

Inna Sukhenko

Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism in US Nuclear Fiction: James Reich's *Bombshell*

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Abstract: This paper studies the phenomenon of fictionalizing terrorism as a literary response to the violence paradigm within nuclear narrative from the perspective of nuclear awareness formation as a critical thinking product about the nuclear energy related issues within the Nuclear Anthropocene. Focusing on James Reich's *Bombshell* (2013), the paper goes beyond literary critical analysis of exploring the ways of fictionalizing the sociopolitical and psychic motives and ideas behind an act of terrorism. The paper highlights the factual component of the literary figurations of terrorism and terrorist activities in nuclear fiction, which is regarded here not only as a factor of weakening the apocalyptic rhetoric of nuclear narrative by transforming its "fabulously textual" nature, but mainly as a trigger of shaping public awareness and knowledge management on nuclear history and nuclear industry with a view to considering the possible patters of nuclear terrorism within the contemporary nuclear agenda.

Keywords: nuclear fiction, nuclear narrative, terrorist narrative, nuclear terrorism, nuclear awareness, James Reich, *Bombshell*.

"Fiction holds more promise for the understanding of the terrorist phenomenon than political science but some words of caution are nevertheless required" (Laqueur 15)

Introduction

In Frank and Gruber's *Literature and Terrorism* (2014), the literary aspects of narrativizing terrorism and fictionalizing "terror" are regarded as a specific contribution of fiction to the understanding of terrorism due to said fiction's "capacity to narrativize terrorism" (Frank and Gruber 15). Such an approach to the interconnection between terrorism and literature in the literary studies perspective (Frank and Gruber 12-14) falls within the umbrella term of Critical Terrorism Studies, exploring the approaches to studying terrorism and terror-related issues as a social and political construct.

In his research on the singularity of "terrorist narrative," first mentioned in his *Spelling It Out: Narrative Typologies of Terror* (2004), Anthony Kubiak distinguishes three types of "terrorist narratives": "the writing of terrorist groups themselves, in which groups formulate their political, religious or ideological agenda, call for the violence, and prepare the individual members for the execution of terrorist acts," "narratives about terrorism: those including fictional explorations of terrorism, critical studies of such fiction, as well as other academic literature, related to the topic of terrorism," and "those forms of writing that we might, in the spirit of our excess, describe as narrative terrorism: attempts to destabilize narrativity itself—disrupting linearity, temporality, plot, character or whatever conventions may be regarded as essential to the production of stories, memories, dramas, or histories" (Kubiak 295-297).

With reference to Kubiak's typology of terror-related narratives, this paper focuses on studying a narrative about terrorism, a variant of "a terrorist novel" (Blessington 116), by referring to the fictional exploration of the causes, motivations and aftermath of the terrorist attacks in nuclear fiction. According to Laqueur, terrorist fiction does not provide a comprehensive coverage of the terrorist's causes and motivations, as well as psychological understanding, but can represent a set of common patterns of the terrorist attacks and terrorists' behaviors in their fictional figurations. A "great deal can be learned about terrorism from contemporary fiction, provided these books, plays and films... are not regarded as manuals for the study of terrorism, aspiring to photographic exactitude and universal applicability" (Laqueur 38).

On the other hand, the purpose of terrorist attacks is to challenge the established order of the society by affecting people's lives. If terrorism-related activities, including terrorist attacks, bring to life a literary work as a literary imagining of such events, this step implies that terrorism inevitably influences the readers as well as writers via a literary response to the terrorist events—"it compels that literary creation to challenge the established order" (Banica 538) via fictionalizing terrorism.

This paper goes beyond literary critical analysis of exploring the ways of fictionalizing the motives and ideas behind the sociopolitical, emotional and psychic reasons for acts of terrorism and studying the ways of literary figurations of terrorism and terrorist activities in fiction. It rather aims to cover other aspects of terrorist fiction, or nuclear fiction in this case: the appeal to the factual component in the fictional considerations of terrorist activities via the introduction of local details reveals the global, internationalized nature of nuclear terrorism with a view to filling the gaps of the unknown spots of nuclear history of humanity and predicting possible patterns of nuclear terrorism-related issues.

The paper emphasizes the aspect of fictionalizing terrorism, nuclear terrorism in particular, as a literary response to the violence paradigm within nuclear narrative, as a contribution to nuclear awareness (Barash), regarded as a critical thinking product about the nuclear history of humanity, the nature of nuclear energy, the nuclear industry, nuclear threats and nuclear culture ("Global Nuclear Awareness Program"). Such focus on researching contemporary nuclear fiction via studying the ways of fictionalizing nuclear terrorism encourages the perspective on nuclear fiction as an archive of the Nuclear Anthropocene which not only weakens the apocalyptic rhetoric of nuclear narrative but also triggers public awareness and education about the threats posed to humanity by nuclear terrorism-related issues within the multidisciplinary debates on nuclear power risks, challenges, and perspectives as a response of the contemporary society to the nuclear agenda.

James Reich: On Writing Experience

It is *Bombshell* (2013) by James Reich which is the focus of the current study. James Reich is a novelist, born in Stroud, England, in 1971, and a resident of the United States since 2009. He completed a Master's Degree in Ecopsychology at Naropa University, and teaches Creative Writing and Literature at the New Mexico School for the Arts. He is the former chair of Creative Writing and Literature Program at the

Santa Fe University of Art and Design. In his interview for *The Huffington Post* Reich comments on his youth as follows:

I was politicized: 1984, living on Airstrip One, the C.N.D. and the Greenham Common protests, the anti-apartheid movement, Greenpeace, the miners' strike, and so forth. There's something vaudeville about it, so it's no wonder it winds up in rock opera or... black comedy. The things we do to ourselves! We're a suicidal crew with or without deities, but especially with them. (Browning)

He is the author of the novels *I, Judas* (2011), *Bombshell* (2013), *Mistah Kurtz! A Prelude to Heart of Darkness* (2016), *Soft Invasions* (2017), and *The Song My Enemies Sing* (2018), published by Anti-Oedipus Press and Soft Skull Press. Reich's name was mentioned in the New Wave of British science fiction, published by Bloomsbury Publishing's Decades series: The 1960s. His work has been published by *Salon*, *The Believer*, *The Rumpus*, *Entropy*, *Sensitive Skin*, *International Times*, as well as was included in Akashic's Noir series, *Sensitive Skin's Selected Writing 2016-2018*, and issues of *Deep Ends: The J.G. Ballard Anthology*.

In his interview given to *The Huffing Post*, James Reich identifies himself as "a working class English writer, [whose] living in the United States for the past five years has only amplified... [his] identification with—to borrow from Mark E. Smith—prole art threat" as well as mentions those influencing his writing style: "I find so much to admire in Christopher Hitchens... Brilliant as he was, there was plenty of the toff in Hitchens that I think endeared him to the American scene. For me, Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play, and his descendent Jimmy Cooper in *Quadrophenia* are as vital to me as Hamlet" (Browning).

James Reich is also an experimental/post-punk musician, his film work includes improvised guitar soundtracks for independent productions, notably by Todd Verow and Jon Moritsugu and Amy Davis. He is also the founder and publishing editor of Stalking Horse Press (Meisler). He is married to his creative partner Hannah Levbarg, with whom he formed the band Venus Bogardus, named after a character created by lesbian pulp fiction pioneer Ann Bannon.

Narrating Nuclear Terror in Reich's *Bombshell*

Published after *I, Judas* (2011), his novel *Bombshell* (2013) is the second to be published by Soft Skull Press. Literary critics vary in their reception of this piece: from "a cautionary tale well told, offered up by a passionate and supremely gifted new author" (McNeill) and "a visionary story, beautiful language and an unforgettable, emotionally resilient and iron-tough heroine, in this politically charged, indelibly smart, wild and electrifying powerhouse of a book" (Rapp), to a tendency to consider the novel as "a feminist anti-nuclear thriller" (Browning), which is "a counterculture tale of revenge" (Lippincott) and "a combustible and commercial step forward by one of our most creative and intellectual writers" (Review of *Bombshell*), who "explodes nuclear tourism and genre archetypes" (Stallings).

Residing in New Mexico influenced Reich's perspective on the region, which he defines as a "cradle of the Bomb" (Stallings) in one of his interviews, explaining his

reference to nuclear energy-related ideas: “Finding myself in New Mexico... is a kind of necessary existential perversity... I love New Mexico, but in terms of *Bombshell*, that violent fury that Cash [the novel’s protagonist] brings against the nuclear industry is, in essence, my own” (Stallings). This perspective allows the writer to represent the contemporary nuclear agenda through the narrativization of his own experience under the influence of the nuclear image of the region, famous for nuclear localities and their role in the nuclear history of the country.

The storyline of Reich’s *Bombshell* covers a trip of the novel’s protagonist—Varyushka Cash, a 25-year-old woman, born in the vicinity of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, located in the former Soviet Ukraine, three weeks before the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and now dying of thyroid cancer—across the United States from the Trinity bomb site, New Mexico (“Trinity Site”) to the Hudson River, New York. She is chased by Robert Dresner, a CIA agent, after her failed attempt to explode the White Sands National Monument at the Trinity site, declared as a U.S. National Park, and her being charged by the police for domestic terrorism actions. Cash intends to get to the Indian Point nuclear power plant on the bank of the Hudson River to make an attempt to explode it as part of her personal guerrilla war against nuclear energy and nuclear industry in particular.

By her message, left at the site of her unsuccessful terrorist attack at the Trinity site, Cash gives her chasers a chance to clarify the features of her personality: “What we know, from the manifesto at the original scene, is that the terrorist is a self-identified alien, a non-citizen, probably a Communist, about twenty-five, an anti-nuclear militant” (Reich 55). The reason for her obsession with the nuclear energy field and nuclear-related issues, including the nuclear history of humanity, the US nuclear legacy and nuclear industry, can be explained by the impact of the nuclear on her personal life. In introducing the protagonist’s biographical details the writer underlines her close connection to nuclear history by commenting on the protagonist’s childhood: “Cash had been stolen away from the land of the Soviets almost twenty-five years ago. She ached for her dead abandoned city, for her transplanted youth” (Reich 19). The unclear moments of her birth and her childhood make the protagonist relate her birth with the nuclear industry which, in her opinion, can clarify her family story and encourage her own search for identity: “she took the infant identity bracelet that had been hers at the hospital in Pripjat from its hanging place around her neck, with the shard of radioactive trinitite that was almost the same green hue as the statuesque woman in the fog” (Reich 167). Cash tries to strike a balance between referring to her mysterious Soviet birth—“nightmarish images of her own birth had come to her more frequently” (Reich 7)—and looking for her place in the American society:

It was for only a matter of days after her birth, under the glittering smoke and contamination of Pripjat, that she had ever been a Russian-Ukrainian girl named Varyushka. Her name was derived from varvara, meaning “foreigner,” and “barbarian.” She had been cut off. (Reich 19)

Kristen Valentine, a literary critic, comments on the title of Reich’s novel by reading the meaning of bombshell as referring to an explosive, a shocker, or a femme fatale, and highlighting that James Reich’s *Bombshell* is “a fierce tirade of a novel that happens to

be about all three” (Valentine), where Cash, a Soviet-born American feminist terrorist, is becoming extremely enthusiastic in launching her violent struggle against the US nuclear industry.

Reich's *Bombshell* and Feminism

Defined as a feminist nuclear thriller (Review of *Bombshell*), Reich's *Bombshell* emphasizes the issues of nuclear terrorism by involving its readers in the field of anti-nuclear activities with references to the Manhattan Project, the Trinity site obelisk, feminism, Valerie Solanas, the Cold war, the Sex war, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Chernobyl, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jane Fonda, Helene Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Yoko Ono, etc., which all together appear as an amalgamation of feminism-based anti-nuclear actions. It is Valerie Solanas and her 1965 *SCUM Manifesto* (its title an acronym for *Society for Cutting Up Men*), accusing men of corrupting all human institutions and encouraging the idea of annihilating all men “so as to get away from any form of sexual subservience” (Solomon) that shaped the ideological background for “a former stripper and member of a now-disbanded radical feminist gang” (DePascal) in her anti-nuclear terroristic activities.

Reich provides the background of Cash's terrorist plans by stressing the feminism-slanted environment of her youth, with its struggle against the men-ruled society which “could not afford an intellectual class of women” (Reich 21). In Cash's case, these feminist ideas, stemming from her fascination with Valerie Solanas's SCUM, “which is based on mutation and violence” (Reich 41), coincide with Cash's huge desire to fight against her sickness, visible in her intention “to remake her flesh, to violate the soft atomic code of her skin” (Reich 41). Against the background of searching for her identity and struggling for her health, Varyushka Cash finds nuclear industry to be the embodiment of contemporary evil and her own enemy by announcing “the opening of her war on the nuclear industry—Cash told herself that she was performing acts of corrective sabotage” (Reich 19).

Summarizing brief details of her unclear birth, the teenager's encounters with the US nuclear legacy and her approaching death of thyroid cancer, Cash is becoming strong in her anti-nuclear steps: “Whenever she thought of the past, the nodes of history came with a neat, perverse rhythm. The clean succession and collisions of dates informed her that her assault on the nuclear industry was inevitable, fatal” (Reich 20). Resulting from the combination of her search for identity and her feminist ideas, the realization of the frames of her further actions encourages Cash's dedication for her personal anti-nuclear terrorist movement: “Now she would haunt the atomic industry even as it haunted her” (Reich 93). In Cash's view, it is “the sons of the nuclear industry” (Reich 110) who not only murdered the Earth and continue to devastate the world but who also stole her childhood, her health, her history, her identity and caused her current alienation:

She thought of the men who had worked on the Manhattan Project, developing the most devastating weapon in history. How could they work, suspending what nightmares must have troubled them? These men razed Hiroshima, Nagasaki, sent waves of death over Japan, and set their glittering sword of Damocles over

every city of the world, forever.... The site of her birth had become a place of terror that teenage boys visited in video games. She was a shadow, an alien remnant, as though she had exploded like a monster from that new womb that men had made. (Reich 19-20)

It is the men-ruled nuclear industry, causing “a virtuality of her blood and skin” (Reich 20), that should be the aim of her war of terror—“a glare that men cannot meet directly” (Reich 21).

The cross point of Cash’s search for identity and her anger towards the men-ruled nuclear industry can be represented in her attitude to Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb. In her attempt to match the flashing memories of her early childhood and her parents, Cash constantly refers to Oppenheimer’s image: “She tried to envision her father, as he must have been in the Soviet Union before she was born. She did not know his name. She did not know her mother’s name. Absent any photographs, she thought of her father as resembling Robert Oppenheimer” (Reich 19). Oppenheimer’s image appears to be the materialization of Cash’s anxiety and excitement for her father, who was involved in the Soviet nuclear industry program: “Superimposed over footage of unspeakable missile arrays, she saw Oppenheimer’s face in a strobe light, forming a rictus of disingenuous astonishment with his hair shining under the glare of television studio lamps” (Reich 19). But the failure of her attempts to envision her father, to find out her roots and to balance her personal search for identity results in the transformation of Oppenheimer’s image into the image of the Destructive man:

Cash recalled that when Robert Oppenheimer observed the first evil flowering of the atomic bomb over the New Mexico desert, he had at that moment taken for himself the person of Shiva, the Lord of Destruction. Sitting and drinking beneath the stars, Cash envisioned Oppenheimer running a hand across his unshaven jaw, flicking sweat into the sand from his death-tainted fingertips. (Reich 19)

Amalgamating Oppenheimer’s image and her father’s work at the Chernobyl NPP before the Chernobyl disaster, the novel’s protagonist Varyushka Cash distinguishes the frames of her identity within her Soviet nuclear past and her American nuclear future. Such an amalgamation of the entire image of her father, together with further transformations of Cash’s personal perspective on her father’s place within the nuclear energy field, are getting to be a factor shaping the background for her radical feminist position and anti-nuclear activity: “Men watched the rising of twin tides, feminism and communism, with profound anxiety. These two socializing instabilities threatened their privileges—a pair of precipitous dominoes, terrorizing them with psychic enslavement and physical impotence” (Reich 19). The cross point of Cash’s personal search and the societal nuclear agenda is implicated in Reich’s novel as Cash’s feminism-based terrorist activities, aimed at the men-ruled nuclear industry, which makes men the main agents of nuclear history, nuclear industry in particular, and the technology-driven society.

On the Factual Component in Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism

The literary reconsideration of nuclear terrorist activities in nuclear fiction is not only a significant contribution to critical terrorism studies but also a factor of transformation for nuclear narrative, which, according to Tamara Hundorova, while “being a textual category,” appeals mainly “not to reality, but to literature” (*Післячорнобильська бібліотека* 13, translation mine). With reference to the amalgamation of the factual and the fictional as a distinguishing feature of nuclear fiction, where “factual narrative is referential whereas fictional narrative has no reference” (Schaeffer 99), the introduction of the factual component into the fictional representation of nuclear-related events, regarded as a way of fictionalizing nuclear terrorism, diminishes the distinction between “the fact” and “the imagined event/virtual construction” (Derrida 20-31). Such poststructuralist perspective on the fact/fiction dichotomy outlines the problems of interaction of the factual and the fictional in fictional writing, where the factual component is used as a reference for an artistic interpretation of true events. Such an introduction of the factual component (real locations, dates, names, organizations, realia, etc.) into fictional works, on the one hand, creates the emotional and cognitive framing of the storyline, but on the other hand, it blurs the difference between “the fact” and “the imaged” by “the entry of virtuality into the real world,” according to Tamara Hundorova (*Транзитна культура* 384, translation mine).

Reich's *Bombshell* is a work of fiction, as the writer comments in his novel, clarifying that “names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental” (Reich ix). Nevertheless, his novel is abundant in factual details of the nuclear history of humanity, since the discovery of radioactivity, through the US nuclear past during the Cold War and its competition against the Soviet atomic science, resulting in the nuclear weapons race, till the current agenda of U.S. nuclear policy, as evidenced by the subsequent extracts:

Many of you in Washington, California, Arizona, Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maryland, New Jersey, and Connecticut are oblivious to the fact that you are playing the same game of Russian roulette with 104 aging nuclear reactors. You are betting on death chambers. Their disposal tanks and containment shafts are overflowing. Let's not be sentimental, New York: an incident at Fitzpatrick, Indian Point, Nine Mile Point, or Ginna would make 9/11 look like the snuffing of two birthday candles. (Reich 24)

...she found herself only an hour's walk away, south through Greenwich Village to Trinity Place, and the offices of the Winters Corporation. She began to feel the thousands of miles between Chernobyl and Manhattan unraveling behind her. (Reich 127)

As night fell, Cash rode her motorcycle north to Los Alamos. Her lips curled as she tracked through the dire names high on the ominous mesa skirted by Omega Road and split by Trinity Drive and decorated with the quaintly referential

Manhattan Loop. Nearby lay Oppenheimer Drive, Bikini Road, and Eniwetok Drive. (Reich 43)

These and other examples of introducing factual information on the US nuclear history into a fictional reconsideration of nuclear-related facts within Reich's *Bombshell* can demonstrate that the fictional and the factual components are so amalgamated in nuclear fiction that the factual component is getting to be the base for making the nuclear narrative a fictional one, resulting in the process of fictionalizing facts, where the factual component is a background for fictional storytelling, where literary techniques can twist factual information (Murthy 24) and erase the border between the factual and the fictional in the readers' perception of nuclear-related facts, with the possible risk of transforming a fictional narrative into a non-fictional one.

The factual component here is reconsidered by the writer by covering the nuclear past through the perspective of the protagonists' feelings and thoughts, with an attempt to digest the contemporary nuclear agenda from the position of the political, social and ecological dimensions. In their amalgamation, such components of emotionally colored "factual" parts in a personal (even individual) perception represent not only the historical and material context of the events but also provide the coverage of social and cultural components and clarify the public opinion on the nuclear event in its full picture. On the other hand, with its factual component as the background for fictionalizing nuclear history, the novel can be regarded as an archive of facts on the nuclear past and the nuclear present, as well as a tool for providing basic nuclear literacy information (e.g., nuclear technology, nuclear policy, nuclear risk behavior, etc.) for further construction of future nuclear scenarios.

Conclusion

Narrativizing terrorism in fiction can be regarded as a literary response of the contemporary society to the problem of terror, especially when nuclear terrorist issues are a subject of literary reconsideration in nuclear fiction. The literary analysis of James Reich's *Bombshell* from the perspective of nuclear awareness formation presupposes the function of nuclear fiction with its fictionalization of the factual as a means of nuclear knowledge management towards framing the basic competences of nuclear literacy as well as energy literacy in general. Through unveiling the causes and motivations of nuclear terrorist activities and through depicting the features of the protagonist's psychological portrait, such an approach to literary figurations of feminism-based nuclear terrorism as present in Reich's novel does not challenge the established order of the society, but contributes to the readers' literacy on the nuclear history of humanity within the Nuclear Anthropocene. Via researching the factors that shape the terrorism-slanted behavior of the novel's protagonist the novel provides the readers with an abundant range of factual information about the nature of nuclear energy, the risks, advantages, and challenges of nuclear industry, the US nuclear history, the Cold War, nuclear risk management, and the components of nuclear culture. Contrary to the approach of studying terrorist fiction from the perspective of "literary terrorism" (Kubiak 295), such a critical approach to the literary imaginings of nuclear terrorism in the aspect of

fictionalizing the factual from the position of knowledge management contributes to the readers' nuclear awareness formation as critical thinking skills in considering nuclear terrorism-related issues from the global agenda of energy humanities.

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