

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margot A. Henrikson. *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xxvi + 451 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08310-3.

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In the film *The War at Home* (a documentary on the 1960s in Madison, Wisconsin), one activist recounts how the bombing of North Vietnam forced him to flash back to his own civil defense training in the 1950s. This connection between the atomic bomb and the turmoil of the 1960s is the subject of *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*, an ambitious and inspired work by Margot A. Henrikson of the University of Hawaii.

Henrikson argues that the atomic bomb had a revolutionary impact on American culture. She describes America in the years after Hiroshima as "schizoid." For a majority of Americans, the bomb "became the unifying symbol of American safety and consensus," but for a small but growing minority it represented "American insecurity, immorality, insanity, and rebelliousness" (xxii). The emergence of a "culture of dissent" became evident as early as the late 1940s, particularly in popular culture forms such as film, fiction, and music. The explosive Cold War crises of the Kennedy administration incited a "moral awakening" about the bomb, according to Henrikson, as everyday Americans faced the real threat of nuclear annihilation for the first time. This awakening is best exemplified by Stanley Kubrick's classic 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, the first open critique of the bomb in popular culture. After Kubrick's film, the "culture of dissent" grew into the activism and rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s, which ultimately helped weaken the power of the Cold War state that controlled the bomb.

*Dr. Strangelove's America* is a remarkably rich survey of postwar American popular culture. The author's knowledge of popular films and novels is particularly impressive. Henrikson finds anxiety over the bomb lurk-

ing in virtually every corner of American culture, from academia to Elvis. Many of the author's examples are thought-provoking and insightful, such as her identification of the bomb shelter craze during the 1961 Berlin crisis as a turning point in the public's perceptions. However, Henrikson sometimes sees the bomb's influence where it may not be all that great. For example, she argues that a wave of films about disgruntled veterans in the 1940s was evidence of nascent antiwar sentiment and a growing suspicion of the government that developed and controlled the bomb. This interpretation may have some merit, but with nearly sixteen million recently-discharged veterans returning home during these years, the immediate and personal challenges these men and women faced every day in readjusting to civilian life are probably more likely explanations for the popularity of such films.

In the end, Henrikson overemphasizes the bomb as an instrument of cultural change. She claims that the bomb was "central...in fomenting the...countercultural rebelliousness of the 1960s (xix). The author devotes little time to another topic about which Americans were schizoid at the time, and have been since the founding of the nation: race relations. The postwar civil rights movement raised many of the same questions about the morality and legitimacy of Cold War America, and provided some of the first protest experiences for the activists of the 1960s. Interestingly, Henrikson cites the 1962 Port Huron Statement as evidence of the bomb's influence on early student radicals, but in the passage she quotes puts equal emphasis on civil rights. *Dr. Strangelove's America* demonstrates rather convincingly that the bomb played a larger role in the activism of the 1960s and 1970s than has heretofore been recognized. Whether that role was

as significant as the author suggests is debatable.

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