



DISCOMFORT MOVIES

Threads

Threads

Director: Mick Jackson
Production Companies: BBC, Network 9, Western World TV
Executive Producers: John Purdie, Graham Massey
Producer: Mick Jackson
Associate Producer: Peter Wolfes
Production Managers: Jacinta Peel, Matthew Kuipers
Production Assistants: Wendy Plowright, Elizabeth Downie, Simon Moorhead
Assistant Floor Manager: Pennie Bloomfield
Script: Barry Hines
Photography: Andrew Dunn, Paul Morris
Camera Operator: Andrew Dunn
Visual Effects Photography: Peter Wragg
Graphics: Andy Coward
Film Editors: Jim Latham, Donna Bickerstaff
Designer: Christopher Robilliard
Properties: Dorothy Elliott
Costumes: Sally Nieper
Make-up: Jan Nethercot
Sound: Graham Ross, John C.C. Hale
Stunt Person: Dorothy Ford
Cast:
Karen Meagher (*Ruth Beckett*)
Reece Dinsdale (*Jimmy Kemp*)
David Brierly (*Mr Kemp*)
Rita May (*Mrs Kemp*)
Nicholas Lane (*Michael Kemp*)
Paul Vaughan (*narrator*)
Phil Rose (*medical officer*)
Michael O'Hagan (*Chief Supt. Hirst*)
Henry Moxon (*Mr Beckett*)
June Broughton (*Mrs Beckett*)
Sylvia Stoker (*Granny Beckett*)
Victoria O'Keefe (*Jane*)
Harry Beety (*Mr Sutton*)
Ashley Barker (*Bob*)
Ruth Holden (*Mrs Sutton*)
Jane Hazelgrove (*Alison Kemp*)
Steve Halliwell (*information officer*)
Brian Grellis (*accommodation officer*)
Peter Faulkner (*transport officer*)
Anthony Collin (*food officer*)
Michael Ely (*scientific advisor*)
Sharon Baylis (*manpower officer*)
David Stutt (*works officer*)
Phil Askham (*Mr Stothard*)
Anna Seymour (*Mrs Stothard*)
Fiona Rook (*Carol Stothard*)
Christine Buckley (*woman in supermarket*)
Joe Belcher (*shopkeeper*)
David Major (*boy in supermarket*)
Maggie Ford (*peace speaker*)
Mike Kay (*trade unionist*)
Richard Albrecht (*officer at food depot*)
Ted Beyer, Dean Williamson (*policemen*)
Joe Holmes (*Mr Langley*)
Andy Fenn Rodgers (*patrol officer*)
Graham Hill (*1st soldier*)
Nigel Collins (*2nd soldier*)
Jerry Ready, Dennis Conlon (*looters*)
Greta Dunn (*woman at hospital*)
Nat Jackley (*old man in graveyard*)
John Livesey (*street trader*)
Lee Daley (*Spike*)
Marcus Lund (*Gaz*)
Lesley Judd, Colin Ward-Lewis (*newscasters*)
UK-USA 1984
112 mins
Digital

This remarkable television production, imagining how a nuclear war might unfold, remains one of the most shocking and devastating films ever to air in the UK. Combining documentary-style realism and kitchen-sink drama, *Threads* observes the looming threat of nuclear war from the perspective of an average working-class family in Sheffield, before shifting to the detailed depiction of a society in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. It's 40 years since the film was originally broadcast and it has lost none of its power to shock.

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The first broadcast of *Threads*, in September 1984, played an important part in shaping the imaginations of a generation of British television viewers – a couple of generations, in fact: many in their late teens and twenties were stirred politically, some into actively opposing nuclear weapons, more into a mistrust of authorities willing to entertain the notion of nuclear war; while younger viewers, less engaged with politics, were stirred merely to nightmares. Its impact is explained partly by timing, a real-world context that made fears of nuclear war more urgent: Thatcher and Reagan upping the rhetoric of Cold War, the arrival of Cruise missiles on British soil, and Frankie Goes to Hollywood releasing 'Two Tribes'. But it was also a question of technique, the way the film made the build-up to confrontation the background to realistic domestic drama. No other vision of armageddon has made it seem, without softening the edges, so cosily familiar, so insidiously plausible.

The film is set around Sheffield: Jimmy and Ruth (Reece Dinsdale and Karen Meagher) are courting in his car up on the moors above the city, 'Johnny B. Goode' on the radio, his hand on her thigh, and fighter jets from the local RAF base shrieking across the sky. The drama follows them over the next few weeks, as Ruth discovers she is pregnant, they hastily introduce their parents to each other, buy a flat and start decorating. The larger, political action is a background buzz that occasionally breaks through, the rattle of a teletyper and a newsreader's exaggeratedly placid tones telling of rising tensions in Iran, Soviet tanks and NATO ships moving, tempers rising. On TV, Patrick Allan's authoritative tones explain how to 'Protect and Survive' with white paint and canned food. In a school playground, where the boys are larking around in their parkas, a van unloads blankets: preparation for nuclear war? Seriously?

For all the build-up, the attack itself seems to happen almost incidentally, when people are out shopping, Jimmy is at work delivering a load of timber and his dad is sat on the bog with his trousers round his ankles: a fiery mushroom cloud on the horizon, and people in the streets gasp, wet themselves, dive under anything that looks like cover, as engines stop and lights go out and the wind and heat of the blast rage toward them. A few minutes later, another sun opens overhead, and the world ends.

The depiction of the effects of an atomic bomb – flying glass and rubble, a firestorm and, later, charred corpses posed grotesquely among the rubble – is reminiscent of Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965). Director Mick Jackson makes no bones about his debt: apart from anything else, he thinks the BBC greenlit this film because it was still suffering institutional shame at having refused to broadcast Watkins's. *The War Game* presented itself as a documentary that used drama; *Threads*, though, is a drama with documentary

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Thu 11 Jul 18:15; Sun 21 Jul 15:15

Eraserhead

Sun 14 Jul 17:50; Sat 27 Jul 20:50

Possession

Mon 15 Jul 18:00

Funny Games

Mon 15 Jul 20:45; Sat 27 Jul 14:15

Climax + Strasbourg 1518

Tue 16 Jul 18:10; Sun 28 Jul 20:20

Requiem for a Dream

Fri 19 Jul 18:20

Crash + Titane

Sat 20 Jul 18:15, 18:30

The Lost Weekend

Sun 21 Jul 17:45; Mon 29 Jul 20:40

They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Mon 22 Jul 20:35

Audition Ôdishon

Wed 24 Jul 20:45; Wed 31 Jul 18:15

Bug

Thu 25 Jul 20:50

Skinamarink

Sun 28 Jul 14:20; Wed 31 Jul 20:45

A Woman under the Influence

Sun 28 Jul 17:20

Relaxed Screening: Eraserhead + intro and discussion

Mon 29 Jul 18:10

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roots. It's detail, in Barry Hines's script and Jackson's *mise en scène*, that is captivating: the budgies in a cage outside Jimmy's house (shades of Hines's *Kes?*), the pubs, with their slot-machines, crappy carpeting and fake wood veneer, the man up at the allotments putting a coat on his whippet. Even the headlines on the newspapers look real (any journalist will tell you how vanishingly rare that is on screen); the warships mentioned in the escalating crisis (the Kirov, the Callaghan) were real ones.

Both Watkins and Jackson/Hines drew heavily on descriptions of Hiroshima and on scientific literature to describe the effects of nuclear warfare, and both films adopt a matter-of-fact tone that only underlines the appalling realism. (There's a minor irony in the fact that Jackson's narration, offering the bald scientific view of what a bomb would do, is spoken by Paul Vaughan, voice of the BBC science series *Horizon*, and later of ad campaigns for Orange mobile phones: 'The future's bright...') Both films depict the collapse of civil society in the aftermath of a nuclear attack: hence the title *Threads* – the prologue, spoken over close-ups of a spider spinning its web, explains that a modern society is made strong by the many threads that bind it together; but the cutting of those threads leads to disaster. But Hines's script goes further than Watkins's, into a world where nuclear winter and disease have led to population collapse, technology has been lost, and the mass of people live like medieval peasants. In the first months, Ruth – family dead, Jimmy vanished – stumbles among the ruins, numbly exchanging sex for dead rats; she gives birth in darkness and cold, screaming, then biting through the child's umbilical cord.

The action fast-forwards a few years: in shots of a bleak landscape that seems to echo Tarkovsky and Brueghel, though crueller than both, people dressed in rags hoe stony fields by hand. Birdsong, music has stopped; all we hear is the wind. Ruth is blind from radiation-induced cataracts; her daughter an inarticulate, feral creature. The disaster of nuclear war was, it seems, only the prelude: the real agony is still to come.

Robert Hanks, *Sight and Sound*, May 2018