Looking at The Day After as a science fiction and/or dramatic film is difficult because of all the reverberations surrounding it, and because it is a thesis film. Here speculation is presented as such immediate reality that it almost becomes reality in the viewer’s mind. Therein lies its power, and its limitations. But given those limitations, it was certainly an at least competent piece of filmmaking. To make it work, the characters had to be as average as possible without being total nonentities; if the picture had centered around a gang of bikers or a group of Hollywood jet-setters, much of its power would have been lost.

There was certainly suspense — not as to what was going to happen (you’d have to have lived in a hole for a year not to know), but when. For the entire first half of the film, the tension lay in at which unexpected split second the sky would light up. The event itself was portrayed as adequately as any such total catastrophe might be, considering that no single viewpoint would ever see more than a minute fraction of what would happen, if at all. The horrors of the aftermath were certainly downplayed, as we were endlessly informed after the showing, but were hardly lacking in intensity or interest.

There was a spate of cautionary nuclear-devastation novels in the 1950s, mostly written by mainstream writers with science fictional leanings, such as Philip Wylie (Tomorrow) and Pat Frank (Alas, Babylon), but until now the film medium has literally never had the guts to do it. (Yes, I remember The Day the World Ended, which was overrun with mutant menaces and not exactly a class act, and Panic in the Year Zero, a game attempt hampered by a low budget and the presence of Frankie Avalon.) The sole resemblance of The Day After to Star Wars is a simple one — yet again I felt that for the first time I was seeing on screen something I had only read about before.

Those who found it dull, however, might be lucky; perhaps there’ll be a sequel (The Day After the Day After) in which Jason Robards has grown another head and the ruins of Kansas City are filled with man-eating plants. As the most telling line in the movie has it: “Stupidity has a habit of getting its way.”

Who Stole My Heart Away department... From the depressing to the ridiculously cheerful — the five years since Dr. Who finally made it across the Atlantic (to be greeted joyously in this column), it has spawned a cult second only to that of Star Trek in the history of series fandom. There are clubs and newsletters, and the several hundred Dr. Who titles in book form sell prodigiously. This has occurred with geographic inconsistency depending on the program’s syndication, but Whomania has taken hold wherever it’s shown at a time when adults want to watch it (which is not Saturday morn-
ing, as was proved in New York).

This comes up at the moment not only because it's a phenomenon worth noting, but because a special Dr. Who program has been popping up here and there sporadically (again depending on the curiosities of regional syndication) which is even jollier good fun than the regular programs. It's a special anniversary edition running an hour and a half, and the title is "The Five Doctors." Yes, you guessed it — it features all five incarnations of the mutable doctor (for the uninitiate, he has over the past 20 years undergone metamorphosis — physical, mental, and sartorial — four times), gathered together from the various eras of time where they (he) happen(s) to be, along with various of his (their) human cronies from over the years. This momentous event is occasioned by a crisis in the era of the Time Lords from whence comes the Doctor, when the head of the Council is up to no good. Also on hand are Daleks, Cybermen, and other assorted menaces.

That Peter Cushing was unavailable to take part, and Tom Baker spends most of the program stuck in a space warp, doesn't really spoil the fun. A substitute for the one and using the other as a plot device worked out perfectly OK; the fifth, newest Who, as yet unseen here so far as I know, turns out to be as charming as the others. Style and wit will out.

Coming soon

Next month: the conclusion of Hilbert Schenck's STEAM BIRD, plus new SF novelets by A. Bertram Chandler and Richard Cowper.

Soon: THE BALLAD OF THE FLEXIBLE BULLET, a brand new novella by Stephen King. Use the coupon on page 32.