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By the Bomb's Early Noir

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

By the Bomb's Early Noir

Michael S. Mayer (bio)

Margot A. Henriksen. *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xxvi + 450 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95.

Long ignored by historians, the impact of the cold war and nuclear

weapons on American culture has become a burgeoning area of scholarly inquiry in the last decade.¹ Margot A. Henriksen makes a contribution to this body of scholarship with *Dr. Strangelove's America*.

Henriksen begins with the premise that “given a conjunction between revolutionary technological change and revolutionary cultural change, it seems only reasonable to expect that an invention as revolutionary as the atomic bomb wrought an accompanying cultural revolution” (p. xv). She maintains that previous scholars have contended that, until the 1980s, “no such revolutionary change engulfed American culture” (p. xvi). These scholars, argues Henriksen, have ignored important connections between the bomb and American culture in the postwar decades. While positing the development of an “atomic consensus” that formed around the “cold war imperative” and regarded the bomb as a symbol of security, she argues at the same time for “the bomb’s central role in fomenting the kind of countercultural rebelliousness that characterized America throughout the 1960s” (p. xix).

Henriksen holds that, in spite of the dominance of the atomic consensus in the 1940s and 1950s, “many dark visions of atomic age life” (p. xxii) emerged during those years. By necessity, however, these visions were largely allusive and metaphorical. She suggests that film noir, “with its disturbing themes and distorted view of American life” (p. xxii), exemplified this sort of indirect dissent. Through its presentation of blurred lines between good and evil, film noir reflected an American society corrupted by the knowledge of atomic destruction, in which “everyone seemed guilty and no one seemed innocent” (p. 61). Similar themes dominated the fiction of Mickey Spillane, Jim Thompson, and Harry Whittington.

By the 1960s, the author contends, the atomic consensus began to break down, and the black humor of Stanley Kubrick’s film, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), exemplified a new openness in [End Page 778] cultural dissent. Central to this process was “Kennedy’s public brandishing of America’s atomic arsenal,” which

“shattered the cold war silence of the later Eisenhower years and shook Americans out of a long sleep of avoidance” (p. 187). In particular, the debate over the morality of bomb shelters, generated by the Berlin crisis and the Kennedy administration’s civil defense program, marked an important cultural shift away from acceptance of America’s nuclear policy. By late 1962, opinion had shifted so far that not even the Cuban missile crisis could spark a renewal of interest in bomb shelters. Henriksen sees the reaction against bomb shelters as a significant antecedent to the dissent of the later 1960s. Though the Cuban missile crisis did not revive enthusiasm for bomb shelters, it did reinforce dissenting views concerned about imminent nuclear destruction. Such dissenting views would expand to question the cold war and American values.

“Black humor, which combined the ‘darkness’ associated with the film noir sensibility of the earlier years of dissent with the rambunctious and iconoclastic laughter associated with the fearless rebelliousness of sixties protests” (p. xxiii), signified the corresponding cultural shift.

The buoyancy and the disdain of this cultural mirth in the early sixties broke the constraints of fear and intimidation that had curtailed free expression in the late forties and fifties and loosed the spirit of iconoclasm that complemented the dominant mood of the rebellious sixties. . . . Black humor matched both the explosive power and the deadly nihilism of the atomic bomb, and it announced the dawn of the cultural revolution that also finally matched the transforming power of the bomb.

(p. 245)

To demonstrate the conflict between the dominant culture of consensus and the oppositional culture of dissent in the immediate postwar era, the author juxtaposes Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) with the film noir classic, *White Heat* (1949). Capra’s film celebrates traditional American values and the American way of life, characterized by life in a small town, a...



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