



“Suppose They Don’t Know It?”: Working-Class Anxiety of Systemic Failure in *The Hole* (1962)

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ABSTRACT

John and Faith Hubley’s Academy Award-winning animated short *The Hole* (1962) is widely recognized as a satire of Cold War anxieties surrounding nuclear catastrophe. This article extends that interpretation by examining how the film transforms geopolitical uncertainty into an everyday working-class discussion about accidents, institutional security, and technological control. Employing a close reading informed by Cultural Studies, this research analyses the film’s improvised dialogue, visual satire, and spatial representation of labor to investigate how ordinary people articulate their anxieties about systems upon which they depend but exercise little control. Particular attention is given to Gillespie’s recurring use of “suppose,” through which he challenges Mathews’s insistence that accidents can be anticipated, explained, or prevented. As their conversation progresses from domestic accidents to military technology and the possibility of nuclear catastrophe, the film exposes the limitations of institutional assurances and the persistent possibility of human error and unforeseen circumstances. Furthermore, the workers’ position beneath the city highlights the contradiction between their material contribution to modern civilization and their limited authority over the systems that sustain it. The article argues that *The Hole* satirizes the presumed infallibility of modern security systems while articulating working-class anxieties arising from systemic uncertainty. Beyond its immediate Cold War context, the film offers a continuing reflection on ordinary people’s vulnerability to institutional failures and their consequences.

Keywords: *The Hole* (1962); Cold War Satire; Working-Class Anxiety; Systemic Failure; Cultural Studies.



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1. Introduction

What happens when the systems designed to protect society become the very sources of uncertainty that ordinary people must live with? Modern societies depend upon increasingly sophisticated technological, political, and economic institutions to maintain security and prevent disasters. However, despite considerable

advancements in scientific knowledge and technological capabilities, such systems remain susceptible to accidents, human error, and unforeseen circumstances. This contradiction becomes particularly significant for ordinary working people, whose livelihoods and security depend upon institutions over which they exercise little control. Literature and other cultural productions have long provided a means of articulating these uncertainties, particularly through satire, which exposes the contradictions between institutional promises and people's everyday experiences.

John and Faith Hubley's animated short *The Hole* (1962) offers an examination of this contradiction against the historical background of Cold War America. The fifteen-minute film features an improvised conversation between two construction workers, voiced by jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie and actor George Mathews, working beneath the streets of New York City. Their seemingly mundane conversation gradually develops into a debate concerning accidents, government, scientific knowledge, military technology, and the possibility of nuclear catastrophe. Released in the same year as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the film won the Academy Award for Best Short Subject (Cartoon) in 1963 and was subsequently selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry in 2013 for its cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d.; Library of Congress, 2013). These recognitions invite further examination of the film's significance, particularly its treatment of concerns that extend beyond its immediate historical circumstances.

The nuclear anxiety represented in *The Hole* was not exclusive to the United States. In the same year, David Cobham's British drama-documentary *The Hole in the Ground* (1962), sponsored by the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation, dramatized the operation of Britain's warning and fallout-monitoring systems during a simulated nuclear attack (Imperial War Museums, n.d.). Whereas the British production emphasized institutional preparedness, the Hubleys approached nuclear insecurity through the perspectives of ordinary workers who questioned the reliability of such systems. Rather than presenting nuclear catastrophe through political leaders, military personnel, or scientific experts, *The Hole* situates geopolitical uncertainty within everyday working-class discourse, where questions of national security are discussed through familiar experiences involving accidents, money, family, and work.

Existing critical discussions have recognized the Hubleys' contributions to experimental animation and their engagement with contemporary social concerns. Cwik (n.d.), in his essay published by the Library of Congress, identifies the relationship between the Hubleys' aesthetic experimentation and the film's treatment of nuclear anxiety, particularly through its improvised working-class conversation and visual representation of hypothetical catastrophes. He also observes Gillespie's recurring suppositions, Mathews's confidence in institutional authority, and the relationship between the underground construction site and the film's representations of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Animation Obsessive (2023) examines the film's production, improvisational techniques, experimental animation, and anti-nuclear concerns, emphasizing its historical significance and continuing relevance. While these discussions establish important aspects of the film's artistic and historical significance, there remains room for a more sustained examination of how its dialogue and visual satire articulate working-class anxiety concerning institutional security. In particular, the relationship between the workers' competing understandings of accidents, their everyday experiences, and their dependence upon larger technological and political systems warrants further critical investigation.

Of particular interest is Gillespie's recurring use of the word "suppose," through which he repeatedly introduces circumstances under which supposedly reliable systems might fail. His hypothetical questions challenge Mathews's insistence that accidents can ultimately be anticipated, explained, or prevented through scientific knowledge and technological safeguards. Their disagreement raises a larger cultural question concerning the position of ordinary people who depend upon institutional systems without necessarily possessing the knowledge or authority to control them. Furthermore, the construction site provides a spatial dimension to this contradiction: the workers materially contribute to the development of modern civilization while remaining distant from the institutions responsible for its security.

Therefore, this article aims to examine how *The Hole* transforms Cold War nuclear anxiety into a working-class discussion about accidents, uncertainty, and systemic failure. Employing close reading informed by Cultural Studies, it analyses the film's improvised dialogue, visual satire, and spatial representation of labor to investigate how ordinary people articulate their anxieties about institutional security. This study argues that the film's satire exposes the limitations of presumed institutional and technological infallibility, while its working-class perspective reveals the contradiction between ordinary people's dependence upon modern systems and their limited ability to control the consequences of their potential failure.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research method through close reading informed by Cultural Studies to examine the representation of working-class anxiety and systemic uncertainty in John and Faith Hubley's *The Hole* (1962). The film serves as the primary research material, while relevant scholarly literature and historical sources concerning Cold War America, nuclear anxiety, and socially engaged animation provide the contextual background. Rather than applying a predetermined theoretical framework, this study emphasizes the relationship between the film's dialogue, visual composition, and satirical techniques in constructing its social and cultural criticism.

The analysis begins with a close examination of the improvised conversation between the two principal characters, particularly their competing understandings of accidents, institutional security, and technological control. Selected dialogue was manually transcribed and examined to identify recurring expressions, arguments, and contradictions, with particular attention given to Gillespie's repeated use of "suppose." As no official subtitles were available and some passages suffer from poor audio quality, uncertain transcriptions are treated cautiously and interpreted in relation to their surrounding dialogue and visual context.

The dialogue is subsequently examined alongside the film's visual and auditory elements, including character design, newspaper headlines, spatial organization, animated representations of hypothetical accidents, and the use of sound and silence. Particular attention is given to how these elements reinforce, complicate, or contradict the characters' arguments. The findings are then interpreted within the historical and cultural context of Cold War America, emphasizing the relationship between working-class experience and institutional power. Through this approach, the study investigates how the film transforms geopolitical uncertainty into everyday discourse and employs satire to expose the limitations of institutional assurances and technological control.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. From Everyday Accidents to Nuclear Anxiety

One of the distinctive features of *The Hole* is how its seemingly ordinary conversation gradually develops into a debate concerning accidents and the possibility of nuclear catastrophe. Rather than immediately introducing the political tensions of the Cold War, the film approaches the subject through the everyday experiences of its two working-class characters. In an early exchange, Gillespie recalls accidentally breaking a glass while washing dishes, attributing the incident to the grease that caused it to slip from his hands. Mathews, however, rejects this explanation, insisting that Gillespie broke the glass because he did not want to wash the dishes in the first place (02:06 – 02:15). This seemingly trivial disagreement establishes the central contradiction that develops throughout their conversation: whether accidents arise from unforeseen circumstances or can ultimately be attributed to human intention and responsibility.

The disagreement becomes increasingly significant when Gillespie introduces the possibility of being accidentally struck by a vehicle while crossing the street. Mathews again rejects the notion of an unintended accident, arguing that the pedestrian must have had some reason for leaving the sidewalk. His argument is supported by a newspaper article that supposedly claims that 99% of people injured in accidents are deliberately seeking injury (05:29). The absurdity of this assertion introduces the film's satire of supposedly authoritative knowledge, particularly when statistical information is used to establish certainty over events that remain unpredictable. Gillespie, meanwhile, challenges Mathews's reasoning through familiar situations in which individuals may suffer consequences they neither anticipated nor intended.

The conversation subsequently shifts from personal accidents to the possibility of nuclear warfare, particularly the reliability of radar and early-warning systems designed to detect incoming missiles. This transition is reinforced by the newspaper headlines appearing throughout the film, including "FRANCE EXPECTS TO HAVE 60 KILOTON BOMBS BY 1964", "ICBM'S WERE SET TO FIRE IN CRISIS," "PLANES CRASH ALL 27 KILLED," (01:35 – 02:00) and reports concerning nuclear proliferation and international disarmament. These headlines establish the wider Cold War anxieties surrounding the workers' conversation, bringing questions of military technology and geopolitical uncertainty into their everyday working environment.

Interestingly, both characters draw upon information obtained from newspapers, yet interpret its implications differently. Whereas Mathews regards scientific and technological advancements as assurances against potential catastrophe, Gillespie questions whether such systems can completely prevent accidents. Their conversation consequently transforms the abstract concerns of nuclear warfare into familiar questions about mechanical failure, human mistakes, and personal responsibility. Through this progression from a broken household object to the possible destruction of civilization, *The Hole* demonstrates how the anxieties of the

nuclear age become intertwined with ordinary experiences of uncertainty. The distinction between everyday misfortune and geopolitical catastrophe increasingly becomes one of scale rather than the possibility of failure itself.

3.2. “Suppose”: *Questioning Institutional Security*

Gillespie's repeated use of “suppose” becomes a central feature of the film's satire, particularly as the conversation shifts towards the reliability of military technology and institutional security. His hypothetical questions repeatedly challenge Mathews's conviction that accidents can be anticipated and prevented through scientific knowledge and technological safeguards. When Gillespie imagines a fragment of Venus being mistaken for an incoming intercontinental ballistic missile, Mathews insists that radar systems can distinguish between the two, declaring, “Nothing can happen! They've got it figured out!” (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 08:00) Gillespie, however, continues to introduce possibilities that Mathews's explanations cannot completely dismiss, including mechanical malfunctions, delayed responses, and human error. Their disagreement eventually culminates in Gillespie's question, “Suppose they don't know it?” (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 08:15), which challenges not only the reliability of technological systems but also the presumed knowledge of the institutions responsible for operating them.

The significance of Gillespie's suppositions lies in their ability to expose the limitations of institutional assurances without necessarily rejecting the value of scientific or technological advancements. When Mathews argues that a malfunctioning machine can simply be repaired by replacing its damaged gasket, Gillespie questions whether those responsible would even recognize the problem. Similarly, when discussing American bombers reportedly dispatched towards Russia before being recalled, Mathews considers their successful return as evidence that the military has everything under control. Gillespie responds by asking what might have happened had the aircraft failed to return. The conversation became absurdist satire when Gillespie express confidence on the system to the point that it could control the uncontrollable:

Gillespie: “All of these neural scientific things ain't infallible. Anything's liable to go wrong with one of those-- or you... you can control accidents?”

Mathews: “Yeah!”

Gillespie: “It's impossible. It's impossible!” (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 09:00)

Through these exchanges, the film questions the assumption that the successful operation of a security system necessarily guarantees its reliability under different circumstances. Furthermore, Mathews's reference to his three children suggests that his insistence upon institutional security does not necessarily indicate an absence of anxiety (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 09:25). Rather, his confidence in technological control may also be understood as a response to the same uncertainty that Gillespie repeatedly articulates.

The satire extends beyond technological fallibility to question the institutions responsible for maintaining international security. During their discussion of disarmament negotiations, Gillespie humorously suggests that disarmament has become a profession whose practitioners would lose their employment if an agreement were finally reached (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 10:35). His subsequent analogy of carrying a pistol for personal protection further illustrates how an instrument intended to provide security may encourage aggressive behavior and increase the possibility of conflict. These observations introduce another dimension to the film's criticism: institutional arrangements and technologies designed to prevent danger may themselves contribute to its persistence.



Figure 1. The humorous, absurd scene showing a crisis of missile launch almost accidentally occurring because of a rat/vole unexpectedly chewed a cable off the missile control panel.

The discussion eventually returns to the possibility of human error when Gillespie imagines a military operator suffering a heart attack or losing consciousness before recalling bombers. Mathews again appeals to institutional

safeguards, suggesting that such personnel would undergo regular medical examinations. However, Gillespie's insistence that anybody might unexpectedly lose consciousness exposes the dependence of sophisticated technological systems upon fallible human bodies. The film reinforces this argument visually through its humorous depiction of a rat damaging a cable connected to a military installation, nearly triggering a catastrophic response. Through the recurring suppositions and their animated representations, *The Hole* satirizes not the pursuit of security itself, but the assumption that increasingly sophisticated systems can completely eliminate uncertainty. The workers' conversation consequently reveals an important contradiction: ordinary citizens are expected to place their confidence in institutions whose potential failures they can imagine, but neither fully anticipate nor prevent.

3.3. Labor, Class and the Spatial Representation of Insecurity

The working-class identities of the two characters in *The Hole* are established through their visual appearance and the construction site in which their conversation takes place. Mathews wears blue denim overalls, immediately identifying him as a blue-collar worker, while Gillespie's dark clothing closely resembles the color of his body, making the distinction between his physical appearance and work attire less apparent. Their occupation is significant because the film situates its discussion of national security among workers who materially contribute to the construction of modern civilization but possess little authority over the political, military, and technological institutions responsible for its protection. Through this setting, the film presents systemic insecurity from the perspective of ordinary people whose labor sustains a society that remains vulnerable to decisions and circumstances beyond their control.



Figure 2. The construction workers Gillespie (left) and Mathews (right). The newspaper flips to different headlines about disasters and bombs during this scene.

This relationship between ordinary workers and institutional authority is particularly evident in Gillespie's discussion of government and citizenship. When referring to government expenditure, he identifies himself with the state, declaring, "I AM the government!" He subsequently invokes the constitutional principle of "We the People" before questioning whether he is actually recognized as a citizen. Mathews responds by asking whether he possesses a driver's license, humorously reducing the question of political belonging to bureaucratic documentation (03:10). Gillespie's exchange reveals a contradiction between the democratic ideal of collective participation and the ordinary citizen's limited relationship with institutional power. His identification with the government is further complicated by his awareness that the expensive military systems supposedly protecting him remain beyond his direct control. Given Gillespie's identity as a Black American performer in 1962, his questioning of citizenship also carries potential significance within the historical context of racial segregation and the Civil Rights Movement, although the improvised nature of the dialogue cautions against treating this exchange as an explicitly intended statement about race.

The film's spatial organization further develops this contradiction through its recurring representations of verticality. The two men spend most of their time working underground, while other construction workers, the developing city, and its larger structures occupy the space above them. Their physical position may consequently be understood as a representation of their social position within modern society. However, this spatial arrangement is not limited to a straightforward opposition between working people below and institutional authority above. The animation also depicts nuclear weapons and military installations underground, establishing a visual relationship between the workers' construction site and the technological apparatus capable of destroying the civilization they are helping to build. While the workers occupy their

underground space through physical labor, the military installations represent another form of human activity organized around the possibility of catastrophic destruction.

Through these contrasting underground spaces and the repeated movement between the construction site and the wider world, *The Hole* connects working-class experience with the political and technological uncertainties of the Cold War. The workers' limited institutional authority does not prevent them from questioning the systems upon which their lives depend. Their everyday experiences with machinery, accidents, and physical labor provide the basis for their discussion of technological failure. The construction site therefore functions as more than a convenient setting for the improvised conversation. It establishes the material and social position from which the film examines institutional security, while preparing the spatial reversal of its concluding sequence, when the underground workplace acquires an unexpected significance following the apparent destruction of the city above.

3.4. When “Suppose” Becomes Reality: Satire and Catastrophe

The concluding sequence of *The Hole* brings the workers' prolonged disagreement over accidents and institutional security to an abrupt and satirical resolution. As Gillespie continues to speculate about the possibility of a military operator losing consciousness before recalling nuclear bombers, Mathews maintains that such an occurrence could be prevented through medical examinations and responsible personal conduct. Interestingly, Mathews briefly acknowledges that an unexpected blackout could happen, only to return to his earlier argument that such an incident must ultimately result from an individual's negligence. Meanwhile, the animation gradually shifts away from the workers' conversation, moving upwards from *The Hole* towards the construction site above. Accompanied by an increasingly ominous mechanical sound, a heavy construction object slips from a crane's platform and falls towards the ground. The resulting impact interrupts Mathews's explanation, leaving his argument unfinished (Hubley & Hubley, 1962, 12:50 – 13:28).

This sequence demonstrates how the film's visual satire operates alongside, and eventually contradicts, the characters' dialogue. Throughout their conversation, Gillespie's repeated suppositions have introduced hypothetical circumstances under which supposedly reliable systems might fail. However, the animation now presents an accident occurring while Mathews is still attempting to explain why such events cannot happen without an identifiable human responsibility. The falling object also establishes a visual relationship between an ordinary workplace accident and the catastrophic consequences that have dominated their discussion. Its apparently disproportionate impact, followed by the revelation of a devastated city, collapses the distinction between everyday misfortune and the possibility of civilizational destruction. Rather than offering a realistic explanation of the catastrophe, the film employs absurdity and exaggeration to expose the limitations of Mathews's insistence upon predictability and control.

The ending also introduces a significant reversal of the film's spatial organization. Having spent most of their conversation underground, the two workers climb out of *The Hole* and discover that the city above them has apparently been destroyed. The underground workplace, previously associated with physical labor and the workers' limited social position, has unexpectedly become their refuge. Conversely, the city, representing modern civilization and its technological achievements, lies in ruins. This reversal reinforces the contradiction between the material contributions of ordinary workers and their vulnerability to the potential failure of larger systems over which they possess little control.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the ending is Gillespie's silence. Having repeatedly challenged Mathews through increasingly improbable hypothetical situations, he now witnesses an actual catastrophe that renders further speculation unnecessary. Instead of continuing their argument, Gillespie descends into *The Hole*, softly humming as the film concludes. His return to the familiar space of labor offers neither an explanation nor a solution to the destruction above. Through this final juxtaposition of catastrophe and everyday routine, *The Hole* transforms its humorous discussion of hypothetical accidents into a reflection on the helplessness of ordinary people when the systems upon which their lives depend fail to provide the security they promise.

4. Conclusion

John and Faith Hubley's *The Hole* (1962) presents Cold War nuclear anxiety through an everyday working-class conversation that questions the reliability of modern systems designed to protect society. Through the contrasting arguments of Gillespie and Mathews, the film examines the relationship between accidents, institutional knowledge, technological control, and human fallibility. Gillespie's recurring use of “suppose” challenges Mathews's conviction that accidents can ultimately be anticipated, explained, or prevented, exposing the uncertainties that remain despite scientific advancements and institutional safeguards.

Their disagreement, however, also reveals a shared anxiety concerning the possibility of catastrophic failure and its consequences for ordinary people.

Through its improvised dialogue, visual satire, and spatial representation of labor, the film transforms abstract geopolitical concerns into recognizable experiences of everyday insecurity. The underground construction site establishes the workers' material contribution to modern civilization while highlighting their limited authority over the systems upon which their lives depend. This contradiction culminates in the film's concluding sequence, where an apparently ordinary workplace accident coincides with the destruction of the city above. Gillespie's subsequent silence and return to *The Hole* provide neither resolution nor reassurance, emphasizing the vulnerability of ordinary people when circumstances exceed their knowledge and control.

Although firmly situated within the historical anxieties of Cold War America, *The Hole* retains the potential to resonate beyond its original cultural and historical circumstances. From the perspective of contemporary Indonesia, its nuclear anxieties may appear historically distant, yet its broader concerns regarding institutional reliability, systemic uncertainty, and the consequences of failure remain recognizable. The film's continuing significance therefore lies not merely in its representation of nuclear catastrophe, but also in its satirical examination of the contradiction between society's dependence upon increasingly sophisticated systems and their inability to guarantee absolute security. Its underlying question, "Suppose they don't know?", remains relevant wherever ordinary people must confront the possibility that the institutions responsible for their security may themselves prove fallible.

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