nuclear bombing of a target forty miles away opens with a small boy being blinded by the flash. The image of the child covering his eyes and screaming out in pain is terribly riveting in itself regardless of its actual role in the narrative. Had the scene been depicted less dramatically, it would not provide the same gut-level motivation for the audience to examine the "how" and the "why" behind it.

As discussed above, the seemingly oppositional use of images to both narrate and describe actually enhances both of these functions. In order for the spectacular images to serve any purpose and accomplish the goal, they must be linked with the narrative. Also, the narrative needs the help of the spectacle to hold attention and make points. The purpose of allowing both

functions is to create a moral realism that transcends both the narrative and the spectacle. Higson states that moral realism is essential to accomplish the Kitchen Sink films' commitment to a set of social problems and solutions, and since *The War Game* was created with a similar goal, one can assume the director was trying to achieve the same effect. This "moral realism" is achieved partially by surface realism but also by the moral urgency and human sympathy brought on by the more poetic images (137). Both elements must be there in order for the goal to be accomplished.

The use of an image to simultaneously narrate and describe also fits into the blend between documentary and fiction that is present in *The War Game* and in Kitchen Sink films. A documentary traditionally tells a true story with an informative purpose, so the surface realism will be present, but a fictional film needs to have some meaning beneath the surface. However, both *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The War Game* are also both fictional stories framing themselves as real-world events. In order for a social realist film like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or a mock documentary like *The War Game* to work and accomplish their respective purposes, they must effectively blend visual narrative and discourse.

The ultimate purpose behind employing images that both narrate and describe is to create moral realism that could not be present without images performing both of these functions. When this happens, the viewer is forced to think and make a decision about what they are seeing. In his essay "The Modern Theatre is Epic Theatre," Bertolt Brecht says that Epic Theatre, in which a scene stands by itself and "the human being is the object of inquiry," forces the audience to make decisions and arouses their capacity for action (37). Of course, this type of theater tells a story, also, but each individual scene is thought provoking. As has been previously established, provoking thought and ultimately spurring action is the goal of Italian Neorealist films, British Kitchen Sink cinema, and *The War Game*. The moral realism created in each of these films is the same thing that Brecht identifies as the elements that create the critical thought and impetus for action in the audience.

The mock documentary's use of imagery for the purpose of both narration and discourse is nothing new in cinema, and it can trace its roots to the characteristics of both Italian Neorealism and British Kitchen Sink realism. *The War Game* uses the Neorealist technique of combining reporting with fiction by using images that both narrate and describe, although it reflects on possible future events rather than realistic past ones. Furthermore, both *The War Game* and Kitchen Sink films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* use different kinds of images to create a moral realism that transcends both features. All of these films and movements share the goal of encouraging the audience to reflect on a social problem and make a decision that prompts them to act on it. The blend of narration and spectacle present in all of these films makes them something beyond entertainment and closer to something which Brecht would call epic. *The War Game* carries these techniques into a new format—the mock documentary.

Stills courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store

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