

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

ATOMIC CINEMA IN AMERICA: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF
A NEW FILM GENRE THAT REFLECTED THE NUCLEAR ZEITGEIST OF THE
COLD WAR (1945-1989)

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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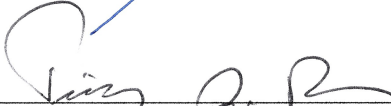
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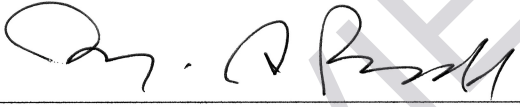
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GRADUATE STUDIES


This dissertation of John R. Mathis entitled "Atomic Cinema in America: Historical and Cultural Analysis of a New Film Genre that Reflected the Nuclear Zeitgeist of the Cold War (1945-1989)" submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation identifies a new film genre forged in the cold war era, called *atomic cinema*. Genre analysis has frequently been criticized for its over emphasis on classificatory labels and for the theoretical minefield that can result from the ahistorical search for ideal forms or an expectation that categorizing texts can achieve a kind of scientific precision. This dissertation argues that the best uses of genre are ones that are formed in relation to particular historical contexts and questions. Employing Terry Eagleton's *approach to texts* as the key to this study's interdisciplinary approach, surveys of works by film theorists, critics, historians, Cold War strategists, and even anti-nuclear activists were conducted in the development of an analysis to analyze the *zeitgeist* of three eras during the Cold War—1945-1963 (The Dawn of the Atomic Cinema), 1964-1979 (Transformative Years of Atomic Cinema), and 1980-1989 (Armageddon Redux). This chronological partitioning aided the historical examination of the public discourse over the growing nuclearism, the *in situ* backdrop in which these films were produced and subsequently understood by audiences. All of which enabled an effective means to document the maturation of the genre as well as vetting borderline films effectively—resulting in an *atomic cinema* filmography of eight-hundred and fifteen films and made-for-television movies. Facilitating the etymological discussion of the author's chosen term *atomic cinema*, a comparative analysis of how notable film scholars and critics (i.e., Susan Sontag, John Baxter, Jack Shaheen, Paul Boyer, Peter Biskind, Mick Broderick, Joyce Evans, Toni Perrine, Kim Newman and Jerome Shapiro) defined and approached their study of atomic-themed films was conducted—demonstrating that a coherent definition for this body of films did not exist. Concomitantly, their research and divergent filmographies provided insights useful in devising a comprehensive definition for *atomic cinema* that accounts for the distinct use of symbolism, motifs, *mise-en-scène*, and atomic terminology associated with the atomic paradox—nuclearism—that developed over time in *atomic cinema* productions.

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PREFACE

Before delving any further into this study, one first must understand something about me and the motivation behind the writing. Why is this essential? The central aspect of this study is to evaluate films that fall within the atomic *cinema* category, the etymology behind this term, and those who have collectively written about these films over the years. Consequently, this mental lens, or individual viewpoint, has an impact in how the aforementioned are assessed. Thus, no matter how much others may have touted their *objective analysis* there is an undeniable *subjective* element to it. Unless, of course, they were disciples of Mr. Spock's logic-based Vulcan philosophy, or possess an android-like cerebral processor like Second Officer Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. While the authors reviewed in this study, American and British, have all experienced the Cold War first hand, their writings reflect a distinctive lens through which they approached their task. The same, of course holds true for me, which will be discussed shortly. One apparent motive for their differing approach can be attributed to their academic discipline and interests—film history, English literature, sociology, psychology, communications, and gender or cultural studies. A second reason can be traced to the Cold War period during which they conducted their research and published their findings. Those who wrote during the early 1950s and 1960s, when the threat of nuclear confrontation seemed the greatest, appear to differ to varying degrees on interpretation than those who wrote much later—looking back a decade or more since the end of the Cold War. Others attempted to prove a thesis regarding the meaning of these films ranging from feminist paranoia to nuclear anxiety. One small contemporary group provided only a cursory film review, choosing instead to pan the special effects and

scripts of the selected 1950s science fiction and horror films as being sophomoric in their analysis—which by today’s benchmark is true. Finally, the more scholarly focused primarily on the meanings of the film’s text and subtext. This disparity in film interpretation brought its own challenges that will be addressed throughout this study. However, in order to provide a deeper cross-analysis of how films were interpreted, those surveyed were intentionally selected to span both the Cold War and Post-Cold War era as well as academic disciplines. This explains why the body of literature was chosen and its generic differences, but what differentiates my approach, and why?

Born a decade after the bombing of Hiroshima, it was an era when some of the most unforgettable Cold War science fiction films were released in America—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *The Day the World Ended* (1956), *World Without End* (1956) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956). Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson argued the same year for a Nuclear Test-Ban as part of his presidential campaign platform.¹ Although his bid for nomination proved unsuccessful, the protracted debate kept the public focused on the bomb. Concomitantly, the term “nuclear” was slowly replacing “atomic” in the American lexicon after the public became increasingly aware of the power of the thermonuclear bomb—aka hydrogen or *superbomb*.² During my youth, the public was still reeling from the heated strontium-90 debates stemming from the *Federation of American Scientists* studies that claimed toxic levels of this radioactive fallout element were present in many parts of the world—the

¹ Paul Brians, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), 19.

² Throughout this study, you will find the term *atomic* and *nuclear* used almost interchangeably. However, there are specific cases where the term *atomic* will be used over *nuclear*. They are: 1) when talking about fusion devices; 2) the atomic bomb testing conducted in the continental United States; 3) all events, films, and themes prior to the news release of the hydrogen bomb tests conducted by the United States and the Soviet Union, in the early 1950s and; 4) in conjunction with the discussion of atomic cinema.

result of the increased atomic and hydrogen bombs testing by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. “Concerned citizen[s] did not know whom to believe, the distinguished professor who said that strontium-90 threatened human life or the equally distinguished scientists who said the fallout danger was remote compared to the risk of nuclear war.”³ In a few years, the world was at the brink of nuclear war as two superpowers stared each other down in 1962, waiting for the other side to blink—born was the term *nuclear brinkmanship*.

As a member of the *boomer generation* (Defined by influential authors William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Generations* as those born between 1943-1960.), I was part of the first generation to be completely exposed to television from birth—the electronic babysitter.⁴ “By 1949, 1 million American homes had TV sets, and in 1954, the number had risen to 32 million. By the end of the 1950s, nearly 90 percent of homes in the United States had TV sets.”⁵ Eager to fill the airwaves and in dire need of readily available products fill their expanding airtime, television provided a second life to big screen movies, especially the B-movies. While suspense, film noir, and mysteries entertained the mature crowd, science fiction and horror films filled with aliens, radioactive mutants, and atomic-powered marvels saturated the weekend afternoon television matinee slots — aimed at this new adolescent crowd. Nurtured by television and the big screen, my generation could easily have been categorized the *atomic generation* instead.

³ Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 106.

⁴ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: Quill, 1991), passim.

⁵ Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 81.

With this as a backdrop, the next link to this study took place shortly after newly elected President Ronald Reagan, former film and television leading man from the 1940s through the mid-1960s, embarked on the rebuilding of America's military might in the early 1980s. Reagan's goal was to rekindle America's winning spirit, something that was lost during the embarrassing withdrawal from Vietnam the previous decade, and to eradicate the continuing Soviet threat. He strongly believed that the "cultural power in America had to be wrested from the 'liberal elite' which had led the country astray during the 1960s and 1970s."⁶ Known for his strong anti-Communist sentiment, some have postulated that as president he was reliving his role as Secret Service agent Brass Bancroft in the film *Murder in the Air* (1940) to protect America at all costs.⁷ This time, instead of a band of foreign spies, the enemy was an "evil empire" and their Communist ideology. It was during this period of renewed anti-communism sentiment, military buildup, and reinvigorated nuclear arms race that I began my thirty-year military career. Midway through my career, a tour of duty onboard *Nightwatch* (E-4B) would provide valuable insights to the storylines behind such classic films as *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963), *Fail-Safe* (1964), and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).⁸ Trained to conduct the same mission as depicted in the made-for-television docudrama *Countdown to Looking Glass* (1984), I experienced the rigors of real-world nuclear command and control duty. Not

⁶ Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 267-68.

⁷ Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 203.

⁸ The E-4B unofficially referred to as the "Doomsday Aircraft," serves as the "National Airborne Operations Center (NAOC) for the National Command Authorities. In case of national emergency or destruction of ground command and control centers, the aircraft provides a modern, highly survivable, command, control and communications center to direct U.S. forces, execute emergency war orders and coordinate actions by civil authorities." Source: *U.S. Air Force Factsheet* on the E-4B. There are only four E-4B aircraft in the Air Force inventory, with one constantly on alert. During my tour of duty, President Clinton directed the name change, in 1994, from National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP) to NAOC in order to eliminate the Cold War stigmatism. Even though additional missions were picked up to support the Secretary of Defense and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the primary mission remained the same.

only did this series of events mold my perspective—insights and viewpoints—it provided a fundamental understanding of the topic at hand.

One can surmise that while the intent is to analyze compare and contrast the leading writers on this topic, it will also evaluate their arguments or reasoning as well as to determine their motivations. As cautioned earlier, the goal is to *objectively* evaluate the material; however, since it is being evaluated using my mental lens there is *subjective analysis* at work. The last point before you proceed is to understand my motivation in completing this work. The first is my passion for watching and studying American and British films—science fiction, combat, drama, film noir, comedy, and action—that portray aspects of atomic technology—both energy and weapons—and its effects on humanity. The second, a more recent development, is my keen interest in understanding how others interpreted the same films that he has enjoyed over the years—an academic understanding of noted scholars in the field. The third is the culmination of my humanities education in which answering the question of “What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology?” this document serves to achieve. The nexus of these three is what follows next. So where do we begin? We begin at the beginning.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves with an explosive that is far from completely perfected. Yet the future possibilities of such explosives are appalling, and their effects on future wars and international affairs are one of fundamental importance. Here is a new tool for mankind, a tool of unimaginative destructive power. Its development raises many questions that must be answered in the near future. . . . These questions are not technical; they are political and social questions, and the answers given to them may affect all mankind for generations.

—Henry De Wolf Smyth, *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes. The Official Report on the Development of the Atomic Bomb Under the Auspices of the United States Government, 1940-1945*

Birth of Atomic Cinema

It was H. G. Wells, who in 1914, first named the destructive force of radioactivity and the “atomic bomb” in his novel *The World Set Free*.¹ Between then and 1939, when the atomic fission discovery went public, most writings that discussed atomic technology and the results of their development were considered science fiction by the public. This was especially true on the silver screen. In motion pictures, such references were normally portrayed by the protagonist’s inventions, powered by mysterious energy sources or pseudo-atomic sources by today’s standards. The earliest example of this was in the American silent film serial *The Power God* (1925) in which the compassionate scientist invents an engine that draws unlimited power from the atoms in the air and must keep its secrets from a gang of henchmen who wish to use the device for evil purposes. Later on, it was powerful ray guns capable of death (*Chandu the Magician* [1932]), downing aircraft (*Ghost Patrol* [1936]), and even intergalactic attacks of Earth (*Flash Gordon: Rocketship* [1936]) that filled audiences with notions of fantastic weaponry of the future. The first film, albeit a horror film, to dramatize the effects of radiation

¹ H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1914), passim.

poisoning was *The Invisible Ray* (1936). The lead scientist, Boris Karloff, travels to the African continent to locate a meteorite composed of a rare element—Radium X—necessary for his scientific discovery to restore eyesight to the blind. However, overexposure to the radiation nearly kills him, leaving him with the ability to kill anyone or anything the mere touch of his bare hand. These types of B-movies would continue to keep adolescent audiences entertained for years to come.

With the “announcement of the successful splitting of uranium 235” in January of 1939 and “the possibility of power derived from a chain reaction . . . a spate of newspaper and magazine articles hailing the atomic utopia of the future and darkly hinting at the possibility of weapons being designed by Nazi scientists” were published prior to the United States entry into World War II in such popular journals as *The New York Times*, *Collier’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, to name a few.² However, one story titled “Deadline,” published in the science fiction magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* (March 1944 issue), became the focus of an FBI investigation.³ Concerned that national secrets were possibly being leaked to the enemy, both the story’s author, Cleve Cartmill, and the magazine editor, John W. Campbell were interrogated regarding the tale’s chillingly accurate description of the workings of an atomic bomb—published fourteen months before the first atomic test was conducted at Alamogordo, New Mexico.⁴ Nonetheless, this freedom of information regarding atomic utopia was short-lived as both Britain and the United States imposed strict censorship of all literature that might address atomic theory, which could inadvertently divulge the classified information connected with the

² Paul Brians, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), 6-7; “What About Atomic Power? Facts and Fancy Separated,” *The Science News-Letter* 37, no. 20 (18 May 1940): 307.

³ Cleve Cartmill, “Deadline,” *Astounding Science Fiction*, March 1944.

⁴ Brians, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984*, 9.

Manhattan Project to Nazi agents.⁵ Ironically, one exception to the rule was granted to *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine. Campbell had successfully challenged the FBI's demands to redact any future episodes of the science fiction serials that incorporated atomic technology as part of their storyline. He convinced the authorities that such redaction would likely generate far greater interest by foreign powers in these stories than if they allowed them to continue as routine fictional plots.

After five years of censorship, the cloak of secrecy was removed on 6 August 1945, when President Truman released a statement announcing the use of the A-bomb on Hiroshima. He began by stating that: "Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT. . . . It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. . . . What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history."⁶ His words would christen a new era for humanity—the atomic age. Almost immediately leading scientists, politicians, and philosophers around the globe began extolling the "harnessing of the atom" as a benefit to civilization or deprecating it as the bane of humanity's existence. Even key members of the Manhattan Project portended that atomic power would forever change future warfare and political dialogue—a course of events that time could not turn back. Niels Bohr and J. Robert Oppenheimer pressed upon government officials to create an International Atomic Development Authority that would maintain control of atomic energy and atomic weapons.⁷ Although promoted by

⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶ Philip L. Cantelon, Richard G. Hewlett, and Robert Chadwell Williams, *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 64-67.

⁷ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Question: The United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1946-1976* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24; Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39-40;

President Truman, this ill-fated proposal—referred to as the Baruch Plan—set before the nascent United Nations met defeat with the Soviet Union as well as with the American public. Neither would concede to a supranational governing authority that would not report to the UN “Security Council, thereby making its dictates immune to the veto of one of the Council's permanent members.”⁸ A direr proposal came from well-known British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who suggested, “that the United States threaten the Soviet Union with nuclear destruction, if Moscow did not cooperate in the quest for world peace and order.”⁹ Debates like these and others concerning America’s stance on atomic weapons and energy would permeate all walks of American society.

Within the literary circles, “pulp writers of science fiction found themselves in an equivocal position after the explosion over Hiroshima of the first atomic bomb. On the one hand, they were acknowledged as prophets proven right by the course of events. On the other hand, many were both disappointed in and fearful of the ways in which the government proposed to handle its “ultimate weapon,” ways very different from those the writers themselves would have chosen.”¹⁰ With the end of the war, scriptwriters and actors came back from the wars and resumed their craft. “The Depression impoverishment in which they had started was over, as pent-up demand for civilian goods produced an economic boom instead of the mass unemployment government experts had predicted”—a boom in which movie attendance, like other consumer activities,

Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present*, 70.

⁸ Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Question: The United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1946-1976*, 23-24.

⁹ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁰ Albert L. Berger, “The Triumph of Prophecy: Science Fiction and Nuclear Power in the Post-Hiroshima Period,” *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 9 (July 1976): 143.

flourished.¹¹ As America prospered, Hollywood and other film/television studios produced a large body of works over the years which would examine various aspects of atomic technology—both weapons and energy—across the spectrum of genres. Among the first post-war atomic films, *Cloak and Dagger* (1946) and *Rendezvous 24* (1946), presented in classic *film noir* style celebrated America's success in keeping the danger of atomic power out of the hands of the Nazis.

As the Cold War progressed—from atomic bombs to hydrogen bombs to space travel—there was no shortage of source materials for scriptwriters of stage, television and film as strategists, philosophers, government correspondents, anti-nuclear activists, defense advocates, journalists and novelists expressed paradoxical and contradictory attitudes toward atomic technology and science. While other genres would address the atomic dilemma throughout the Cold War, such material inspired an endless stream of science fiction narratives. Prior to the A-bomb, science fiction films had been limited to space travel, mad scientists, robots, comic books heroes, and the like—concepts originating from the imagination of transcendent novelists, such as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells to name a few. Post Hiroshima and even more so, after news of the first hydrogen bomb tests were publically released,¹² humanity became keenly concerned that it could possibly destroy the entire planet. Science fiction provided a means to discuss such prospects in the detached terms of fantasy. *Rocketship X-M* (1950) became the first in a long line of films to “dramatize the potential destruction of an entire civilization by

¹¹ Neil Barron, *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*, 5th ed. (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), 51.

¹² Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960*, 22.

nuclear weaponry.”¹³ This along with the success of George Pal’s *Destination Moon* (1950)—winning the Academy Award for Special Effects—elevated the science fiction genre to respectability among moviegoers.¹⁴ Armed with respectability, science fiction became big business. With the arrival of television, a new outlet for cinematic storylines—both recycled movies and new made-for television releases—concerning the atomic paradox informed society on an unparalleled scale. One author aptly pointed out that although “popular music and fiction can exercise considerable influence, no song, however widely played, and no book, regardless of sales, has anything like the reach and impact of the moving image.”¹⁵

Not only were science fiction and horror genres capitalizing on the *atomic cinema* craze, but so was the U.S. government. It was also during this early period, 1945-1962, that the U.S. government sponsored the greatest number of nuclear educational short films. Many, considered propaganda by today’s standards, they also included backing first pro-nuclear full-feature docudrama, *The Beginning or the End* (1947). Within a few years Arch Oboler’s *Five* (1951) hit the big screen to become the first “nuclear film to illustrate a futuristic vision of a society and its inhabitants in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.”¹⁶ Such was the dawn of *atomic cinema*—both sides of the nuclear paradox being portrayed in almost every genre.

¹³ M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 110.

¹⁴ John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), 94.

¹⁵ William L. O’Neill, “The “Good” War: National Security and American Culture,” in *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 517.

¹⁶ Jack G. Shaheen, *Nuclear War Films* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 16.

Defining Atomic Cinema

But whatever its sociological importance, sf cinema is basically a sensuous medium. It is the poetry of the atomic age, a shorthand evocation of the pressures that are making us what we are and will be. It is also air to a strange hieratic beauty and a cultural humor which one imagined technology had robbed us of. Just as the pop music of the Forties seems more redolent of that age is anxieties and attitudes than it's rather self-conscious literature, so phenomena like sf film may one day be seen to represent more completely than any other art form the angst of this decade.

—John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema*

This leads us to the focus of the study itself: What is *atomic cinema* really?

Before proceeding, one must first ask is it a genre, a subgenre, or a category of its own? Does there exist an agreed upon definition or distinguishable framework to classify it? The short answer is “it depends.” Depending on the author’s focus—nuclear, apocalyptic, or paranoia-based fiction films—as well as the timeframe being studied—just the 1950s, parts of the Cold War, or entire history of atomic themed fiction films—some authors have provided clear definitions or characteristics for the films addressed in their research. Others do not overtly provide such a definition, but rather assume the reader will determine this on their own as they wade through the selected films and television presentations contained within. Even defining genres becomes problematic as clearly defined attributes of a genre overlap in most films. Many films listed as science fiction by one film critic/historian is labeled a horror film by another. As Jeanine Basinger aptly points out: “Clichés about genre include[s] the idea that they are easily defined and recognized, that they are fixed and never change, that they are based only on recognizable literary devices—such as characters and plots—and that films are either one

genre or another. Actually, genres are hard to find, tricky, and contradictory.”¹⁷ This is evident in current online film databases that categorize most films under multiple genres, and many are associated with multiple subgenres. Consequently, the ability to truly assign a specific genre classification for each film discussed is difficult, to say the least. However, assigning one based to a category based on the construct of *atomic cinema* might prove conceivable.

Therefore, to obtain a suitable response this study will first define the term *atomic cinema*, discuss the symbolism associated with atomic cinema, and then analyze *how* audiences, critics and historians, understood these films. By conducting a study of past authors who have focused on nuclear-themed cinema, Chapter 2 will present a discussion on the evolution and expansion of genres in film and conclude with Susan Sontag’s 1965-touchstone article, “The Image of Disaster” and John Baxter’s analysis of science fiction. With this as a foundation Chapter 3 examines the etymology of this new term—*atomic cinema*—a term selected by the author. This is accomplished by tracing how authors since Sontag have characterized or categorized these films based on their distinctive approach—their mental lens. Often their titled work was indicative of this focus. While this list of titles is not all inclusive, some telltale titles include: *Nuclear War Films* (1978); *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (1983); *By the Bomb’s Early Light* (1985); *Nuclear Movies: A Critical Analysis and Filmography of International Feature Length Films Dealing with Experimentation, Aliens, Terrorism, Holocaust, and Other Disaster Scenarios, 1914-1989* (1991); *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Bomb* (1998); *Film and the Nuclear*

¹⁷ Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 7.

Age: Representing Cultural Anxiety (1998); *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (1999); *Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (1999); and *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (2002).

An inextricable part of this definition determination is linked to how cinematic expressions—illustrating the nuclear situation—were used and interpreted. Ever since humans have been able to communicate through language, words have educated, entertained, and influenced opinions. For nearly seven centuries, after the invention of the Gutenberg press in 1439, the mass-produced printed word was the primary means to document and communicate ideas on a grand scale. With the advent of radio broadcasts in the early twentieth century, entertainment and news were being piped into almost every household in America. In the hands of skilled producers, broadcasts reached out to all ages, all educational levels, and all walks of life providing a new form of amusement and means to influence the general public—whether to buy products, endorse political candidates, or support local causes. A mere decade later, motion pictures made their debut that would forever have an impact on society. With this technological marvel came the ability not only to entertain but also to document events as they actually occurred—edited to maximize effect—and replayed in theaters around the world. Its impact was not always praised. Such was the case of D. W. Griffiths’ *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) which was charged with inciting race riots in abolitionist cities where it was shown.¹⁸ In contrast, Hugo Munsterberg, Harvard psychology professor urged in his 1915 study *The Photoplay: a Psychological Study* that even though the “sources of danger cannot be overlooked, the social reformer ought to focus his interest still more on the tremendous

¹⁸ Ian C. Jarvie, *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 2-3.

influences for good which may be exerted by the moving pictures.”¹⁹ Concomitantly, cultural critic Walter Benjamin considered film a powerful agent for both good and bad. One in which film’s “social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”²⁰ And fellow film critic and theorist, Siegfried Kracauer, author of *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* went a step further by postulating that film has the ability to influence but also capture the psyche of a nation—its *zeitgeist*.²¹ As film gained even greater acceptance in society as both entertainment and art, so grew the number of film and cultural scholars—skeptics and proponents alike—who studied, catalogued, and debated film’s growing social impact.

Such was the case after the beginning of World War II. “World War II put movies at the very center of American popular culture” and the U.S. government quickly enlisted Hollywood to win the war.²² In an industry dominated by American Jews, gaining their support to fight a cinematic war against Fascism required little urging by the Washington policymakers.²³ With the exception of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), Hollywood historically portrayed the military in a favorable way, and continued to do so throughout World War II.²⁴ For the next four years, “the motion picture industry became the pre-eminent transmitter of wartime policy and a lightning rod for public

¹⁹ Hugo Muensterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916), 155.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Ardent (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968; reprint, Schocken Books, 1985), 221-22.

²¹ Jarvie, *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology*, 43-44.

²² O’Neill, “The ‘Good’ War: National Security and American Culture,” 518-19.

²³ Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 14.

²⁴ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 113-14.

discourse.”²⁵ Films were scripted to improve morale and reassure American moviegoers that we were indeed fighting—and winning—the just cause. Whether through comedy or drama, scripts were carefully written that depicted America at its best—on the front lines and back at home.²⁶

This willingness of Hollywood to support government policies continued as the Cold War developed. Movies continued to promote the successes of the military services during World War II. Whether fact-based or fictional they boasted pro-American values—aimed not only at U.S. audiences, but oftentimes aimed at “embedding American-style democratic values in foreign cultures, especially in such new theaters of the Cold War as Central America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.”²⁷ However, as the Cold War nuclear arsenals expanded, major Hollywood studios found themselves walking a fine line in addressing the increasing nuclear anxiety in America as they faced constant pressures from government and other conservative organizations not to undermine government policies regarding nuclear defense. Besides the U.S. government, there were other organizations either supporting or opposing the government’s position on nuclear armament and energy that leveraged atomic cinema to influence their immediate audiences.

Government intervention into the major studios’ monopoly over the industry in the late 1940s and ultimate dismemberment in the early 1950s gave rise to the independent studios—historical purveyors of westerns, and now the science fiction/horror genres—who found themselves no longer content with rolling out just mindless cinematic

²⁵ Donald Fishman, “The Cold War: Three Episodes in Waging a Cinematic Battle,” in *War and Film in America: Historical and Critical Essays*, ed. Marilyn J. Matelski and Nancy Lynch Street (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 44.

²⁶ Fishman, “The Cold War: Three Episodes in Waging a Cinematic Battle,” 44.

²⁷ Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 117.

entertainment but now willing to tackle the paradoxes of nuclear arms and energy in their signature works.

Such was the world of film and later television shows as the Cold War began. Topical issues such as anti-communism, accidental nuclear war, efforts to promote civil defense efforts, as well as nuclear accidents were reflected through various plot elements—some clearer than others. These became nuclear symbols, motifs, and metaphors that manifested themselves into several thematic patterns found throughout the various genres. For example, in the science fiction and horror genres of the 1950s, radioactive fallout from earlier atomic atmospheric testing became the source for genetic mutations that created giant insects and fifty-foot tall humans, while the desert landscape served to emphasize the dire prospects of the post-atomic holocaust world in many futuristic dramas. In other cases, the desert was chosen to link the film's plot to either the Nevada or the New Mexico atomic test sites. As noted film scholar and documentary filmmaker, Toni Perrine points out, "The desert setting is significant not just for its historical connection to the fear of radioactive fallout, but for its important contribution to the *mise-en-scène* of the film."²⁸ Such was the case in the film *Them!* (1954). Called in to investigate strange disturbances in the New Mexico desert, Dr. Medford (Edmund Gwen) concludes that radiation from the first atomic bomb test site—Alamogordo—produced the mutant ants that were beginning to spread from their desert habitat. And for the early mystery and spy thrillers, just the mention of the "Manhattan Project" alerted audiences that the characters in the film were talking about atomic secrets—national

²⁸ Toni A. Perrine, *Film and the Nuclear Age: Representing Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Garland Publisher, 1998), 84-85.