



Nuclear Fear: A History of Images

Spencer R. Weart

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Our thinking is inhabited by images-images of sometimes curious and overwhelming power. The mushroom cloud, weird rays that can transform the flesh, the twilight world following a nuclear war, the white city of the future, the brilliant but mad scientist who plots to destroy the world-all these images and more relate to nuclear energy, but that is not their only common bond. Decades before the first atom bomb exploded, a web of symbols with surprising linkages was fully formed in the public mind. The strange kinship of these symbols can be traced back, not only to medieval symbolism, but still deeper into experiences common to all of us.

This is a disturbing book: it shows that much of what we believe about nuclear energy is not based on facts, but on a complex tangle of imagery suffused with emotions and rooted in the distant past. *Nuclear Fear* is the first work to explore all the symbolism attached to nuclear bombs, and to civilian nuclear energy as well, employing the powerful tools of history as well as findings from psychology, sociology, and even anthropology. The story runs from the turn of the century to the present day, following the scientists and journalists, the filmmakers and novelists, the officials and politicians of many nations who shaped the way people think about nuclear devices. The author, a historian who also holds a Ph.D. in physics, has been able to separate genuine scientific knowledge about nuclear energy and radiation from the luxuriant mythology that obscures them. In revealing the history of nuclear imagery, Weart conveys the hopeful message that once we understand how this imagery has secretly influenced history and our own thinking, we can move on to a clearer view of the choices that confront our civilization.

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