WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION:
THE SPECTACLE OF SACRIFICE
AT THE NEVADA TEST SITE

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Imagine you are holding a small pile of ground pumice in your hands. That dust would be almost the exact same size as dust from nuclear fallout, also known as black rain. If the dust you hold in your hands was nuclear fallout, rather than simply ground pumice, it would be composed of “fission products, activation products, and unfissioned weapon material (uranium and/or plutonium).”¹ Like all dust, it would spread easily. It would be difficult to control, very light, and even gravity would have a difficult time keeping it still. If you dropped some of it from a distance of four feet above the ground, it would likely spread in all directions, with hardly any of it falling directly beneath the point you dropped it from. Now imagine that small pile of dust multiplied by hundreds of thousands of times. The resulting amount would not even come close to the amount of dust that was produced by aboveground nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site from 1951 to 1962. Imagine trying to retrieve all of that dust and attempting to isolate it in one place. The dust from those eleven years constitutes some of the material remnants of the nuclear age—the vestiges of a series of events that took relatively little time to perform, but whose effects are seemingly irreparable. This dust, previously buried beneath layers of sediment, has already fallen and now has a life of its own.

Operation Buster-Jangle, Nevada Test Site, 1951.

Scenes from the Nevada Test Site

Men dressed in white collared shirts and crisp trousers make their way toward identical folding chairs. The seats are aligned in rows, creating a slight amphitheater-like curve. A male voice over the loudspeaker counts down, “5, 4, 3, 2...” The men move their thick black, nearly opaque goggles from their heads to their eyes. “1.” For a moment, everything is completely silent. An orange, cylindrical tower of smoke emerges as if in slow motion from one point on the ground. Then a second bout of smoke, this time vertical, rises from the ground, expanding into a wide mushroom shaped cloud. The smoke surges outward as the men watch intently, their bodies remaining completely motionless. The force of the blast pulls the smoke back inward before it starts to settle, dust floating downward, slowly cloaking everything nearby in a layer of radioactive remnants of the brilliant orange cloud. The dust further homogenizes the already stark landscape, erasing from above the few signs of life that had existed seconds before.
In his evaluation of the function of the spectacle in capitalist times, Guy Debord states, “The spectacle is the developed modern complement of money where the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the entire society can be and can do.”\textsuperscript{2} The spectacle is, therefore, visual evidence of power and wealth and the abstract projection of the ability to concretely threaten other nation-states. The majority of the photographs taken at the Nevada Test Site during its most active years, or at least those available in the public domain, are of the bombs themselves and of the aftermath of nuclear tests. However, the photographs of great significance for this inquiry—although they are often overlooked—are those of the audiences of nuclear tests with the aforementioned well-dressed men wearing dark glasses, sitting leisurely in the quiet desert night and watching the sky light up as if witnessing the big bang itself. I wonder if the photographers who documented these fascinated viewers realized that the public’s attraction to these spectacles of destruction was also spectacular, albeit in a different way.

Looking at these images now, it can seem unbelievable that the viewers, mostly white middle-aged, well-to-do looking men, are sitting so calmly as they watch the destruction of what they likely believed was their land to sacrifice. What is it that attracts these viewers and others to images of extreme devastation? Are we drawn to the visual impact of sublime destruction? To the evidence of military and scientific powers’ abilities? To the fine line between relative safety and peril? To danger itself, with the facade of relative security? In this paper, I expand several of these lines of inquiry, attempting to illuminate some possible reasons for human fascination with the spectacle of sacrifice, particularly in relation to the Nevada Test Site during the height of the Nuclear Age.\textsuperscript{3} I also propose that these theatrical displays of atomic weaponry were as much a part of the defense project as the bombs themselves. Drawing on Felix Guattari’s \textit{Three Ecologies}, I conclude by


\textsuperscript{3} This research builds upon previous inquiries into the relationship between imaging the landscape and propagating ideologies such as American exceptionalism, white privilege, and manifest destiny.
suggesting a possible method of countering this fascination (which has a strong relationship to the hegemonic capitalist system), proposing the anti-spectacle as a sustainable movement away from such fascination and away from the risks of revering the spectacle.

Historical Geographies of the Nevada Test Site

Before the arrival of Euro-American settlers, the land now known as the Nevada Test Site was home to multiple American Indian tribes, including the Western Shoshone and the Southern Paiute. The Indian reservations that border the Nellis Air Force Base and the Nevada Test Site include the Moapa Reservation, the Pahrump Paiute Tribe, the Las Vegas Paiute Colony, the Duckwater Shoshone, and the Goshute Reservation. American Indians in Nevada who had lived on this land since time immemorial did not view it as barren, but rather as sacred and fruitful. Many are still fighting for this treaty-protected land, and some are involved in yearly protests in alliance with peaceful direct action group the Nevada Desert Experience.

Adjacent to the Nevada Test Site, Yucca Mountain is a traditional sacred site of symbolic creation for the Shoshone and Paiute, one of the “points from which humans emerged [out of the womb-like regenerative earth] and were dispersed.”\textsuperscript{5} The fate of Yucca Mountain now is enveloped in controversy regarding its proposed use as a long-term, high-level nuclear waste storage facility, although the project was recently de-funded by the governor of Nevada and the federal government.\textsuperscript{6,7}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{yucca_mountain.png}
\caption{Yucca Mountain, Nevada, USA.}
\end{figure}

**Disposable Landscapes**

In 1951, the Department of Defense proclaimed the land, later called the Nevada Test Site, as theirs, indicating “‘land was cheap...bomb it into oblivion and never notice the difference,’”\textsuperscript{8} ignoring the fact that the area had been the traditional homeland for the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute for thousands of years. Nevada originally meant “snowy, which suggests that it was initially settled

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{8} Kuletz, “Geographies of Sacrifice - Nuclear Landscapes and Their Social Consequences,” 91.
from the West, rather than from the East,” further evidence of tribal inhabitants’ claims to the land.9 However, due to its relative remoteness, dry climate, and expansive scale, the stark desert landscape was seen as prime real estate for weapons testing. In the eyes of the Department of Defense, it was fruitless, disposable territory, ripe for sacrifice in the name of national “security,” and ready for disciplining into a “geometry of testing fields.”10 For the tribal members whose ancestors had lived there for centuries this was their land, stolen from them for destructive uses. As one tribal member said, following the hundreds of nuclear tests that have occurred on the site, “we are the most bombed nation in the world.”11

Sacrifice as Spectacle

After roughly one year of nuclear testing on the Nevada Test Site video and photo journalists, as well as the usual VIPs, were finally invited en masse to document the detonation of atomic bomb Charlie, scheduled to occur on April 22, 1952. Around two hundred reporters converged to view the test from a site only ten miles from ground zero, dubbed “News Nob.” The video documentation gathered on that day allowed the atomic audience to expand greatly, giving countless television-owning Americans live access to the spectacular event.12

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10 Kuletz, “Geographies of Sacrifice - Nuclear Landscapes and Their Social Consequences,” 175.
11 Ibid., 98.
The Atomic City and the Atomic Audience

The city of Las Vegas, which sits sixty-five miles away from the Nevada Test Site, was originally inhabited by Southern Paiute American Indians. In the mid-1800s, a group of Mormon missionaries built a small settlement there, with the hopes of escaping the prejudices and bureaucratic demands present in already incorporated United States land.\(^{13}\) Due to the area's challenging conditions for crop-growing and the Paiute's approach to property (they took the Mormon's crops, viewing them as common possessions) they left soon after, but the fort they constructed remains and is now a part of the Las Vegas Mormon Ford State Park.\(^{14}\) Around 1900, the city became a railroad town. In the

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13 Mormons were on a quest for autonomy from the United States and were, therefore, quite different from other European colonists.
1930s it began to market itself as the gateway to the Boulder Dam. Liberal gambling laws and low taxes encouraged the development of casinos, bars, and hotels for Boulder Dam tourists. Once business owners in Las Vegas heard that the newly established Nevada Test Site was to host regular nuclear bomb tests, they were worried that such actions would harm tourism. To curb the risk of damage to their fragile industry, they used its proximity to the Nevada Test Site to market it as “The Atomic City,” complete with atomic cocktails and viewing parties at dawn, when the tests would usually occur. As stated in William L. Fox’s In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle, the city has now built a reputation of “offering [physical] form to our desires.” One must wonder, what desires were these viewing parties and the other cultural phenomena surrounding them answering to? Slavoj Žižek has suggested that “the sublime is the site of the inscription of pure subjectivity.” Thus, observation of the sublime object heightens our feeling of subjectivity. If true, this would explain the draw of the spectacle of destruction to an extent, but there is still much to be accounted for.

Las Vegas postcard, undated.

15 Ibid, xiv-5.
16 William L. Fox, In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle (University of Nevada Press, 2007), xiii.
17 Slavoj Zizek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Duke University Press, 1993), 46.
Members of the American bourgeoisie would gather on these days of atomic adventure to enjoy the spectacle, while sipping the famed, colorful Atomic Cocktail. The bright blasts and strange clouds that resulted drew viewers from across the country who desired to experience the sublime scene of nuclear weapons testing. With these outstanding examples of military-industrial-complex-inspired showmanship, I propose that these theatrical displays of atomic weaponry seem to have played as important a part in the defense project as the bombs themselves.


Class Divisions and Viewership Patterns

In Bourdieu’s 1984 study of behavior and preferences related to social class entitled Distinction, the author notes that “Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation—literature, theatre, painting—more than in the things represented. A “life of ease […] tends to induce an active distance
from necessity.” This suggests that, at least for “intellectuals,” representative art is expected, and even, needed to maintain a “‘proper’” distance from the real world; For “the people,” according to Bourdieu, representations operate as evidence of the validity and strength of particular ideologies. This statement is notable because nuclear bomb “tests” cannot be considered representative art, but in many ways they were treated as such. The fact that the majority of the audience watched the blasts on television rather than live is important, and perhaps the dark goggles offered some feeling of distancing or screening to live viewers, similar to watching a television broadcast. However, the force of bombs, strong enough to knock people off their feet, should have reminded them that it was not a mere representational spectacle, but concrete, material life. Cultural historian Rebecca Solnit compares some of the images taken during the atomic age to the emotional, visceral Baroque paintings of the seventeenth century, such as the quintessentially dramatic *The Conversion of St. Paul* by Caravaggio. It is as if viewers of these spectacles have stepped into a Baroque scene without taking part in the action directly. 


19 Solnit, *Savage Dreams*. 
Weapons of Mass Distraction: Interpretations of Nuclear Testing Viewership in Relation to Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*

A key element of Guy Debord’s book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, was his critique of the use of the commodified image to unite and pacify viewers. He states: “The spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation....” Debord goes on by stating:

“The fetishism of commodities reaches moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism. The only use which

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20 Solnit uses this particular painting as an example of this comparison between Baroque images and those taken at the Nevada Test Site in *Savage Dreams*.
remains here is the fundamental use of submission.”

The statement above resonates when one calls to mind the sublime and strange beauty of the atomic tests. The explosions have the power not only to seriously harm, if not eliminate, all living things in their path but also, when watching from a distance, hypnotize them into motionless submission.

Debord continues:

“The unreal unity proclaimed by the spectacle masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production rests. What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what separates them from it. What brings together men liberated from their local and national boundaries is also what pulls them apart. What requires a more profound rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchic exploitation and repression. What creates the abstract power of society creates its concrete unfreedom.”

Aside from masking the reality of the nuclear situation with the excitement of the sublime visual experience, the spectacle also covers class divides that would normally deter the unification of various social groups, creating situations in which Bourdieu’s previously-mentioned divisions between “intellectuals” and “the people” can disappear. This simultaneous pulling together and masking allows for mass deception, or mass distraction, through the use of the sublime spectacle. It is worth noting the irony of this technique of distraction. The United States Department of Defense was distracting the public from the perils of nuclear testing by encouraging them to look at the tests themselves. The aesthetics of the bomb deterred the public from seeing its perils. Here we see the difference between what I will call the far look and the close look. If we are looking at a nuclear

22 Ibid., 67.
23 Ibid., 72.
bomb test from afar, whether the farness is due to a screen, goggles, or physical distance, it is
difficult to look past the spectacle of the bomb and to perceive details—it’s history, its consequences,
and so forth. Looking closely at these tests would entail looking at elements from the seemingly
minuscule, all the way up to the macrocosmic overview of the entire atomic age, but beginning at
the level of the dust that composed the big bang, rather than merely at the big bang. Looking closely
often results in a more nuanced view of the object or practice under observation. In the case of tests
at the Nevada Test Site, close looking could result in seeing the history of the landscape and its
traditional inhabitants; the multifarious significances of sites on the land; the intricacies of military
motivations and actions on, around, and about the site; the underlying connections between Las
Vegas visitors’ fascination with the spectacles; the commodification of vision; and the long and
short term consequences of systems and actions being imposed upon the landscape.

Italian Futurist, Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti identifies human fascination with war, and
tacitly with spectacle, articulating their nuanced interplay in his well-known manifesto:

“War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by
means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is
beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful
because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is
beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the
stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture,
like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning
villages, and many others.”

Functions of the Spectacle During Aboveground Testing at the Nevada Test Site

There are two principle angles from which to view the spectacle’s potential to serve as a significant political weapon against domestic and international enemies of the state during the Cold War. First, it is represented as a domestic weapon to pacify publics through its sublime beauty and defiance of previously expected human limits. Many who viewed the first atomic tests up close compared them to heavenly visions. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, once declared that during the Trinity Test, he thought of “a passage from the Bhagavad-Gita, the sacred book of the Hindus: I am become death, the Shatterer of Worlds.”25 In Rebecca Solnit's book, Savage Dreams, the author notes the strange tension between the creative and the destructive elements of atomic bombs, as well as their heavenly aesthetics. She states, “There is something wondrous about the fact that humans have managed to make stars, and something horrible about the fact that they, or we, went to the trouble of making stars for no more interesting reason than obliterating other human beings, and the places around them.”26 27

Secondly, in using some of the same tactics domestically employed, the nuclear spectacle was used as a weapon against international threats, mainly from the former Soviet Union. The act of showing and performing the act of destruction for the enemy results in potential attacks becoming less abstract for the targets. The images of the tests dispersed and represented were a concretizing force. Because the “tests” occurred so frequently, sometimes every week, Solnit nicknamed the Nevada Test Site the “Nevada Rehearsal Site.”28 She rightly observes that the military was in constant rehearsal for the theatre of nuclear war, or, more starkly, for “the end of the world.”29

26 Solnit, Savage Dreams, 43.
28 Solnit, Savage Dreams, 15.
29 Solnit, Savage Dreams, 7.
Moving the Tests Underground and Contemporary Uses of NTS Documentation

In 1963, all nuclear testing moved underground due to the Limited Test Ban Treaty. This became the official end of nuclear spectacle and of the height of the Atomic City. “Efforts to achieve a test ban agreement had extended over eight years.” At this point, the visibility of the test site was transformed. Before the site’s intermittent invisibility was propagated through its absence from maps, its high security, and its constant cycle of appearance (during tests) and disappearance (after tests). Its testing operations were now to be carried out completely underground, masked underneath the cover of land. By 1962, 100 atmospheric (aboveground) tests had occurred. From the time the Limited Test Ban Treaty was signed until now, the Nevada Test Site has been host to more than 828 underground tests. These underground tests are far easier to ignore, due to their comparative infrequency and relative invisibility. Fallout is prevented with this testing model, but waste must still be disposed of responsibly. Suitable means for the long-term storage or disposal of such waste have yet to surface.

33 Ibid.
Particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States government has somewhat of an “opening” of its own.\textsuperscript{34} Although still far from being completely transparent about its actions during the Cold War, some revealing documents have been declassified and many projects and publications regarding nuclear testing have been released, including the recent \textit{Origins of the Nevada Test Site}, released by the United States Department of Energy in 2000. There is even a project based at the University of Nevada Las Vegas that has acquired partial funding from the government. The project aims to collect oral histories of people with diverse relationships to the

\textsuperscript{34} Glasnost and perestroika (which translate roughly to \textit{opening} and \textit{restructuring}) were policies of the Soviet administration under Mikhail Gorbachev, who held various positions in the Soviet Union from the mid-1980s (General Secretary of the Communist Party, Chairman, and President). These policies had a large role leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The actual “opening” that occurred is debatable, but I am using the word here to describe a pattern of releasing previously classified material that has emerged in the United States since the 1980s (for instance in the declassification of color photographs documenting the human effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). For more, see Edward Albert Hewett and Victor H. Winston, \textit{Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroyka: Politics and People} (Brookings Institution Press, 1991).
Nevada Test Site. Documentation of the tests is now widely available in the public domain, including images from inside the control room. Some of it remains classified. An in-depth evaluation of the continued impacts of nuclear testing as well as of the more contemporary issue of the myriad risks of nuclear energy has yet to surface.

**Lasting Impacts**

Half a century of nuclear testing on the land at the Nevada Test Site has made lasting impacts on the land, on the cultures that depended on it historically, on the politics during and after the nuclear age, and on communities locally and internationally. Sociologist Valerie Kuletz states “The most profoundly devastated area of the nuclear landscape—and perhaps of the earth—exists on the Nevada Test Site. Groundwater in some aquifers on the NTS is contaminated by tritium 3000 times in excess of safe drinking water standards, as well as by Plutonium and other radioactive isotopes. Since 1951, radioactive releases from the Nevada Test Site have emitted over 12 billion curries into the atmosphere.” A statement made by Congressional investigators also reads, “The greatest irony of our atmospheric nuclear testing program is that the only victims of United States nuclear arms since WWII has been our own people.”

Using the land on the Nevada Test Site as a laboratory has resulted in its drastic transformation. It is now marked by the hundreds of tests it endured and dusted with radioactive fallout. Many people with diverse relationships to this site, whether direct or indirect, have also been physically or symbolically dusted with the same fallout.

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37 Ibid., 94.
38 It is important to note that this is not true. The Marshall Islanders are still suffering tremendously from the impact of testing in the Pacific. Furthermore, the United States has assisted many nation-states in the acquisition of nuclear materials.
39 Kuletz, “Geographies of Sacrifice - Nuclear Landscapes and Their Social Consequences,” 83.
A view of the Nevada Test Site from Yucca Flat. Photo credit: National Nuclear Security Administration / Nevada Site Office.

“Mapping the nuclear landscape is a political practice of seeing ... making visible the landscape itself.”40

Conclusions

As Solnit, among others, has noted, one result of exposure to nuclear fallout is the breakdown of genetic coding in cells. The cells essentially “lose their memories” due to their exposure to radioactivity. The spectacle of nuclear testing seems to have had a similar effect on the minds of humans, the beauty of the strange clouds helping them to forget the details, the contents of the clouds, and their intended uses.41

40 Ibid., 183.
41 See Solnit, Savage Dreams, 6-7: “Radiation can make cells lose their memory, and loss of memory seems to be one of the cultural effects of the bombs too....”
In *The Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari proposes that in order to escape and supersede the systems we are entwined within—the society of the spectacle, commodity fetishism, and so forth—we must learn to look and interact with our worlds through three lenses, or three ecologies: social ecology, mental ecology, environmental ecology.\(^4\) This would result in: (1) a defense against the effect of market forces on bodies; (2) a denial of “sedative discourse” (such as homogenized news composed of hypnotizing spectacles); (3) refocusing on starting small (at the level of dust); (4) an active denial of the idea of “pseudo eternity” (the inability to change the world); and (5) valuing memory and utilizing it practically.\(^4\)

Guattari’s ideas can easily be applied beyond the Nevada Test Site and the nuclear age. I propose that by using the concepts within *The Three Ecologies*, we can encourage a reconstitution of how we interact with landscape and form defenses against the draw of the sublime spectacle. I would encourage a turn toward the society of the banal, or the anti-spectacle, and toward a society of the three ecologies, toward attention to detail, and toward creative and active rather than sedative discourse. The desire to look can be refocused toward a desire to do.

\(^4\) Ibid. (Here I have expanded ideas present in Guattari’s work).
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