

Atomic Media: Throughout the Years

The dropping of the atomic bomb on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of the atomic age. Many countries now possess the weapon that killed a hundred thousand in an instant (the new versions being far more powerful). This historic tragedy has been seen in many different lights, and along with the shift in public attitude, there has been a shift in media coverage in regard to the bomb and its deadly potential. Through the exploration of popular media throughout the ages since the launch of the two bombs, the division between revisionist and traditionalist narratives becomes apparent. The perspectives around the belief that the use of nuclear energy is necessary and will propel us into a new age is a common reflection of traditionalist narrative, whereas its a horror, something to be abandoned and that will be our ultimate undoing. For the purpose of this essay, I will be using the comics periods as they reflect a greater shift in the public consciousness, and their descriptors such as gold, bronze, and atomic, neatly categorize a set period of time that is otherwise harder to pinpoint.

Slowly, the idea that nuclear bombs were a necessity has decreased. Though the vast majority still believe that the bombs were necessary, Pew Research cites a generational divide. Stating, “Seven-in-ten Americans ages 65 and older say the use of atomic weapons was justified, but only 47% of 18- to 29-year-olds agree.”¹ The article was released in 2015, seventy years after the bombing, and many of the older participants would have grown up hearing the traditionalist narrative about the bomb and whereas younger people may have had more access to the debate in regard to the bomb. Not to mention the litany of post-apocalyptic narratives that have come out about nuclear armageddon. However, the vast majority still believe the bomb was necessary,

¹ Stokes, B. (2015). 70 years after Hiroshima, opinions have shifted on use of atomic bomb. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/08/04/70-years-after-hiroshima-opinions-have-shifted-on-use-of-atomic-bomb/>

“finds that the share of Americans who believe the use of nuclear weapons was justified is now 56%, with 34% saying it was not.”² With this data in mind the prevalence of nukes in our media has an interesting place.

Ten years after the nuclear bombs were dropped the Godzilla film made its way to America and a few major changes happened to the landscape of American media. In the world of comics, the comics code authority was formed as a result of an increase in violence amongst young people that was blamed on the increasingly violent depictions of comics, particularly the horror and supernatural genres, however, superheroes found themselves swept up in this wave of censorship as well. This began what is known as the silver age of comics in which comics essentially self-censored to avoid offending the morality police of the time. This also is the rise of atomic energy in the creation of heroes, villains, and mutants. In John Galatai’s article on the subject, he poses the question of why has every subsequent generation feared nuclear power and weapons and he points to a loophole exploited by comics and horror media set forth by the comics code authority, which had banned most monsters, gore, blood, and etc, the exception being robots, aliens, and atomic warfare. They were heavily used in 1950-60s American comics, as a rise in high sci-fi conceptions, the uses of nuclear power being used to create heroes and villains alike. The nuclear bomb and atomic energy became synonymous with creation of heroes in the age of the 50s and 60s. From captain atom to Spider-man the popularity of radioactivity became synonymous with power, and heroic ideals.

The period before the 50s and 60s was an interesting time in terms of atomic energy since by 1949 the U.S. was not the only superpower to possess nuclear weaponry. The period between the transition to the heavily regulated media gives an unfiltered snapshot of what American progressives and the general public were moving towards as well as ideas on nuclear energy. The

² Stokes, B. (2015).

era of 1948-1955 is known as the Atomic Age of comics for the last eighty years. This age is characterized by its infatuation with atomic energy, where it is most often characterized as a force for good. A good of sample from this time comes in 1949 Superman comic, in which he takes a pill that mess with his mind and the cure is flying into a mushroom cloud.³ Perhaps a better example is EC comics Judgment Day, in which an astronaut Tarlton travels to a planet Cybrina in his nuclear-powered ship only to find systematic injustice of the robotic species based on color, and subsequently denies them entry to the Great Galactic Republic, citing that only once humans were able to dismantle their own systems of inequality were they truly able to live in harmony. It is then revealed that Tarlton was black this whole time and that the future humanity has created is propelled by equality and atomic power.⁴ This age is characterized by a more optimistic look at atomic energy and was primarily targeted toward adult readers. This media is an interesting reflection of the broader narratives at the time, showing the pride in the scientific accomplishments of America, as a sense of forward progress, along with it being a sense of nationalism. There is a heavy focus on atomic energy/ the bomb as a force for good, whether it be from more patriotic comics or progressive ones in general atomic energy seems to be primarily utilized as a good thing. Despite this period falling more in line with the traditionalist narrative, in the world of historiography, there is already analysis questioning the necessity of the bombs. From Heresy's Hiroshima, and the scientist themselves, yet despite this Stimson's analysis remained popular and the media seems to reflect this. During this time, many American

³ Galati, J. (2019, July 18). A Balance of Terror: John Carpenter, Nuclear Weapons, and Our Enduring National Fear - Comic Book Herald. Comic Book Herald.
<https://www.comicbookherald.com/a-balance-of-terror-john-carpenter-nuclear-weapons-and-our-enduring-national-fear/>

⁴Cronin, B. (2019). The Anti-Racism Comic Book Story That Beat the Comics Code Authority. CBR.
<https://www.cbr.com/judgment-day-ec-comics-code-authority/>

heroes especially former military members would gain atomic-based superpowers such as Captain Atom.

There is a shift after the 1954 publication called *Seduction of the Innocent* which prompted the creation of the Comic Code Authority, and the end of the Atomic Age of Comics. In its place, the Silver Age rose and while for the purposes of this essay, I will mostly be skipping over this, it featured more campy styles of comics for DC and Marvel that were granted more freedom in the genre. Their famous Fantastic Four comic represents a new take on atomic energy as it morphs and physically changes the four members of the team, and where for the most part many of them still appear very human, Ben Grimm is completely mutated to “The Thing”, a living monster that has a hard rocky exterior. His life is radically altered as he is permanently disfigured and struggles as society labels him a monster. He struggles with love interests and his interpersonal relationships. Not even the other members of the fantastic four can completely relate to him and his experience. His disfigurement by the cosmic energy is similar to those disfigured by the bomb. Especially with how often the Thing and his feelings get sidelined by the others because for them it gave them awesome powers, like how the U.S. swept the devastation under the rug because of its power and potential, well the rest of Baxter building’s crew can go on and lead normal lives, he is treated as a freak every day and ostracized by the greater society. Something unique to Marvel at the time was its social commentary, though it may not be a direct one-to-one with those who were victims of the bomb, it is interesting to see how the early disfigurement as a result of exposure to radiation became a popular trope within media, another such instance being the Incredible Hulk. This marks a change in public perception of radiation as following the dropping of the atomic bomb, U.S. news used a mixture of censorship and misdirection to minimize the effects of radiation from nuclear fallout.⁵ Though

⁵ Cronin, B. (2018, December 29). The Many Loves of the Fantastic Four's Thing. CBR.

the traditionalist view would remain the dominant trope of the media, gradually there was the introduction of its consequence and fear of it. Between the late fifties and early sixties, radiation as a force of disfigurement and mutation would become a popularized trope in media. This represents a remarkable shift, as the fifties were a lot more pro-bomb, whereas the sixties were more fearful. For example, fallout shelters are being advertised for basements.⁶ There was a notable cultural shift surrounding the bomb and its potential, all of this culminated in the infamous ad for Lyndon B. Johnson that only aired once. In 1964, the ad “Daisy” was aired and it featured a little girl counting the petals on a daisy, transposed between the countdown for an atomic bomb, then it urges the view to vote for Lyndon B. Johnson.⁷ From this it is clear as far as American media is concerned the bomb is no longer seen as forward progress, but rather a threat, though it grants great power it often comes at a price. The examples shown from superhero media and the Daisy ad show a clear present shift from the optimism of the forties and The Atomic Age of Comics.

The seventies to the eighties gave rise to what is called the Bronze Age of comics, representing a loosening of the code as well as a greater range of media exploration. Following the various civil rights movements and the resurgence of feminism, a great shift took place in media output, and this extends to discussions around atomic energy and the bomb. This is the start of the rise of post-apocalyptic fiction following nuclear destruction, such media became especially popular in the eighties with works such as *The Terminator*, and *Mad Max*, as well as novels such as *Always Coming Home*. This is also the time period in which one of the largest events in comic book history occurred, called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the main villain the

<https://www.cbr.com/fantastic-four-thing-love-interests/>

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⁷ “‘Daisy’ Ad (1964): Preserved from 35mm in the Tony Schwartz Collection.” YouTube, 7 Sept. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=riDypPIKfOU&t=1s.

Anti-Monitor possessed the ability to manipulate matter and atoms, made entirely of destructive energy threatened the multiverse of DC. The destructive potential of the atom bomb and the idea of mutually assured destruction had been all but cemented in the public consciousness. A mass movement arose for nuclear disarmament and for the freeze of testing for nuclear weaponry. The movement was massive and protests happened all over the country. Though there was not much violence between military personnel and activist.⁸ In 1979, there were protests for a nuclear freeze on Wall Street, blaming corporations for the nuclear arms race. In 1980, the same year Regan was elected, 59 towns in Massachusetts passed referendums advocating nuclear freeze. In 1982, 750,000-1 million protestors showed up in New York, as the U.N. met for a Second Session on Disarmament.⁹ The atomic bomb had no longer become a symbol of American pride, but rather one of damnation. It is important to note, that in the 1980s color footage of the result of the bombings would be finally released to the public and the devastation was apparent. As a result, there is a further shift towards the revisionist position as the devastation is clear and the fear continues to build.

This perspective continued into the late eighties and nineties. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, nuclear weaponry and special operations across the West began to diminish. The signing of the second START treaty in 1993 limits nuclear warheads to 3,000-3,500, about ten percent of what each nation held at the peak of their stockpiles.¹⁰ The movements for disarmament were successful and worldwide nuclear weaponry begins to be dismantled, but what effect does this have on the media and what does the public think about the bomb? In 1991,

⁸ Anti-nuclear Activists and Protest Actions (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). NPS.gov Homepage (U.S. National Park Service). <https://www.nps.gov/articles/antinuclearactivism.htm>

⁹ Falzone, C. (2012). Nuclear Freeze Campaign, 1970s-1980s |. Education and Research on Global Disarmament Policy.

<https://disarmament.blogs.pace.edu/nyc-nuclear-archive/nuclear-freeze-campaign-1970s-1980s/>

¹⁰ "Timeline." Atomicarchive.com: Exploring the History, Science, and Consequences of the Atomic Bomb, <https://www.atomicarchive.com/index.html>.

a survey done by PEW research found that 63% of the populace believed that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified, a 22% decrease from forty-six years earlier, the Cold War had certainly taken its toll, and as nuclear weaponry itself increasingly became the focus of post-apocalyptic imagery.¹¹ During this period a new medium would be used to explore the horrors of nuclear weaponry. Video games have gotten a negative reputation in the modern era and that's rather unfortunate as the series Fallout proves as it explores a post-apocalyptic future, in the 22nd century where the player, dwells in a nuclear shelter and sets out on a quest to repair their water systems. The background story for the game is that in the year 2077, the United States and China engaged in nuclear warfare that ended modern civilization, and the survivors live off of the salvage of the old world.¹² It is notable to mention the war between the U.S. and China lasted less than two hours, yet that was enough to destroy modern society in the Fallout series, it truly exemplifies the fears of the decades of the cold war and nuclear escalation. This further exemplifies a push towards the bombs being unnecessary and cruel weaponry. It is clear to see through examples like these why the decision was becoming less and less popular and the traction the revisionist narrative was gaining.

The media of the nineties often gets ridiculed for an infatuation with post-apocalypse, world-shattering events, and anti-heroes. This period is often referred to as the Dark Ages, known for its darker themes and stories such as the Death of Superman, and Xmen Apocalypse. Nuclear weaponry, with the potential to destroy the world as we know it, was truly frightening and devastating. However, certain media suggest that the fear of the bomb came from outside rather than internally. The 1996 film Independence Day, follows an alien invasion of Earth, the aliens deploy saucers over major cities all over the world, and the destruction is similar to that of

¹¹ Stokes, B. (2015).

¹² Wikipedia contributors. (2023). Fallout (video game). Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallout_\(video_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallout_(video_game))

atomic bombs, however, instead of killing a hundred thousand, they kill millions. The nuclear weapon is used twice within the film, once in a trial run over Houston which destroys it, and finally on July 4th after a patriotic speech by the United States president, the mothership of the alien's ship is bombed following its shields being disabled ending the threat. Independence Day is a patriotic tribute to America in every sense, the day when the alien threat is defeated coincides with July fourth, the American independence day for which the movie is named, despite the aliens attacking the world, it is the United States who takes action and defeat their foe using the ultimate power that it achieved. Yet, at the same time, it represents the fear of a foreign threat with weapons that could wipe out cities the same way that a nuclear bomb can. In the movie, it is the American president's design to nuke the alien ship with their queen (sidebars hive minds are often used as an allegory for communists) devastating their species, yet ending the war.¹³ The piece is supposed to be a feel-good us versus them, type of piece, but the morality behind it is very dubious. Testing the nuclear weaponry over Houston, nuking the Hive Minds queenship and all topped off with the speech from fictional President Whitmore filled with American patriotic cliches such as not going quietly into the night and Independence Day. It reeks of American exceptionalism. The interesting thing this is surprisingly close to the post-WW2 narrative America has pushed in regard to war, America enters the war and swiftly ends it, with the bomb ending the conflict without any more violence. It takes the very traditionalist approach of the nuke being used to save more lives and as the only means to put an end to a bloody wasteful war. The aliens mirror the American perspective of the Japanese in World War 2, where there was no negotiation all they wanted was to see humanity dead by any means. Yet at the same time carries the fear of the Cold War, with an enemy holding a weapon

¹³ "Independence Day (1996 Film)." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Apr. 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_\(1996_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_(1996_film)).

that could kill millions in minutes and nothing can be done about it. The film's position on nuclear warfare paints it as a last resort, yet extremely necessary contrasting with the messages of many other popular pieces of the time in which nukes were only weapons of wanton destruction. If any piece perfectly represents why the approval rate has stayed in the majority I believe it is this one, the idea that America is a liberating force and it can be trusted with such a weapon was not invented by this movie, and nor is the first time this idea has been iterated, but this specific instance is important as it is an example so close to next major event that would influence the perspective on nuclear weapons

The film *Deterrence* which came out in 1999 is closer to the more standard fear of the use of nuclear weapons and is closer to the revisionist narrative. The film takes place in 2008, a second Korean war is occurring and in the midst of this President Emerson, who recently risen from his position as vice president due to the death of the President, is planning for the election when he receives news that Iraq has invaded Kuwait and in the process killed UN mission largely staffed by American citizens. In response, he makes an announcement calling for the president of Iraq to submit himself for arrest at the U.S. embassy in ninety minutes and cease the invasion of Kuwait or nukes will be launched on Baghdad. The Iraq president refuses and threatens to launch nuclear weapons he had bought from the black market, supposedly from France. Eventually, time runs out and Emerson launches the nuclear attack on Baghdad decimating it, Iraq fires back, and while some of their missiles land the nukes fail. It is then revealed that Iraq was sold the black market nukes directly from the U.S. using France as a proxy in order to sabotage their nuclear weapons development and that Emerson believes that his attack will force China and Korea to concede to the Second Korean War in the following months.¹⁴ True

¹⁴ “Deterrence (Film).” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 Apr. 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deterrence_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deterrence_(film)).

to its name, the nuclear attack carried out by Emerson was a deterrence and an attempt to stoke fear in the enemies of the U.S. This film is interesting because it largely mirrors the second world war in a way that is different from Independence Day, rather it closer to the revisionist narrative that the bombs were dropped as a deterrence to the Soviet Union in the final days of the war. In this President Emerson mirrors Truman, as he was not elected president, but vice president, and is thrust into a situation he is not fully prepared for. The information on the false nukes was revealed to him to as he was not actively involved or briefed on it. He also justifies his use of nuclear weapons to the general public by stating it was a necessity in order to protect America by any means, especially since the bulk of U.S. military forces were involved in the Second Korean War. While privately he states that he believes the display will force China and Korea's concession. If Independence Day was a reflection of more traditionalist narratives around the nuclear bomb, Deterrence more closely mirrors the revisionist perspective.

September 11, 2001, is a day that most Americans know by heart at this point, and considering how often it is brought it up, it likely will not be forgotten for the next several decades. The destruction of the twin towers represented the first foreign attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. America has long enjoyed the prospect of being isolated from the rest global West, and thus when major wars such as the first and second world war occurred the American continent was virtually unscathed, thus Japan's attack and Osama Bin Laden's attack were landmark events, not to minimize those events, but the ones that followed far eclipsed those initial attacks. This essay is not on September eleventh, but rather the shift in the public consciousness over time in regards to the atomic bomb and exploration in media, and this event in particular set up a shift that was felt almost immediately. In December, America announced it would withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and in his 2002 State of the Union

address Bush denounced Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an axis of evil (invoking WW2 comparison to the Axis powers).¹⁵ America is gearing up for war, and the public consciousness shifts. While these major historical events take place in between them in November 2001, the DCAU released their magnum opus *The Justice League*. *The Justice League* begins with a secret invasion of shape-shifting aliens who turned out to be behind a mass movement for nuclear disarmament in order to weaken Earth's defenses to overtake it, this, of course, leads to the formation of the Justice League, a coalition of America's top superheroes who along with their new alien ally end the invasion. The Justice League themselves have a complicated relationship with the American government, especially Batman, but it is interesting that nuclear disarmament is the first thing tackled in its debut. *The Justice League* does not shy away from deeper issues, especially emotional conflict, but the question of disarmament is something that one does not expect from such a show, especially for a three-part opener. It is also considering the recent history of the movement for disarmament it is a rather interesting perspective. Though the show displays how underhanded the U.S. military can be through characters like Amanda Waller, these first few episodes seem to make the case that disarmament is a mistake and leaves America weak and vulnerable to attack. Though the show would have been in production prior to September eleventh it is a rather interesting stance considering the attack. The fact of the U.S. withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty came a year later, may show the sentiment that many felt that America was too vulnerable to attack. *The Justice League* is in of itself picking up a plotline from *Superman The Quest For Peace*, in which Superman disarms the nuclear weapons of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, however here it is played as a naive, but good-intentioned move that inevitably bites them when the alien attack comes. It shows how quickly the media perspective can change from traditionalist to revisionist within less than twenty years.

¹⁵ "Timeline: Iraq War." BBC News, BBC, 5 July 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36702957>.

Today the vast majority of Americans believe that the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were in fact necessary. Yet, that opinion seems to be becoming less and less popular, based on the media analysis I doubt it will ever fall out of favor. America's fear of nuclear destruction has always been foreign and despite the litany of anti-nuclear messaging the resurgence of traditionalist belief in the necessity of weaponry post-9/11, suggests that foreign threats will always outweigh the horror of the bombs and their effects. This is further shown by the fact that even though more and more Americans believe that bombs were not necessary, the vast majority do not believe that America should issue a formal apology. The bombings and its effects have led to debates that have lasted decades, and the media itself reflects public perception and opinion of this tumultuous event.

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