



‘Automobility in the Age of Apocalypse: On the Beach, Nuclear Nostalgia, and Atomic (Im)Mobilities’

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# Automobility in the Age of Apocalypse: On the Beach, Nuclear Nostalgia, and Atomic (Im)Mobilities

Christopher O'Hara

In the 1966 animated short film *What on Earth!*, viewers are presented with a news-reel styled broadcast—ostensibly from the ‘National Film Board of Mars’—detailing Martians’ first glimpses of alien life on Earth.<sup>1</sup> As a car enters from the right, the narrator announces: ‘And then, the big news: there *is* life on Earth!’ The ‘cameras on our orbiting spaceship’ then follow these Earthlings through their daily rituals: ‘at dinner’ (fuelling with petrol), taking ‘shelter for the night’ (parking in a garage), and ‘browsing in curiously designed libraries’ (driving through a region inundated with billboards). Yet this colourful, comedic, slightly surreal animation takes a sinister turn towards its end as we glimpse the human occupants of the vehicle for the first time. As a dog and several children leave the vehicle, the narrator says:

It seems odd that such a highly developed civilisation has not yet found a way to combat parasites. These pesky little creatures build huge hives or nests which often block or slow down the orderly progress of the Earthling, however, the Earthling seems to have this matter in hand. The eradication of these pests is obviously a top priority job for the working class.

The image of the human as parasite, the city’s buildings as hives/nests, and of the car as the dominant species which will become the killer of humanity seems to presage our very modern conundrum: humanity’s imminently doomed future. Indeed, it seems now in the twenty-first century that our obsession with mobility has, quite literally, turned the carbon dioxide we produce into the pesticide that will kill us. While *What on Earth!* is decidedly *not* an apocalyptic narrative, it carries an apocalyptic weight, as human ‘eradication’ seems to be the cars’ ‘top priority.’ This film—a piece of odd ephemera from 1966—connects us today, as we recognise our impact on our environment, with an older tradition of ecologically-informed, apocalyptic narrative built on the tension between movement and stasis.

Apocalyptic narratives in the films of the immediate post-war era seem to fall into two general categories: the hyper-mobile and the hyper-still. The former category is the fodder of high-octane action films and pulp fiction which rely on the mobility of people and goods to generate their conflicts. Anindita Banerjee gestures towards this when she describes a significant proportion of contemporary science fiction as ‘little more than technologically up-cycled frontier fantasies whose templates were laid out in nineteenth century: survival myths featuring larger-than-life individuals in post-apocalyptic environments [...] from endless generations of star wars and starships to the eternal quest

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<sup>1</sup> *What on Earth!*, dir. by Kaj Pindal and Les Drew (National Film Board of Canada, 1966).

for water and gas in the deserts of the *Mad Max* franchise.<sup>2</sup> The invocation of *Mad Max* here seems very telling of the ways in which we conceptualise the apocalypse: humans fight bitterly to the end, using the last of our precious resources to extend a rapidly dwindling timescale until death. Characters, in this first category, move from place to place rapidly, trying to find the remnants of some decaying past, whatever it might be. The second category, though, opposes the mobility of the first by relying on stillness instead of hyper-mobility. In this type of apocalyptic narrative, people wait, they go about their lives patiently—if unhappily—with some dignity until the end. The apocalypse is slow, and changes are gradual: there is a storm in the distance, and it *will* make landfall, but not yet. This is the static apocalypse. Unlike, say, *Mad Max*, these stories are discreet, minute, intimate.

This paper argues that these two categories of apocalypse—the hyper-mobile and hyper-still—coalesce in nuclear fictions to tease out the paradoxically technological nature of the apocalypse. What we find in the time of late capitalism—the period of decline (and, eventually, despair) immediately following the period of mass-abundance which characterised the post-war West<sup>3</sup>—is a totalising scarcity. This scarcity is caused by the hyper-mobilised forces which usher us into late modernity while the technologies of mobility themselves provide some small, largely static, comfort in the face of impending doom. By attending to automobiles, we can extrapolate the role that the car plays in comforting us and cocooning us, physically and psychologically, from the danger of the apocalypse. Further, by looking at narratives which stress the impermanence of the human species, we can come to understand an apocalyptic shift *away* from the sanctity of human life and *towards* the sanctity of the durable goods humanity has created, undermining notions of futurity and replacing it with capitalist nostalgia.

First, I must make a brief point regarding what, precisely, I mean when I talk about hyper-mobilised forces. The nuclear age coincides neatly with an era of twentieth century geological history broadly called the Great Acceleration, in which ‘the curves for countless parameters went from linear to exponential growth over the course of the 1950s’, stemming largely from ‘the rapid increase in energy consumption as well as mass motorization after the war.’<sup>4</sup> It would seem that the consumer society of the global North spearheaded the Great Acceleration with its emphasis on motorisation, disposable commodities, and over-production: what Andreas Malm has persuasively named the ‘Capitalocene.’<sup>5</sup> Yet this era is likewise punctuated by atomic blasts and the ‘spread of artificial radionuclides from surface A-bomb explosions’,<sup>6</sup> from which it has been suggested that the specific moment marking the beginning of the Anthropocene might be ’05:29:21

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<sup>2</sup> Anindita Banerjee, ‘Fiction’, in *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon*, ed. by Cymene Howe and Anand Pandian (Santa Barbara: Punctum, 2020), 185-189 (p. 186).

<sup>3</sup> This definition, while my own, owes a great debt to both Jürgen Habermas, particularly his essay ‘What Does a Crisis Mean Today? Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism’ which, among other things, outlines three crises (ecological, anthropological, and international) endemic to late capitalism; as well as Murray Bookchin’s *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, which both historicises late capitalism (although he does not use the word, the sentiment is remarkably similar) as a product of the post-war west and explores the peculiarities of capitalist alienation in a society of abundance.

<sup>4</sup> Helmuth Trischler and Fabienne Will, ‘Technosphere, Technocene, and the History of Technology’, *Icon*, 23 (2017), 1–17 (p.4).

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), p.391.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Zalasiewicz et al., ‘When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level Is Stratigraphically Optimal’, *Quaternary International*, 383 (2015), 196–203 (p.199).

Mountain War Time ( $\pm 2$  s) July 16, 1945', that is, the precise time of the first atomic blast on record.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Joseph Masco persuasively argues, natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, are 'only understandable to America's political leadership, and many of its citizens, in terms of nuclear catastrophe', implying a foregrounding of nuclearity in public psychology and government action which blurs the line between climate change and nuclear war, replacing one mobile force (Co2) with another (radiation).<sup>8</sup> As such, what we call the 'Anthropocene'—a geological survey of human impacts on *global* environments—is characterised both by fossil fuel emissions rapidly changing the climate *and* atomic radiation fundamentally changing the background radiation and elemental makeup of the Earth. This time, then, is an era of pervasive mobility: the mass movement of people at unprecedented levels—from rural to urban settings, locally with the aid of automobiles, and internationally through a range of technologies—which contribute to carbon emissions; the movement of goods, capital, and the advent of 'globalisation' and cheap consumer goods; *and* the movement of tiny, almost imperceptible radioactive particles, which contaminate the environment on a global scale. (Indeed, one of the primary reasons for the 1963 'Test Ban Treaty' was to 'put an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances'.)<sup>9</sup> It seems, then, that the anthropogenic apocalypse will likely be the result of hyper-mobility, in all of its forms—individual, capitalist, atomic. Yet the effects of that apocalypse will be hyper-stasis.

Nevil Shute's 1957 novel *On the Beach* is an apocalyptic novel in which the tension between mobility and stasis is brought to the fore. It follows the daily lives of its five central characters—Lieutenant-Commander Peter Holmes, his wife Mary, Captain Dwight Lionel Towers, Moira Davidson, and John Osborne—as they await a cloud of radiation that will wipe out Melbourne, Australia, the last major city on Earth still unaffected by radiation sickness, as a cloud of radioactive dust moves further and further south. We are told that the war which precedes the events of the novel was 'short, bewildering [...] the war of which no history had been written or ever would be written now, that had flared all round the northern hemisphere and had died away with the last seismic record of explosion on the thirty-seventh day.' This brief history is immediately followed with an indication of the new, post-war scarcity as Peter Holmes, who had been at sea during the war, returns 'to Falmouth to his Mary and his Morris Minor car. The car had three gallons in the tank; he used that unheeding, and another five that he bought at a pump, before it dawned upon Australians that all oil came from the northern hemisphere.' As oil and petrol are scarce, the people of Melbourne adopt different systems of transport: bicycles become prevalent, the electric tram becomes popular, horses as a means of transport return to the modern world, and cars have their engines removed and are pulled by oxen.<sup>10</sup> These forms of transport suggest that, in some capacity, mass mobility, even on a small scale, is a necessary component of twenty-first century capitalism as these people *must* move, even when the modern conveniences of late capitalism are taken away. As such, *On the Beach* presents an apocalyptic narrative in which the hyper-mobile and the hyper-still collide, as the people find new ways to move, but more slowly, for shorter distances, and with great difficulty.

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<sup>7</sup> Zalasiewicz et al., p.200.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Masco, 'Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis', *Social Studies of Science*, 40.1 (2010), 7–40 (p.27).

<sup>9</sup> 'Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water Between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union', 1963, National Archive of the United States, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (London: Heinemann, 1957), pp. 3-6.

This impression is reinforced visually in the novel's film adaptation. In the 1959 Stanley Kramer (but Shute-advised and Melbourne-filmed) film of the same name, we see a partially destroyed car early in the film's running time.<sup>11</sup> A car—the reasonably new Holden FJ—appears in its disuse *before* any character mentions the fuel shortage, indicating, subtly, the public movement away from automobiles in a time of scarcity. Indeed, the car—the symbol of convenience and mobility—becomes an inconvenience, and an impediment to public mobility as we see a man push the door out of the pedestrian path.<sup>12</sup> The camera then pans left and pulls out to show the busy street of the metropolis filled with bicycles, horses, and an electric tram.<sup>13</sup> But there are two elements of the filmic portrayal of *On the Beach* that stand out in particular: the abundance of non-petrol vehicles, and the remaining presence of disused petrol-using motor cars.

The presence of non-petrol transportation is easily explained by the scarcity caused by the apocalypse. However, the remaining presence of these now-useless machines is an altogether more complex structure of interwoven ideologies of consumerism and identity. Shute, in *On the Beach*, considers the ways in which mid-century identity is inextricably linked to one's status as consumer, and the state of consumer-identity in times of scarcity. Indeed, when Peter sees the bullock pulling the car with its engine and windscreen removed, he thinks about doing the same to his Morris Minor but 'it would break his heart to do so' because this was 'the first car he had ever owned, and he had courted Mary in it.'<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Commander Towers dreams of a red Oldsmobile which fades from his memory, Moira's parents mention her previous lover's Austin-Healey, John Osborne buys a Ferrari, despite not having any petrol, and even Moira measures time itself in terms of trinkets, guessing that she must have had a pogo stick when she was seven because 'it came after the tricycle, after the scooter, and before the bicycle.'<sup>15</sup> As Shute's biographer Julian Smith writes, '*On the Beach* envisions a world destroyed by gadgets, but this world still loves the gadgets which have destroyed and will outlast their makers.'<sup>16</sup> Further, Smith reduces this relationship between man and gadget to a simple admission of humanity's inescapable love for material goods, writing that 'Shute is not criticizing; he is only saying that man seems unable to reject the creations of his machine culture.'<sup>17</sup> Yet the man-machine relationship in the apocalypse of *On the Beach* is far more complex than Smith allows, as it represents the intersection between nostalgia and futurity, abundance and scarcity.

Drawing out this paradigm in slightly sharper relief is a conversation between Commander Towers and Moira Davidson about Towers' socks which need mending. Moira offers to mend his socks, but he declines, saying:

"It's time I got more, anyway. These are just about done."

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<sup>11</sup> *On the Beach*, dir. by Stanley Kramer (Kino Lorber, 1959). Because of the difficulty of obtaining rights to reproduce stills from the film, each following citation from the film will include a timestamp which will indicate the scenes I mention, should a reader wish to see the scene themselves. The film is also widely available online and through libraries.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:38.

<sup>14</sup> Shute, pp. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Julian Smith, *Nevil Shute* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

“Can you get more socks?” She asked. “Daddy can’t. He says they’re going off the market, with a lot of other things. He can’t get any new handkerchiefs, either.”

Peter said, “That’s right. I couldn’t get socks to fit me, the last time I tried. The ones I got were about two inches too long.”

Moira pressed the point. “Have you tried to buy any more recently?”

“Well—no. The last lot I bought was some time back in the winter.”<sup>18</sup>

It might be that Towers, being American—not Australian—genuinely fails to realise the scarcity that impacts Melbourne at the time, but this belies the psychological distancing he is trying to perform. What Towers illustrates here is an attempt to disguise the present state of scarcity through an insistence on the permanence of past systems of disposable commodification. In failing to recognise the present for what it really is—the end—and the future that that present presages/predicts (that is, one without humanity), he imposes a misguided nostalgic notion of the abundance of the previous world onto the present. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’:

The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience. We normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past.<sup>19</sup>

As such, Towers’ nostalgia—the way he looks at the past, where he imagines his home and his family still alive—is a projection of an idealised future in which humanity continues to believe. Towers is misplacing time, removing it from its temporal shackles and insisting on a ‘continuity of human experience.’ This normalises an unbearable future by making a certainty *feel* unlikely and thus ‘inuring us to it,’ to borrow a phrase from Susan Sontag.<sup>20</sup> The presence of and fascination with cars proposes the automobile as a symbol of the past, and of who these characters could be in the past: it is a way for the characters in a bleak present to conjure a more pleasant past (that is, one in which the future can still be imagined). It is a temporal stasis, where time must be stilled and we can remain in this space of relative fixity. Yet time is always mobile, slowly moving them towards certain death. Fred Erisman suggests that this is simply Shute’s interest in ‘the little man’ who will ‘go on about their business, with matter-of-fact gallantry, until the end.’<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Carlton W. Berenda writes that ‘the triumph of man lies in his complete realization that whatever he does is ultimately without meaning and that he finds his real significance in his devotion to mythic symbols. He creatively gives meaning to his trivial world by his dedication to such symbols.’<sup>22</sup> The cars in the film thus continue to wield an immense power, producing a tangible effect on the lives of its characters. They are symbols which psychologically protect the characters from fully recognising the annihilation of their future, allowing them, in some

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<sup>18</sup> Shute, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009), 197–222 (p. 197).

<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘The Imagination of Disaster’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), pp. 209–25 (p. 225).

<sup>21</sup> Fred Erisman, ‘Nevil Shute and the Closed Frontier’, *Western American Literature*, 21.3 (1986), 207–17 (pp. 215–217).

<sup>22</sup> Carlton W. Berenda, ‘The Meaning of Man in Nevil Shute’s *On The Beach*’, *Books Abroad*, 34.3 (1960), 232–33 (p. 233).

sense, to move out of and beyond time as the symbols metonymically stand-in for the past, which, as Chakrabarty notes above, helps us ‘envisage the future.’

We might extend this reading and suggest, with Gijs Mom, that the car functions as a type of ‘cocoon’ which protects the motorist from the outside world, becoming a ‘multisensorial ‘room on wheels,’ which [is] dominated by vision.’<sup>23</sup> Mom extrapolates that the car-as-cocoon developed after the car-as-capsule, that is, automotive design shifted from the open-tourer style, to an enclosed style, and then eventually to the cocoon which is, essentially, an enclosed car built with comfort in mind. The car as cocoon—with its sturdy walls and windows, suspension systems, power steering, radios, and (eventually) air conditioning—not only mediates passengers’ experiences with the outside world, but it mitigates them; the car as cocoon creates a clear distinction between self and other, which becomes almost entirely dependent on visibility whereby the motorist’s perception is artificially suspended by the line-of-sight limitations imposed by the car’s body. Yet this visibility is reciprocal. While Mom largely focuses on perception from within the vehicle, the other—who is outside of the vehicle—perceives the automobile and the passengers as one unit, as likewise other. As such, cocooning takes on a psychological as well as physical significance. The car has always been a kind of mythic symbol, but when the car becomes a cocoon, it serves not only to symbolise mobility and convenience, but also that which it cocoons. The car-as-cocoon seems to function in some sense as social armour, or as a social façade: it comes to symbolise the passenger and their desire to be perceived in one way or another.

John Osborne, the stereotypically boring scientist of *On the Beach*, brings the idea of the automobile as a social cocoon into focus with a custom racing Ferrari. The Ferrari is, at first, a past dream pulled into the present; Osborne says that motorcar racing is ‘what I’ve always wanted to do, but there’s never been any money.’<sup>24</sup> Yet the pleasure of actually racing the machine, of fully realizing his dedication to the symbol, temporarily eludes him as a result of petrol scarcity, which he avoids by purchasing a car which uses a special ether-alcohol mixture. Nevertheless, the car tangibly changes Osborne’s life. We are told that ‘he was not very well accustomed to taking personal risks, to endangering his life, and his life had been the poorer for it [...] The Ferrari altered that. Each time he drove it, it excited him.’<sup>25</sup> And, as he crashes, running off the road and spinning out, he finds that he is not afraid of death, but rather ‘deeply ashamed that he had treated his car so’—mythologising and deifying the vehicle as above his own life.<sup>26</sup> Of course, Osborne is not the only man—and it is, except for one, *only men*—in the novel to consider the vehicle above human life. When petrol finally begins to leak out of people’s stockpiles, the Australian Grand Prix is held, but the venue is moved from Albert Park to a private track in Tooradin because:

Nobody worried very much about the prospect of a car spinning off the course and killing a few spectators, or the prospect of permission to use the park for racing in future years being withheld. It seemed unlikely, however, that there would be sufficient marshals ever to get the crowds off the road and away from the path of oncoming cars, and, unusual though the times might be, few of the drivers were

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<sup>23</sup> Gijs Mom, *Atlantic Automobility: The Emergence and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940*, Explorations in Mobility, I (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), p. 375.

<sup>24</sup> Shute, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

prepared to drive straight into a crowd of onlookers at a hundred and twenty miles an hour. Racing motor cars are frail at those speeds, and a collision even with one person would put the car out of the race.<sup>27</sup>

With the end so close in sight—at this point in the novel, we are told that it will be a month—human life loses its sanctity, becoming an inconvenience to the motor race. Indeed, human life loses value except in its potential to ‘put the car out of the race’, symbolising a cultural shift away from concerns with futurity. That is, the recognition of a future without humanity catalyses an alteration to how humans think about themselves in relation to their material culture: they are no longer the dominant force, ruling over their surroundings. Rather, their objects, machines, and gadgets rule over them. These people will, like us in the twenty-first century surrounded by plastic, be outlived by their industrial creations. Instead of a world in which consumer goods are abundant, and, as such, disposable, the only abundance of this new world is humanity, and so humanity itself becomes disposable. After the first qualifying race, of which only seven of the nineteen cars finish, Peter mentions that:

“They’re certainly racing to win ...”

“Well, of course,” said the scientist. “It’s racing as it ought to be. If you buy it, you’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Except to smash up the Ferrari.”

John Osborne nodded. “I’d be very sorry to do that.”<sup>28</sup>

It seems, then, that the commodities have taken on a permanence that the consumer cannot hope to achieve. The continuity of human history is replaced by the continuity of material culture. Instead of the technological obsolescence which typifies modernity, we now enter the era of human obsolescence which is marked by a deep nostalgia for materiality.<sup>29</sup> As Alfredo González-Ruibal writes on material nostalgia:

Material nostalgia is a demand for continuity. We need continuity amid endless threats of discontinuity [...]. The experience of historical fragmentation and alienation from history echoes a similar fragmentation and alienation in our identities. Many of us can no longer see ourselves in the time of our grandparents and even in our own childhoods. The sense of loss is not just related to a vanished past, but to the broken links between present and past, which is also a traumatic rupture in our biographies.<sup>30</sup>

The durable goods of capitalist production—those symbolic gods which rule our material worlds—become the force of continuity when humanity’s understanding of itself becomes discontinuous. Osborne’s car will outlast him, Peter and Mary’s house will still stand when there is nobody to inhabit it, and Moira’s pogo stick will last until it rusts into dust. Yet, in the apocalyptic world, material nostalgia does not simply reflect a fragmentation of the linkage between our past and present, but also the fragmentation of a future which will not

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<sup>27</sup> Shute, pp. 232-233.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 235-236.

<sup>29</sup> c. Mark Goble, ‘Obsolescence’, in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, ed. by Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Columbia University Press 2016), pp. 146-168.

<sup>30</sup> Alfredo González-Ruibal, ‘What Remains? On Material Nostalgia’, in *After Discourse: Things, Affects, Ethics*, ed. by Bjørnar J. Olsen and others (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 187–203 (p. 198).

come to be. To have material nostalgia is to propose one's position in a chain of temporality, to say 'I am here, in this time, and it has come after and before other times.' But material nostalgia in an apocalypse holds onto the past very tightly. It alters the chain of events and suggests that 'I am not here, in this time, *but I am then*, in that time: that time when we had a future.' Moira, who, we should remember, measures time in terms of her toys and trinkets, refuses this new schema of automotive fetishism that seems to have overtaken the men of the end-times, saying, "They *can't* go on. It's like the Roman gladiators, or something."<sup>31</sup> But Osborne provides a key to understanding this new blood-sport, as he thinks that dying in this race would be preferable to 'vomiting to death in a sick misery in less than a month's time. Better to drive like hell and go out doing what he wanted to.'<sup>32</sup>

And Osborne eventually *does* die on the altar of his automotive god. As radiation sickness tears through Melbourne, he spends his final moments preparing the Ferrari for long-term storage—raising the car, draining the fluids, disconnecting the battery terminals—before putting on his driving helmet and goggles and sitting in the car for the last time. Shute writes:

It was comfortable there, far more so than the club would be. The wheel beneath his hands was comforting, the three small dials grouped around the huge rev counter were familiar friends. This car had won him the race, that was the climax of his life. Why trouble to go further?

He took the red carton from his pocket, took the tablets from the vial, and threw the carton on the ground beside him. No point in going on; this was the way he'd like to have it.

He took the tablets in his mouth, and swallowed them with effort.<sup>33</sup>

Osborne's self-euthanising in the seat of his Ferrari deifies the vehicle one last time, as he prepares it for an existence without human life. The Ferrari becomes a temple of the past he wanted, and of the future that could be; Osborne becomes the sacrifice.

The film, however, portrays a slightly different end for Osborne. In the 1959 *On the Beach*, Osborne does not ready the Ferrari for storage but, rather, uses it as the agent of his demise. In a slow, ponderous scene, he seals the entrance to his garage with a tarp before sitting in the seat, turning on the engine, and letting the exhaust overtake him.<sup>34</sup> This ending perhaps positions the vehicle into a more reciprocal role than Shute's, as the gadget itself becomes fatal, paralleling the nuclear gadgets which have hurled humanity directly into apocalypse. As such, this scene proposes a vehicle which is all-consuming in its violence: not only does the Ferrari directly assist in Osborne's suicide, but without Osborne's preparations, the Ferrari itself will be destroyed in time, rusting before turning to dust. But this destruction is one final attempt to be comfortably cocooned at life's end. Fred Astaire's Osborne smiles—and his smile grows—as he revs the engine and the fumes build. Motoring, for Shute, and for Kramer, then, leads directly to pleasure, even under circumstances in which pleasure seems unconscionable. The motorcar, in a time of petrol scarcity and impending doom, becomes a symbol of a better past with a brighter future, and

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<sup>31</sup> Shute, p.236.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

<sup>34</sup> Kramer, 2:04:40-2:05:47.

the nostalgic pleasure of motoring—of the union between man and gadget—leads to a deified car which consumes everybody and everything.

The automobile, we have seen, is a dual symbol of futurity and nostalgia which is all-consuming and totalising in its cocooning psychological force. On the one hand, the car moves us into the hyper-mobile future, while, on the other hand, it cocoons us in a psychological stasis built from an ahistorical nostalgic yearning for a time in which the future seemed guaranteed. To move this argument into the present, however, into the twenty-first century, is crucial. Our twenty-first century deified technology—with all-consuming symbolic power—is not simply the car: it is the car, the plane, the train, the bicycle, the ship; it is the plastic in our packaging, in our oceans, in our bodies; it is the circulating energy on which modernity is built. In short, our all-consuming technologies are those which both move and move us: the technologies that will kill us are those which circulate—which move goods, people, pollutants, radioactive fallout—despite or in spite of us, but which also comfort us, cocoon us, make us feel safe, mobile, productive, clean, and durable. Thus, thinking through *our* current cultural fears—militaristic, pandemic, climatic and beyond—in relation to nuclear annihilation, and its relationship to mobility and stasis, becomes increasingly necessary as we move into new unmapped territories of globalisation and techno-apocalyptic thinking.

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