

The atomic caf and the black humor of nuclear annihilation essay sample

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During the post-World War II era, with the rise of the Cold War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, America itself began to fear the atom. With nuclear bombs already having been used to end World War II, the public realized that humanity had the potential to destroy the entire world with the push of a button. To that end, the United States government did everything it could to try to assuage the fears of a rightfully-worried public about the threat of nuclear destruction. Through the use of playful animation, propaganda films, and the futile strategies of fallout shelters, it is clear to me that Americans were lulled into a false sense of security through misinformation and patronizing platitudes about righteousness and God. The filmmakers used juxtaposition of these cutesy, sophomoric public relations stunts with footage of the grim realities of nuclear warfare to take a darkly humorous approach to conveying their dismay at the lies the American government told to its people.

One of the most fascinating things to me in *The Atomic Café* is the filmmakers' ability to convey completely clear and salient points through no editorializing of their own – every bit of material in the film is culled from archive footage, interviews, radio transmissions and training and propaganda films. Through selective editing, the film manages to showcase the filmmakers' position that the American government lied to people and misled them about the seriousness of the nuclear threat in order to keep people in the dark (Posen 44). The film begins with interviews stating that, in effect, government officials performed “ preliminary indoctrination”, as the men lied to photographers who took pictures of the atomic bomb tests about how the tests were something that needed to be done, and that the

bombings were necessary (despite the film's opening text that Japan was already fighting a losing war in World War II). When discussing the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Tibbets definitely notes that they were "military targets," and notes that the US government wants to cover up the atrocities by making people ignore them - "the less said about the US government, the better." The filmmakers immediately follow this up with the title card "PEACE IS WONDERFUL" in big bold letters, showing that America got hard to work on the propaganda train.

Much of *The Atomic Café* links the American conservative values of Christianity to the bomb, showing how government officials used religion as a propaganda tool to justify their use of the atom bomb, something I found very affecting in the film. In one press conference, President Truman says that he believes that the atom bomb is a gift from God, and hopes we will use it "in His way and for His purposes." God is invoked in all manner of public relations initiatives throughout the film, including when the patronizing Army forces sit the residents of the Bikini Atoll down to explain how they will use the bomb; they say they want to make a "destructive force into something good for mankind", and that the bomb is in God's hands, so it must be good. (This also shows the imperialism and deceit inherent to the US Navy's atomic projects; they had to fool the Bikini people into leaving because of something they did not understand.) Pro-bomb propaganda films interview clergy and nuns to give their opinions on whether or not the hydrogen bomb should be made, turning the possession of nuclear weapons into a divine mandate. The filmmakers expose this for the transparent tactic that it is through their complete discomfort, the repetition of talking points

found in multiple sources of propaganda, and more.

One of the most frequently used editing tools used by the filmmakers in *The Atomic Café* to show their darkly humorous denouncement of the atomic bomb era is the insertion of cheerful, folksy songs that were played and written at the time about the nuclear bomb. Montage is used frequently, juxtaposing the grim realities of nuclear warfare with the cheery, almost corny treatment of the atomic scare in the media. The post-Hiroshima cheering and reveling in the streets in 1945 is intercut with horrifying footage of Japanese victims with radiation burns and mutations. Songs with lyrics like “Everybody’s worried ‘bout atomic bombs/but nobody’s worried about the day my Lord will come” play while young suburban families show off their makeshift bomb shelters and radiation suits for the camera.

Meanwhile, experts are shown to say that fallout shelters absolutely do not work, and if anything make it specifically worse to be in one; by intercutting between those kinds of comments and the naïve efforts of the American public to protect themselves, the filmmakers show that level of dissembling that the American government committed against its own people.

I definitely see the filmmakers’ wry humor, as they clearly see something funny about the ways in which Americans tried to distance themselves from the nuclear horrors that awaited them, and how the American government tried to help them do it. As the Cold War raged on, a great deal of nuclear panic came from the Red Scare; Communists and Communism as an ethos was deeply criticized, and there was fear that they had the bomb. The choice of clips by the filmmakers clearly paints anti-Communist fears as unreasonable and stifling; they claim that Communists hate freedom, and

reasonable assertions by one American Communist in one film are put down with glib insults like “ Why do you just go live in a Communist country?”, while allegedly painting capitalism as a good thing. The filmmakers use the Rosenberg trials as yet another way to show how misguided the Red Scare was. Through a bit of archive footage, the Rosenbergs are shown to be innocent, unassuming people who were electrocuted for being Soviet spies. All in all, the Soviet scare was used as another tactic to maintain American acceptance of nuclear proliferation, by drumming up ideological arguments and propaganda to ensure that Americans would fear a Soviet invasion more than potential annihilation by the bomb. The Rosenbergs were basically scapegoats for the American public, and were used to distract us from the ongoing nuclear scare while also cementing our allegiances to the United States by showing us what happens to spies.

The use of cartoons is made especially absurd when cut against horrifying nuclear explosions and cold hard facts about the atom bomb. Pro-bomb propaganda films just tell people to “ Duck and Cover,” and imply the worst that could happen is a temporary loss of hair. At the same time, the “ Duck and Cover” film teaches children to be ready at any time to duck and cover, thus heightening their fear of the bomb. One film even implies that risk is just how life goes, so we should just effectively deal with it. During the “ Duck and Cover” song, the filmmakers point the blame at American officials by cutting the “ and you” lyric over footage of JFK, Nixon, Einstein and others, implying that the danger of nuclear power is not being appropriately dealt with by the people who are actually in power.

Every trick in the book is shown to try to make people feel safe, and the

filmmakers directly link the raising of Cold War tensions with the heightening atomic scare – segments of Nixon’s infamous interview with Krushchev, in which the two argue about American and Soviet capabilities, are cut between shots of people frantically building fallout shelters. The justified concern about nuclear fire is also played up as a mental illness, calling it “nuclearosis”. The film’s final sequence showcases the oddly cheery nature of America’s attitude toward a nuclear apocalypse, simply getting in one’s shelter and waiting for the authorities suddenly becoming the thing that will save you (Mielke 28).

The Atomic Café showcases the extent to which the US government lied to and misled its people about the extent to which nuclear testing and war was dangerous; the filmmakers clearly oppose that, and choose to demonstrate this hypocrisy through darkly humorous use of music and editing. The over-the-top ridiculousness of the US government’s claims about Communism, the atom bomb’s capabilities, and the public’s readiness for nuclear war is made more ridiculous when cut all together into a single film, and appropriately juxtaposed with the horrifying reality and awe-inspiring power of the nuclear bomb. To that end, the film convinces us that we knew very little about the atom bomb, in large part due to the ignorance and patronization of the public through propaganda.

Works Cited

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