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The Binding of Abraham: Inverting the Akedah in Fail-Safe and WarGames

Abstract

This article draws upon Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death* to trace how two exemplars of atomic bomb cinema reinterpret the Binding of Isaac (*Akedah*). Released during the twin peaks of Cold War tension, *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *WarGames* (1983) invert the *Akedah* of Genesis 22. In both films, an act of sacrificial patricide accompanies or replaces the sacrifice of an Isaac-like son. When viewed in the context of Cold War cultural politics—events such as Norman Morrison's Abrahamic self-immolation and Kent State's rejection of George Segal's sacrificial memorial—the inverted *Akedah* emerges as a subversive reflection of its traditional form. If, as some scholars argue, the traditional *Akedah* has been used during wartime to justify sacrificial filicide and further nationalist fervour, its inversion becomes a trope of resistance and protest against the intergenerational annihilation of global nuclear war.

Keywords

Fail-Safe, WarGames, Cold War Cinema, Atomic Bomb Cinema, Akedah, Aqedah, Genesis 22, Sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac, Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard, Derrida, The Gift of Death, Norman Morrison, George Segal

Author Notes

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Released during the twin peaks of Cold War tension, *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *WarGames* (1983) reinterpret the Binding of Isaac, also known as the *Akedah*. In both films, an act of sacrificial patricide accompanies or replaces the sacrifice of an Isaac-like son. This inversion has philosophical precedent in Søren Kierkegaard's and Jacques Derrida's readings of the *Akedah*, which map onto a certain strand of Hasidic interpretation. When viewed in the context of Cold War cultural politics—events such as Norman Morrison's Abrahamic self-immolation and Kent State's rejection of George Segal's sacrificial memorial—the inverted *Akedah* emerges as a subversive reflection of its traditional form. If, as some scholars argue¹, the traditional *Akedah* has been used during wartime to justify sacrificial filicide and further nationalist fervour, the inverted *Akedah* becomes a trope of resistance and protest against the intergenerational annihilation of global nuclear war. The poised nuclear warhead comes to symbolize the Cold War's suspended knife of Abraham: waiting in vain for human, rather than angelic, intervention.

The Sacrifice of Abraham

The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-13) is well known for its brevity and narrative silence, leading Erich Auerbach to claim that “the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process

which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead.”² On their journey to Mount Moriah, Abraham and Isaac speak not a word—or at least not a word of their speech is recorded—and three days pass in the textual white space between Genesis 22:3-4. Arriving on Mount Moriah, Abraham builds an altar while Isaac unknowingly fetches the wood upon which he will be sacrificed. As Abraham raises his knife to “slay his son” for “burnt offering,” an angel intervenes and commands Abraham to “lay not thine hand upon the lad,” providing him instead with a ram for slaughter.

Perhaps the most enduring reading of The Binding of Isaac, with a considerable afterlife in literature, philosophy, and biblical exegesis, is Søren Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the *Akedah* in *Fear and Trembling*.³ Kierkegaard’s reading privileges Abraham over Isaac, who becomes “little more than a foil to Abraham’s ‘greatness’.”⁴ For Kierkegaard, Abraham is “a knight of faith,” who undergoes a “teleological suspension of the ethical” transcending both the aesthetic and the ethical, and moving into a supra-ethical religious order. To reckon with the totality of Kierkegaard’s sacrificial system is beyond the scope of this essay.⁵ I want to pursue only one question: is Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac also an act of self-sacrifice? That is, is there a way in which the privileging of Abraham over Isaac reverses itself, making Abraham a sacrificial victim as well?

Upon first reading, the answer is no. For Kierkegaard, self-sacrifice seems reserved for individuals functioning within the aesthetic and ethical phase.

Kierkegaard gives two examples of such self-sacrificial figures: Faust and “the tragic hero.” Faust—“an apostate of the spirit who goes the way of the flesh”—enacts self-sacrifice within the aesthetic order by remaining silent.⁶ “He remains silent in order to sacrifice himself.”⁷ Faust remains tormented by “the universal,” however, for the aesthetic— in its privileging of the particular over the universal— is an abasement of the ethical.⁸ Ascending one level in Kierkegaard’s tripartite schema, we find the tragic hero in the realm of the ethical. Whereas Faust sacrificed himself towards aesthetic ends, the tragic hero sacrifices himself out of dedication to a universal-ethical imperative. “The authentic tragic hero sacrifices himself and everything that is his for the universal; his act and every emotion in him belong to the universal; he is open, and in this disclosure he is the beloved son of ethics.”⁹ Unlike Faust, the tragic hero speaks, for “ethics demands disclosure.”¹⁰

Ascending a final level into the religious realm, Kierkegaard leads us to Abraham. Whereas Faust, the aesthetic hero, remained silent and privileged the particular over the universal, Abraham remains silent to avoid having to justify his actions, which would force him to fall back into the realm of ethical disclosure. “Abraham *cannot* speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable): that it is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation.”¹¹ Kierkegaard is clear that both the aesthetic and the ethical (tragic) hero engage in self-sacrifice, but it is not certain

whether or not Abraham engages in self-sacrifice—we know he is willing to sacrifice his son, but is this equivalent to sacrificing his own life as well? On one hand, in order for Abraham to stand in “an absolute relation to the absolute” it seems that he must remain a “particular” individual: he must escape self-sacrifice. “The genuine tragic hero sacrifices himself [...] This does not apply to Abraham.”¹² And yet, on the other hand, if Abraham were *to actually* sacrifice Isaac, whom he “loves with all his soul”—and as he will be forced to do in *Fail-Safe*—there is no way that he could escape intact. Kierkegaard offers a vision of such a figure in his discussion of doubt, where he describes an Abraham that “thrust[s] the knife into his own breast.”¹³

Jacques Derrida notices a similar underprivileged reading in *Fear and Trembling*, and argues, following the Hasidic interpretation¹⁴, that Kierkegaard’s Abraham would not be able to sacrifice Isaac without first sacrificing himself: “[...] the sacrifice of Abraham or of Isaac (and it is the sacrifice of both of them, it is the gift of death one makes to the other in putting *oneself* to death, mortifying oneself in order to make a gift of this death as a sacrificial offering to God).”¹⁵ For Derrida, Kierkegaard’s Abraham sentences himself to death at the very moment he resolves to sacrifice Isaac. “The unconditionality of respect for the law also dictates a sacrifice (*Aufopferung*) which is always a sacrifice of self.”¹⁶ By privileging the law (of God, of the State, of Reason) over his particular symbolic order, Abraham inflicts the most severe suffering upon himself by

putting to death his particular desires and beliefs, as well as his commitment to a universal and ethical imperative. Some biblical scholars take this argument even further to argue that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac would not only result in the sacrifice of Isaac's father Abraham, but the ultimate sacrifice of God the Father, as a life-giver and protector.¹⁷

It must finally be noted that, for many scholars, the *Akedah* is read as directly prefiguring the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. These interpreters argue the biblical notation that "Abraham then returned" after the sacrifice, without mention of Isaac, implies that Isaac was indeed sacrificed, "resurrected and returned to earth."¹⁸ In this reading, the *Akedah* serves as a bridge between the Jewish and Christian faiths— for, as one scholar argues, "the Christian doctrine, 'Christ died for our sins' has a Jewish counterpart: 'Abraham offered Isaac for our blessing.'"¹⁹ This connection between Isaac and Christ will be especially important for my reading of *WarGames*, which blends messianic imagery with the inverted *Akedah*.

Two Conflicting Orders

When *Fail-Safe* was released in 1964, atomic anxiety was building to an all time high. During the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), when the United States and the Soviet Union almost exchanged nuclear volleys, the American

artistic imagination became saturated with images of mutually assured destruction (MAD). As Jerome Shapiro notes, the apex of cinematic anxiety came in 1966, when more atomic bomb films were created than in any other year during the Cold War.²⁰ This anxiety was not without cause. With the Vietnam War's series of bloody climaxes in 1965, the possibility of the Cold War turning hot preoccupied television screens. "That year, 1965, was the maddest of them all," writes Adam Piette in his study of the "literary" Cold War, "the war's escalation, the imagining of incendiary violence, the horror of the news and reels drove Vietnam deep into the heart of the homeland's dream of itself."²¹ In the midst of this madness, we find a cultural preoccupation with narratives of self-sacrifice.²²

In November of 1965, Norman Morrison, a leader of Baltimore's Quaker community, lit himself on fire in front of the Pentagon. Inspired by the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in 1963, Morrison's politically-motivated act threatened to become more than a suicide. He held his one-year-old daughter, Emily, releasing her only at the last possible moment. As his wife Anne remembers:

[Morrison's action were] reminiscent of Abraham's taking his beloved Isaac up to the sacrificial altar in an unreasonable, unconventional act of faith (as Norman had once called it) before an angel intervened and saved Isaac. [...] Emily's presence became a symbol of the many precious Vietnamese children who were victims, if not targets, of the war.²³

Anne's invocation of the *Akedah* is not a metaphor happened upon by chance. "Like Abraham, I dare not go without my child," Morrison writes in a letter left to her on the day of his suicide.²⁴ Instead of offering his child as a "burnt offering," he offers up himself. Curiously, Morrison's interpretation of the *Akedah* inverts the sacrificial narrative in a way similar to the narratives we will trace in *Fail-Safe* and *WarGames*. The threat is not that Morrison will sacrifice Emily and escape with his life, but rather, that father and daughter will be sacrificed together in the same consumptive fire.

To argue that the self-immolations of Vietnamese monks directly inspired *Fail-Safe*, or that *Fail-Safe* somehow supplied Morrison with inverted Abrahamic imagery, would be to reduce a complex web of relations to a facile causal chain. It seems, rather, that the tensions of the early 1960s Cold War— as enacted in the South-East Asian theater and elsewhere—partially manifested themselves through the latent social metaphor of Abrahamic sacrifice. As Yael Feldman argues in *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative*, "Apparently the rewriting of sacrificial narratives is part and parcel of the 'recovery' as Bernard Lewis puts it, of canonic narratives that have always accompanied the rise of nationalist fervour."²⁵ As other recent studies have shown, the *Akedah* became one of the canonic narratives recovered during the twentieth century.

Susan Mizruchi, in *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory*, identifies a group of fin de siècle novels that form "a

specific group of literary works” identified through “recurrent references to the story of Abraham and Isaac.”²⁶ Mizruchi traces how “conceptualizations of sacrifice,” specifically the *Akedah*, were coopted during “the dramatically unsettled turn of the century.” And—she argues in her afterword— “sacrifice endures” and “remains a fixture of [the United States’] national scene” far into the twentieth century.²⁷ Picking up where Mizruchi leaves off, Carol Delaney, in *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*, traces the transmission of the *Akedah* into the present day, arguing that the story has often been employed to justify nationalistic ends. “I wish only to draw attention to the relation between war and the values and structure of the Abraham story. In war, sons (and now daughters) are sacrificed for the ‘fatherland,’ even though it involves killing the sons and daughters of others.”²⁸ For Delaney, the fatherland becomes a surrogate, secular God, demanding sacrificial demonstrations of faith in the name of Feldman’s nationalist fervour. If, as Delaney argues, the *Akedah* has traditionally been used to justify the sacrifice of children in times of war, Morrison’s self-immolation becomes a radical gesture of civil disobedience.

We find a similar form of protest in *Fail-Safe*. Part of “a cycle of American anti-nuclear and anti-Cold War movies made in the early to mid-1960s,” *Fail-Safe* reveals its didacticism through its titular polysemy.²⁹ The film is about a squadron of US Vindicator bombers accidentally ordered by means of a computer glitch to proceed past its fail-safe point and bomb Moscow. In its

condemnation of an increasingly automated military, dependent upon increasingly complex technologies, the film is also an imperative statement about the need for such systems to *fail safely*.

In the film's final scene, despite cooperation between the President and the Soviet Chairman, one of the Vindicator bombers successfully evades the Soviet defence barrier and drops its warheads on Moscow. In order to prevent an all-out nuclear holocaust between the Soviet Union and the United States, the President orders his old school friend, Brigadier General Warren *Abraham* Black (more affectionately known as "Blackie"), to drop an equivalent atomic load on New York City as an act of equal exchange. Earlier in the film, the President hatched the plan as a fallback, as another form of fail-safe. Here I turn to Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's 1962 novel, upon which the film is based.

"Blackie" the President said, his voice quiet and firm. "Do you remember the story of Abraham in the Old Testament?" [...] "Blackie, keep the story of Abraham in mind for the next few hours," the President said. Then he paused. "Are Betty and the family in New York?" "Yes," Black said. A dread of premonition came over him.³⁰

On the surface, the President's allusion is fairly straightforward. Warren *Abraham* Black becomes an Abrahamic figure, sacrificing his wife and children—not to mention the rest of New York City—in order to prevent a full-scale nuclear war. Upon interrogation, however, the use of the *Akedah* seems to challenge this reading.

Both the novel and film begin with Blackie's nightmare. In the film, an overhead tracking shot of a bull running laps in a stadium suddenly slows to half-speed, as it turns to gaze upon the camera. The shot then cuts to a low-angle, close-up of a spectator we will come to know as Blackie, his face half-shadowed, the first instance of a Janus-like metaphor that will follow him throughout the film. Suddenly, a matador appears and begins the *tercio de banderillas*. The next sequence proceeds to cut back and forth between the bull and Blackie, who tries to avoid looking upon the scene before him. The continuity of angles—the bull looking upward at the camera followed by Blackie looking downward—creates a linkage between the subjectivity of the bull and Blackie, a connection further underscored by the implied causal connection between the bull's wounds and Blackie's flinching. As the bull bleeds out, a high-pitched, non-diegetic monotone suddenly overwhelms the audience's cheers. The same sound will be emitted from the President's phone when the U.S. ambassador to Moscow is hit by the Vindicator's bomb—letting the President know it is time to tell Blackie to perform his sacrifice. Finally, Blackie wakes at home; it was all a dream, soon to come true. "Sometime I am going to see that matador, find out who he is," he tells his wife. "When I do, that's it—that's the end of me."

Turning to the novel, we find that this hallucinogenic sequence has a textual precursor. "Black felt himself becoming the bull. It was done effortlessly. It was as if his body oozed like a fog into the shape of the bull. The familiar Black

dissolved, lost form and substance, slid into the body of the immense animal.”³¹

In both the cinematic and textual versions of *Fail-Safe*, Blackie sees himself as a sacrificial bull. When we remember that a ram appears in Genesis 22:13 for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son, Blackie’s identification with the bull complicates *Fail-Safe*’s use of the *Akedah*. Rather than sacrificing the collective—symbolized by the cheering, anonymous audience—as he will later be forced to do, Blackie is bewildered by the sounds of the crowd before whom he is about to die. “Now he was looking up at the audience, he was bewildered by the strange colors and sounds, he was swinging his head looking for the matador.”³² If Robert Abraham Black is simultaneously the Abrahamic father and the sacrificial ram, *Fail-Safe* calls for a revised reading of the *Akedah*.

Blackie’s mission is thematically preceded and causally engendered by Colonel Jack Grady’s bombing of Moscow. In Grady, we find the nightmarish twin of Abrahamic sacrifice—an Abraham who hears God’s first command, but not the second. Like Abraham, Grady receives two sequential and contradictory orders. Triggered by a mechanical failure, a command is sent to Grady ordering him to bomb Moscow. When the President is finally able to lift Soviet radio jamming and recall the order, it is too late: Grady has been instructed to disobey all further commands upon crossing into Soviet airspace. He refuses the President’s call to return home, as well as his wife’s desperate plea that “there’s no war!” Emmanuel Lévinas writes, with regards to Abraham’s two conflicting

orders: “That [Abraham] obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential.”³³ Grady’s character is an Abraham who lacks this “essential,” and serves as a structural foil for Blackie—who waits for a second call that never comes.

The final chapter of the novel—entitled “The Sacrifice of Abraham”—promises to resolve the initial scene’s ambiguities. If we are to read Blackie as a traditional Abrahamic figure, then his children, wife, and New York become stand-ins for Isaac; the President—who makes a secret pact with Blackie, ordering him to bomb New York without providing any spoken rationale—becomes a surrogate God, a synecdoche for what Delaney calls the transcendent authority of the State. And yet, the ending of *Fail-Safe* inverts the *Akedah* by rewriting Abraham’s sacrifice as an act of self-sacrifice. In the film, after the President gives Blackie the order to drop his bombs, the scene cuts to a profile shot of Blackie in the cockpit of his jet, wearing an oxygen mask. One is reminded of Roland Barthes’s 1957 essay on the “The Jet-Man,” where he writes that “it is this submission [of the jet-man] which is offered as a sacrifice to the glamorous singularity of the inhuman condition [...] So truly does the situation of the *jet-man* comprise the sense of a religious call, that it is itself the reward of previous austerities.”³⁴ Blackie’s eyes are empty—bovine rather than bullish—filled with none of the fear or pain witnessed in the opening scene. He has heard his call—in

this case literally a call between his headset and the President's radio—and is ready to make his sacrifice. He answers the President's commands with a cool "yes sir." His calm composure becomes almost inhuman, blurring the distinctions between body and jet. Connected by tubes and belts they become one and the same: a fine-tuned assemblage for carrying out orders without question.

Invoking a silence similar to the Abrahamic silence that Kierkegaard dwells upon, Blackie tells his crew, "you have all been briefed on the mission so there is nothing left to say." After initiating a countdown, he drops the bomb, and injects himself with his suicide kit. As the poison takes effect and he begins convulsing, a lingering close-up profile shot records him calmly saying: "the dream! the matador! the matador! Me! Me!" In a moment of tragic *anagnorisis*, Blackie realizes that the faceless matador whom he has been seeking is, in fact, himself. Blackie is both bull and matador, sacrificer and sacrificed, victim and executioner. And it is here, in this moment, that the equivocality of the book chapter's title—"The Sacrifice of Abraham"—reveals itself. For *Fail-Safe* redescribes the *Akedah* as both a sacrifice *of* Abraham—that which Abraham sacrifices, his son, Isaac, his city, New York—and a sacrifice *of Abraham*—the self-annihilation of Abraham himself.

The Messiah and the Bomb

Between *Fail-Safe*'s 1964 release and *WarGames*'s 1983 release, American nuclear anxiety fell into a mostly dreamless sleep. Paul Boyer argues that this “long period of nuclear apathy and cultural neglect” was caused by a range of historical factors such as the illusion of diminished risk, the loss of immediacy, the utopic hopes of atomic energy, the complexity and comfort of deterrence theory, and the distraction of the Vietnam War.³⁵ It is important to remember just how much sacrifice this “distraction” entailed.

With the Kent State shootings in May 1970, the State's willingness to sacrifice its own sons and daughters came to the foreground. “The slaughter at Kent State was, one might say, a ritual enactment which laid bare one of the deepest desires of the elders of our tribe” writes Jon Corelis in 1980, “that the young should be bloodily sacrificed in war.”³⁶ It is not surprising, then, that the American sculptor George Segal—commissioned in 1978 to produce a commemorative sculpture—chose the *Akedah* as a visual metaphor for the incident. His statue, entitled “Abraham and Isaac: In Memory of May 4, 1970” depicts a bound and kneeling Isaac begging for mercy before a stoic, knife-wielding Abraham. Kent State rejected the statue, deeming it “inappropriate” and suggesting a sculpture of a partially nude woman pleading with a soldier instead, with the added insistence that the two figures be *of the same age*.³⁷ In their

attempt to efface the intergenerational violence at the heart of the shootings, the administrators of Kent State revealed that the tension inherent in the latent social metaphor of Abrahamic sacrifice was still active throughout the *détente* period of the Cold War.

When *WarGames* was released in 1983, a “new” Cold War had begun. With the swift destruction of *détente* in the early 1980s, the American atomic imagination awoke to a fresh set of anxieties. “After several decades in which scarcely anyone but a few indestructible peaceniks and the limited fraternity of arms-control specialists gave any sustained attention to the peril of nuclear destruction in war,” writes the president of the Rockefeller Foundation in March 1982, “it is being written about and talked about on every side.”³⁸ This anxiety was due, in part, to Reagan’s renewal of the arms race. Faced with an arms race they now couldn’t afford, the Soviet Union was forced to consider pre-emptive nuclear strike as a potential strategy.³⁹

Whereas in *Fail-Safe* a mechanical failure threatens to throw the world into global nuclear war, in *WarGames* it is the error of computer rationality itself that almost leads to doomsday.⁴⁰ David Lightman is a bored high-school student with access to an IMSAI 8080 microcomputer and too much time on his hands. One day, he stumbles upon the backdoor to NORAD’s WOPR (War Operation Plan Response) supercomputer. The computer—nicknamed “JOSHUA”—is full of “games” to teach strategy and simulate potential Cold War scenarios: chess,

checkers, backgammon, and Global Thermonuclear War. After beginning a game of GTW from his bedroom—a game which shows up on NORAD’s computers as a real Soviet threat—Lightman and his inamorata, Mack, track down Dr. Stephen Falken, the creator of JOSHUA and the only hope of stopping the US military from responding to what are only simulated Soviet attacks.

The “logic” behind JOSHUA’s thinking is the satirized logic of Herman Kahn, RAND’s controversial game theorist and the author of *On Thermonuclear War* (1960). Kahn, who calmly theorized about “tragic but distinguishable postwar states” and if there was “any plausible public policy which would justify ending life for everyone,” became a figurehead for Cold War strategic abstraction.⁴¹ His “level-headed” quantification strongly influenced *Fail-Safe*’s Dr. Groeteschele— a character who “spouts Kahn’s theories [...] almost verbatim.”⁴² Dr. Groeteschele’s connection to Kahn is most apparent during the opening party scene, in which the doctor advocates a utilitarian approach to the large-scale loss of human life. Here I quote the film.

“I say 60 million is perhaps the highest price we should be prepared to pay in a war.”

“What’s the difference between 60 million dead and 100 million?”

“40 million.”

“Some difference.”

“Are you prepared to say that the saving of 40 million lives is of no importance?”

“You miss the point, Professor. The saving of those 60 million lives is what’s important.”

As if directly responding to Dr. Groeteschele and his MAD logic, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's special assistant for national security, challenged the sanity of Kahn's mutually assured destruction, writing: "Think tank analysts can set levels of acceptable damage well up in the tens of millions of lives. They can assume that the loss of dozens of great cities is a real choice for a sane man. They are in an unreal world."⁴³ In *WarGames*, the logic of Kahn's unreal world becomes the logic of the hyper-rational, post-human machine. JOSHUA, whose primary objective is "to win the game," does not strategize towards human-determined ends; instead, it has learned how to learn, deciding that "success" means complete elimination of the enemy, no matter how pyrrhic the victory.⁴⁴ Frighteningly—as Dr. John McKittrick argues in an opening scene—if war were to occur, "the President will probably follow the computer war plan."

Like *Fail-Safe*, *WarGames* is also structured upon an inverted *Akedah*. Whereas *Fail-Safe* takes place before the symbolic death of Isaac, in *WarGames*, Isaac has already been sacrificed. When Lightman reaches Dr. Falken, it is revealed that Falken's son, Joshua—the child after whom JOSHUA was named—was killed in a car accident. Crippled by the loss, Falken lives an almost undead existence. Lightman soon recognizes Falken's death-in-life, exclaiming, "You don't care about death because you are already dead!" This theme is further redoubled by Falken's legal death. "So you gave up? Decided to play dead?" Lightman asks, with regard to Falken's disassociation from NORAD. The

professor replies: “for security reasons, they graciously arranged my death.” Like the undercurrent in Kierkegaard that we traced through Derrida in which the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Abraham are one and the same, the responsibility Falken feels for the death of Joshua engenders his own desire for self-sacrifice. Here we have a vision of Abraham’s life after the death of Isaac, a sacrifice that turned out to be accidental. And yet, while Falken’s human son is dead, JOSHUA—his technological progeny—lives on, keeping the memory of the late Joshua alive as an artificially-intelligent ghost in the machine. For Falken, the possibility that JOSHUA will annihilate him (and the rest of humankind) becomes a form of sacrificial redemption. “I’ve planned ahead,” he says; “We are just three miles from a primary target, a millisecond of brilliant light and we’re vaporized.” Calling the potential nuclear obliteration of Las Vegas, “a suitably biblical ending for the place,” Falken fantasizes that JOSHUA will destroy the world: the way the world destroyed his only son, Joshua.

The *mise-en-scène* further underscores this inversion of the *Akedah* comingled with the imagery of nuclear apocalypse. Giving the children an impromptu lecture on extinction, Dr. Falken stands in front of a projector screen, which alternately displays a Tyrannosaurus Rex slowly wandering across a burning background and a volcano exploding into a mushroom cloud. The extinction of the dinosaurs becomes visually and rhetorically equated with the extinction of the human race by nuclear apocalypse. “Extinction is part of the

natural order,” says Falken, while the scene cuts to a medium close-up shot of the children’s blank stares. David and Mack’s faces become surrogate screens for the projected flames’ reflection, as images of ash and rubble speckle their white flesh. Skeletal models of extinct dinosaurs physically crowd the frame, contrasting (and equating) the living children with the dead creatures. On the aural plane, Falken’s fireplace—shown in an establishing shot, but now off-screen—provides diegetic crackle and popping sounds that begin to verge on the non-diegetic, as they provide a realism and immediacy to the silent flames. The *Akedah*’s “burnt offerings” come to mind, as David and Mack become the potential collateral victims of Falken’s machine-assisted suicide. Falken’s death by JOSHUA would be more than self-sacrifice; it would be an act of sacrificial patricide—a completely inverted *Akedah*—Isaac sacrificing a willing Abraham, the machine turning back upon complicit man, its father and creator.

Before any of this can happen, however, Falken has an off-screen change of heart, deciding to help the children disarm JOSHUA. As David and Mack flee the professor’s home, they sit on a log and contemplate their impending death. “Oh Jesus,” whimpers Lightman, “I really wanted to learn how to swim. I swear to God I did.” Suddenly—as if answering Lightman’s invocation of Christ and God—a bright light appears in the sky, beaming down upon the children. The light is not an angel, however, come to stay the hand of the Abrahamic Falken; rather, it is Falken himself—a name conspicuously avian—swooping down in a

military-grade helicopter. Here we uncover the secularized reinterpretation of the *Akedah* at the center of the film. In *WarGames*—as in *Fail-Safe*— there is no Abrahamic angel preventing the sacrifice of the human collective. Rather, man must assume the role of both Abraham and angel—creator and overseer of nuclear technology.⁴⁵ Falken must stay his own hand by disarming JOSHUA to prevent the inverted *Akedah* from occurring, just as the President attempts to retract Grady's orders in *Fail-Safe*. This is not the first time that Falken is called upon to serve as the angel of *Akedah*. Earlier in the film, Lightman asks Falken to pick up the phone and stop the JOSHUA computer from initiating World War III. Falken's call to NORAD, like the angel's call to Abraham, would also be a second call. The first call to JOSHUA—a computer-to-computer telephone call—gave JOSHUA the order to sacrifice humankind by initiating a game of Global Thermonuclear War. Falken's second call would be a call to Cheyenne Mountain, NORAD's nuclear bunker in which JOSHUA is held, further paralleling the angel's "call" to Mount Moriah.

In the end, however, it is not Falken, but David Lightman who disarms JOSHUA, preventing global nuclear war. Initiating a game of tic-tac-toe with JOSHUA, in which the machine is forced to place itself, David exposes the irrationality that undergirds Herman Kahn's MAD logic. The machine rapidly cycles through all the possible permutations of tic-tac-toe, learning that stalemate is the only possible outcome in an ideal game. Applying this realization to Global

Thermonuclear Warfare, JOSHUA discovers McGeorge Bundy's lesson: a victory that requires mass-extinction is not a victory at all, but rather, a tragic stalemate.⁴⁶ Eventually the computer console goes black, as JOSHUA types out: "A STRANGE GAME. THE ONLY WINNING MOVE IS NOT TO PLAY."

By disarming JOSHUA and preventing global nuclear warfare and extinction, David Lightman makes good on his name and becomes a messianic man-of-light. Like Jesus Christ, named "the son of David, the son of Abraham" in Matthew 1, Lightman comes to represent the Davidic messiah prefigured in The Binding of Isaac. Edward Kessler has argued that "the sacrifice of Isaac is completed by Christ and the *Akedah* is a model of the future redemptive sacrifice of Christ."⁴⁷ In the final scene of *WarGames*, we see a similar completion, as David Lightman becomes a messianic stand-in for the Abrahamic Falken's deceased, Isaac-like son. After JOSHUA aborts its nuclear launch, Lightman, the child of an absent father, embraces Falken, the father of deceased son, symbolically leading the undead father back into the realm of the living. The celebratory soundtrack swells as the characters cheer and the credits roll. And yet, curiously, David Lightman is not sacrificed like Christ or Joshua; neither is the JOSHUA machine, Professor Falken, nor any other character. Instead, cloaked within the film's joyful ending, we find a note of warning—there has been no Christ-like sacrifice to redeem humanity, to "complete" the *Akedah*: the threat of global nuclear war is still very much alive. It comes as no surprise, then, that a

month after *WarGames* was released a group of young Milwaukee hackers accessed a Los Alamos nuclear weapons center computer, almost initiating a war game of their own.⁴⁸

By inverting the *Akedah*, both *Fail-Safe* and *WarGames* utilize the Old Testament narrative to protest the mass “sacrifice” of nuclear warfare. *Fail-Safe*, released in the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis, during the peak of U.S. nuclear weapons production, uses the inverted *Akedah* to reflect the changing methods of warfare in this historical period. No longer does war only trade in the sacrifice of sons: if the Cold War were to turn “hot,” Isaac and Abraham would both become sacrificial victims, just as Blackie and his family are vaporized together by the same nuclear warhead. Set during the “new” Cold War, *WarGames* updates *Fail-Safe*’s weapons technology by two decades, using the inverted *Akedah* as a moral warning against the JOSHUA machine’s unchecked, robotic automatism. In this inversion, the *Akedah* is redoubled by David Lightman, who becomes a messianic substitute for Dr. Falken’s sacrificed son, Joshua. Firmly entrenched within a shared secular universe, the films feature neither divine intervention, nor utopic, techno-rational progress. Instead of an angel’s hand, we find only a renewed call for technological oversight and international armistice in the face of potential global extinction.

¹ See the discussion of Yael Feldman, Susan Mizruchi and Carol Delaney to follow.

² Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10. For more on the interpretive and historical background of the *Akedah*, see John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 227-29. See also Jon Levenson, *The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 12-13.

³ Kierkegaard wrote *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, a name that foregrounds just how important silence is for Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham.

⁴ Hannay, *Fear and Trembling*, 7.

⁵ For an overview of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* see Andy F. Sanders, "Kierkegaard's Reading of the Sacrifice of Isaac" in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Akedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 166-182. For a more in-depth overview of the various issues at stake in *Fear and Trembling*, see Andy F. Sanders "Kierkegaard's Reading of the Sacrifice of Isaac" in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Akedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 166-182.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 107-8.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 110.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 112.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 113.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 87.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 115. One might want to compare Kant's antithetical reading in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, where he argues that an order as irrational as the one Abraham receives cannot have possibly come from God. "We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God — of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even is [read: if] this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven'" (115).

¹² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 137.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 101; 54. It must be noted that many scholars refuse to even consider an outcome where Isaac is sacrificed. Shalom Spiegel, for example, argues that "the Midrash again and still again emphasizes what is specifically reported in Scripture too, that Abraham was categorically and in no uncertain terms forbidden from heaven so much as to touch Isaac with evil intent, or to remove from him even one drop of blood" (*The Last Trial*, 46).

¹⁴ There is a tradition in Jewish Hasidic thought that parallels this underprivileged reading in Kierkegaard, arguing that sacrificial filicide is by necessity a form of self-sacrifice. The Hasidic tradition identifies Abraham with *Hesed* (literally “charity” or “kindness”). *Hesed* can also mean self-sacrifice, however, and helps to explain the double sacrifice that occurs in The Binding of Isaac. As Jerome Gellman notes, “*Hesed*, as an attribute of self-sacrifice, can paradoxically bring one to agree to the sacrifice of one’s own son, as long as that sacrifice is perceived of as a sacrifice of one’s own self.” Some Hasidic traditions even suggest that Abraham’s self-sacrifice *precedes* the sacrificial filicide. Gellman elaborates: “All of his dreams and hopes for the future are to ‘go up in smoke,’ rising heavenward in the burnt offering of Isaac. Abraham’s *self*-sacrifice demands the death of his own son” (Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham!*, 98.). To sacrifice Isaac is too much for Abraham, and—like Kierkegaard’s depiction—he must sacrifice himself as well.

¹⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 69. For more on Derrida and sacrifice, see Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 162-168.

¹⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 93.

¹⁷ For more on this exegetical strand, see John Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven, CT, Yale University: 1993), especially 130. Here Levenson draws a distinction between “a not inconsequential measure of faith—faith that the prophetic message is authentic and the God who authors it, reliable” and “empirical knowledge, in which the element of trust is of less importance, if it figures at all” (130). If Abraham were to actually sacrifice Isaac, Abraham’s faith in his own father as an authentic and reliable God of life would be sacrificed as well.

¹⁸ Berman, *The Akedah*, 19. For more on this reading, see Chapter 13 “The Martyrdom Interpretation.” See also Caspi, *Unbinding the Binding of Isaac*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Aharon Agu nuances this comparison in *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* when he writes, “The comparison of martyrdom to the *Akedah* is not meant to soften the starkness of martyrdom by referring it to a prototype experience whose intensity is always conceived of as greater (in the way that, for Christians, the cross of Jesus casts all future sufferings in the shade). On the contrary, the experience of the sons is no less intense than that of the fathers, and indeed in the tradition, Abraham’s experience acquires meaning as an anticipation of the future experience of Israel. Martyrdom partakes of *Akedah* in that they both result from divine necessity [...]” (38).

²⁰ Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, 14.

²¹ Piette, *The Literary Cold War*, 170.

²² Since the Cold War and the Vietnam War overlapped ideologically and historically, I will read cultural reactions to Vietnam as being part of a larger societal pushback against Cold War policy.

See Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), especially 11-30 and 61-76 for a justification of my hermeneutics.

²³ Quoted in Piette, *The Literary Cold War*, 169.

²⁴ Quoted in King, "They Who Burned Themselves for Peace," 31.

²⁵ Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 25.

²⁶ Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice*, 3.

²⁷ Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice*, 7; 369.

²⁸ Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, 248.

²⁹ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 143.

³⁰ Burdick and Wheeler, *Fail-Safe*, 68. For a nuanced description of this scenario, see "The Short-term Effects of Nuclear Attack" in P. Rogers, M. Dando, P. Van Den Dungen, *As Lambs to Slaughter: The Facts About Nuclear War* (London: Arrow Books, 1981), 127-148.

³¹ Burdick and Wheeler, *Fail-Safe*, 4.

³² Burdick and Wheeler, *Fail-Safe*, 7.

³³ Lévinas, *Proper Names*, 77.

³⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 72.

³⁵ Boyer, *By The Bomb's Early Light*, 358-9.

³⁶ Corelis, "Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare," 138.

³⁷ O'Hara, "Kent State/May 4 and Postwar Memory," 311.

³⁸ Quoted in Boyer, *By The Bomb's Early Light*, 361.

³⁹ Walker, *The Cold War*, 267.

⁴⁰ This mutual distrust of "fail-safe" systems is what binds the two films together, argues Emily Auger in *Tech-noir Film: A Theory of the Development of Popular Genres*. "The plot of *WarGames*, like that of *Fail-Safe* (1964), derives from an imminent thermonuclear war controlled by machines that cannot be stopped because people have been cut out of the protocols. *WarGames* picks up where someone refuses to put the last button before detonation without confirmation from another human being: had such a failsafe been in place in the earlier film, the conclusion would have been quite different" (465).

⁴¹ Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 20; 30. For a more in-depth discussion of Kahn's theories, see Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴² Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 143.

⁴³ Quoted in "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. I. [October 1969], 9-10.

⁴⁴ Tracing the history of Cold War machines like JOSHUA in his recent *Wargames: From Gladiators to Gigabytes*, Martin Van Creveld argues that computational war games often dictated rather than refined wartime policy (239).

⁴⁵ As an historical artefact, *WarGames* may have served to implement its message. As Stephanie Ricker Schulte argues in her recent *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture*, *WarGames* indirectly contributed to real-world policy changes with regards to the oversight of nuclear weapons. "*WarGames* did not directly cause policy change. Rather, it was a participant in a complex process through which meaning was made and remade in the cultural sphere [...] For several years after the film's release, newspaper, magazine, and television reports connected the fictional film *WarGames* to these Cold War fears of real-world "war games" between the United States and Soviet Union. News organizations also used *WarGames* to frame a number of reports on computing and networking technology" (23/26).

⁴⁶ "In the real world of real political leaders—whether here or in the Soviet Union—a decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advanced as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable." (Quoted in "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. I. [October 1969], 9-10).

⁴⁷ Kessler, "Bound by the Bible" in *Two Faiths, One Covenant*, 25.

⁴⁸ See Ricker, *Cached*, 26-27.

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