

The Atomic Cafe

By John Wills

The documentary movie *The Atomic Cafe* relates the story of the American atomic bomb from its inception in 1945 through to dominance over world affairs in the late 1950s. Consisting solely of archival footage, filmmakers Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty craft a convincing narrative of early Cold War events and attitudes. Their film provides a critical glimpse into post-war America: a world of Duck and Cover school drills, troops marching toward ground zero at the Nevada Test Site, and politicians waxing lyrical over both the threat and the promise of a new atomic era. The film highlights the aesthetic spectacle, abundant novelty and kitsch appropriation of the bomb endemic to the period, but also reveals the drama, deceit and even death associated with atomic experimentation.

An expansive US Government film catalogue provided the initial inspiration for *Atomic Cafe*. Intrigued by a list of thousands of documentary titles, Pierce Rafferty approached his brother Kevin, a fledgling filmmaker at the California Institute of Arts, over ideas for a film. Sharing a mutual interest in government propaganda, they began work on the project in 1976. They teamed up with Jayne Loader, a freelance journalist, and gradually narrowed their scope to government and press depictions of the atomic bomb. Rafferty then spent several years searching for films in public and private archives, before the team sat down to review approximately 10,000 hours of footage. Splicing together segments from press reels, military training films and civil defense documentaries, Loader and the Rafferty brothers aimed to create a story that told itself. Atomic-themed music provided a soundtrack to the speeches and conversations on-screen. Financed mostly by the three filmmakers, the film cost around \$300,000.

Released on March 17, 1982, *The Atomic Cafe* met with largely positive reviews. Vincent Canby for the *New York Times* applauded the “devastating collage film” for its exploration of atomic culture, and called it a picture “deserving national attention.” Richard Harrington for the *Washington Post* declared, “*The Atomic Cafe* could be the most important film of 1982,” and a “place from which to start rethinking about the unthinkable.” *60 Minutes*, *Good Morning America* and *David Letterman* all showed clips from the movie.

The release of the film proved timely. *The Atomic Cafe* spoke to lingering disillusionment with government stemming from the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. It aligned with the peak of public distrust over national atomic policy. In the 1970s, renegade scientists such as John Gofman questioned the safety of the American nuclear industry, and in 1979, a partial meltdown at Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania drew nationwide attention to the dangers of the atom. In 1981, newly elected President Ronald Reagan pushed for a rapid escalation in the nuclear arms race, with the Soviet Union and the United States entering a period of heightened tensions, dubbed the ‘Second Cold War.’

The Atomic Cafe raised serious doubts over how far the government, nuclear industry and military could be trusted. It showed troops at the Nevada Test Site being shepherded towards radioactive mushroom clouds, little different from the caged animals kept on-site and exposed to deadly blasts for the benefits of science. It highlighted a government willing to lie to Marshallese Islanders over the dangers of radiation, and brazen enough to suggest to the American public that hiding under picnic blankets could assure survival in nuclear war. With its alarming tone, the film served as an instant protest tool for the 1980s anti-

nuclear movement Freeze. It successfully transformed pro-nuclear propaganda into anti-nuclear propaganda.

Through its satire of the military-industrial complex, *The Atomic Cafe* joined a range of material targeting America's love affair with the atom. For some time, feature films had offered an artistic challenge to the American post-war atomic hegemony, the most famous being Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). *The China Syndrome* (1979) and *Silkwood* (1983) explored issues of deception and corporate malpractice in the nuclear industry, while *Testament* (1983) and the ABC television movie *The Day After* (1983) offered painfully realistic depictions of nuclear attack on American home soil. After watching *The Day After*, Reagan confided in his diary that the film proved "very effective and left me greatly depressed." Released the same year as *The Atomic Cafe*, the documentary *Dark Circle*, directed by Judy Irving and Chris Beaver, highlighted the problems of the nuclear fuel cycle at Rocky Flats production facility in Colorado and Diablo Canyon plant in California. Together, such films helped the American public visualize the dangers of radioactivity. Film provided a powerful medium for negotiating atomic issues.

By utilizing vintage film clips, *Atomic Cafe* offered a distinctive evidence-based flavor of nuclear skepticism. Rather than employ a narrator, the team allowed the footage to speak for itself, and left the picture open to interpretation by the audience. Pierce Lafferty explained, "the three of us had decided all the way along that the film was going to be in a format that would to a certain extent force people back on their own memories, on their own thoughts, on their own perceptions about this material." Jayne Loader referred to *The Atomic Cafe* as a "compilation vérité," notable for the absence of any "voice of god" to guide the viewer. The team's choice of content nonetheless framed the narrative. Loader and the Lafferty brothers selected footage that highlighted the paradoxes and lies of the age. When

an army chaplain reassures his men at the Nevada Test Site that there is "no need to be worried" with the atomic bomb "a wonderful sight to behold," the following clip shows unprotected troops getting mouthfuls of radioactive dirt as they run towards a gigantic dark cloud. Rife with dark humor, the film reaches its crescendo with a montage of images that together depict a wholesale nuclear attack. A woman fake-screams, a kid in bizarre protection gear rides his bike, and the cartoon character Burt the Turtle hides under his shell as the United States is obliterated; the final scene shows a chirpy father instruct his family, "children you better clear up the broken glass and all this debris, all in all I'd say we've been very lucky around here." As Paul Herman for the *New York Times* related, "The movie is about the atom bomb, one of the most serious subjects a filmmaker could choose in these times. Yet in the audience, youngsters and adults alike are convulsed with laughter."

The Atomic Cafe helped historicize the bomb and highlight the pivotal role of propaganda in America's atomic program. While sometimes underplaying the complexity of the period and the range of motives behind the nuclear test series, the movie remains a powerful warning statement. Its enduring relevance is two-fold: to question the promotion of new and untested technologies and to recognize the power and willingness of the government to deceive on a mass scale.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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