



When Life Imitates Art

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MARSHA WEISIGER

when life imitates art

ON A DAY in late March 1979, when I arrived at the offices of Mountain West Research, where I worked as editor and technical writer, my boss greeted me with electrifying news. Our consulting firm had just drafted a socioeconomic history of the Three Mile Island (TMI) Nuclear Station, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and now our client, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, was asking for new research into the economic and social effects of an accident at the plant.¹ Beginning in the wee hours of March 28, a series of equipment malfunctions and operator errors had exposed and destroyed much of the reactor core in Unit 2, leading to a small hydrogen explosion within the containment structure and, later, the venting of low-level radioactive gas into the atmosphere. What made the accident most astonishing was its timing: less than two weeks earlier, *The China Syndrome* had premiered, narrating the story of an eerily similar near-meltdown at the fictional Ventana Nuclear Plant. My first thought on hearing of the TMI accident was that someone had sabotaged the plant to make life imitate art, for I knew from our just-completed study that security there was notoriously lax. Three years earlier, a disgruntled employee had breached security undetected, and only six months previously, a local political official whose boat had broken down nearby had scrambled over the perimeter fence and shouted for help for some time before security guards noticed him. It seemed entirely plausible to me that a saboteur might have triggered the event to make a point.

That fear also crossed the mind of the film's director, James Bridges. He worried that some would see the accident as a twisted publicity stunt. Accordingly, two of the film's stars, Michael Douglas and Jack Lemmon, an outspoken critic of nuclear power, cancelled publicity appearances, unwilling to capitalize on catastrophe. Only Jane Fonda took advantage of the "shocking synchronicity" and went on a national tour with her husband, Tom Hayden, to promote energy alternatives and their Campaign for Economic Democracy.²

A thriller, the *China Syndrome* told the story of a television news crew that—while shooting a fluff piece promoting the nuclear power industry—accidentally witnesses an alarming crisis in the control room. Unbeknownst to plant officials, cameraman Richard Adams (Douglas) films the entire scene. When he and reporter Kimberly Wells (Fonda) show the film to a physicist and a nuclear engineer, they learn that the plant probably experienced a close call, one that might have nearly exposed the reactor core, precursor to the "China Syndrome." As the physicist explains, if exposed, the core would melt, within a matter of minutes, through the bottom of the plant and downward "theoretically to China." But, in actuality, the scientist continues, once the molten core hit groundwater, it would explode into the air, spewing clouds of radioactivity. "The number of people killed would depend on which way the wind is blowing," he somberly



© Columbia Pictures Corporation. Courtesy Columbia Pictures Corporation/Photofest.

Jack Lemmon, Michael Douglas, and Jane Fonda in a publicity photograph for *The China Syndrome* (1979) directed by James Bridges.

intones, “rendering an area the size of Pennsylvania permanently uninhabitable.” Such a sequence of events, in truth, has never happened, even at Chernobyl. But when I saw the film the weekend after the accident near Harrisburg, this line sent a chill down my spine.

The sense of *déjà vu* continued. As the news crew realizes they have stumbled on an important story, the plant’s conscientious control-room operator, Jack Godell (Lemmon) begins his own investigation, troubled by a tremor during the accident. Discovering that the safety inspections were falsified, he teams up with Wells and Adams to publicize his concerns before the reactor is brought back on-line and a second plant, built by the same shoddy contractor, is licensed. But as a third member of the news crew, Hector Salas (Daniel Valdez), brings the evidence of phony inspections to a licensing hearing, company goons run him off the road in a scene that purposefully evokes the suspicious death of Karen Silkwood, whose car crashed while en route to a meeting with a *New York Times* reporter with evidence of safety violations at the Kerr-McGee plutonium plant in Crescent, Oklahoma. Just as Silkwood’s documentation vanished, so does Godell’s.

From here, the film devolves into a typical disaster flick. An armed and desperate Godell holds the plant hostage, demanding a televised forum. Company officials plot to shut the plant down and in the process nearly trigger a meltdown, and an encounter between Godell and a SWAT team ends lethally.

Critics of the film denounced it for its sensationalism. Supporters of the nuclear power industry argued that various technical inaccuracies regarding the design of the plant and its control room, the portrayal of corporations more concerned with image and the bottom line, and the picture of a negligent Nuclear Regulatory Commission were grossly misleading.³ In real life, the NRC launched

a thorough investigation of the TMI plant, suspending the license for its other reactor for six years. Some of those sympathetic to the anti-nuclear movement also criticized the film for exalting the news media instead of grass-roots activists and for focusing on a catastrophe—one that is, in the end, narrowly averted by a redundant back-up system—rather than on the real, on-going threats of low-level radiation and long-term nuclear waste storage.⁴

These are valid complaints, and yet they ignore an essential verisimilitude. Three nuclear engineers who resigned in protest over safety concerns from General Electric served as technical consultants, ensuring a degree of realism. Moreover, the brief shots of anti-nuclear protests (featuring actual activists), which some felt trivialized the movement, rang true to me. In one scene, activists tie gags over their mouths to protest the very real prohibition against raising certain unresolved problems, such as the long-term storage of spent fuel rods, at licensing hearings. I knew from my work for the NRC that public input at those hearings was highly constrained. Most important, the sequence of events in the fictional and real-life accidents was shockingly similar. In both, indicator lights and gauges led operators to believe that open valves were closed and that low water levels in the containment vessel were high. Pumps shook violently. Operators dismissed an explosion as a normal thud. The main difference was that the real accident proved much worse than the fictional one.⁵

The timing of the Three Mile Island accident, of course, changed the public's response to the film. Audiences likely would have viewed it as just another disaster flick, until the accident at TMI gave it credibility. The film became a political event, energizing the anti-nuclear movement, even as the nuclear power industry rushed to denounce it as inaccurate and exaggerated. It was the accident itself, of course, that damaged the industry, but the film helped fuel the anti-nuclear debate by encouraging the public to imagine the worst-case scenario. Art foreshadowed life all too well.

Marsha Weisiger is assistant professor of history at New Mexico State University. Her book *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* is to be published by the University of Washington Press.

NOTES

1. Cynthia B. Flynn and James A. Chalmers, *The Social and Economic Effects of the Accident at Three Mile Island: Findings to Date*, NUREG/CR-1215 (Washington, DC: U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, 1980).
2. Jane Fonda, *My Life So Far* (New York: Random House, 2005), 407-08.
3. Samuel McCracken, "The Harrisburg Syndrome," *Commentary* 67 (1979): 27-39.
4. See, for example, Michael Gallantz, "The *China Syndrome*: Meltdown in Hollywood," and Doug Zwick, "The *China Syndrome*, the Genre Syndrome," both in *Jump Cut* 22 (1980): 3-6.
5. For a thorough analysis of the accident and its aftermath, see J. Samuel Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); for a concise timeline of the accident, see the teachers' guide to the *American Experience* documentary, "Meltdown at Three Mile Island," at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/three/sfeature/tmiwhattxt.html.