Atomic Cinema and the Catastrophic Aesthetic

Professor Jennifer Fay

Course Description:
The atomic mushroom cloud is the iconic symbol of Japanese erasure, American victory, and the protracted cold war and arms race that threatened the world with total annihilation. At once infinitely representable and yet impossible to see much less experience, the nuclear explosion gave rise to new seen and unseen visual registers, temporalities, sexualities, aesthetics, politics and forms of the sacred that we now associate with the so-called “first” nuclear age. This class investigates cinema’s relationship to atomic culture as a narrative, visual, and affective phenomenon, and tries to make sense of atomic cultural history across the Atlantic and Pacific as we now move into the second nuclear age. From U.S government documentaries to European and Japanese art-cinema, from B-horror films to Bollywood, to high budget melodramas, from satire to sincerity, the “atomic” texts covered in this class will cut across a range of genres and national cinemas.

• What does it mean to envision global annihilation? How is nuclear apocalypse connected to religious, messianic narratives?
• Is there an atomic temporality and historicity? Does this explosion announce a new historical episteme?
• How does the atom sensitize us to new scales of matter from the cosmic sublime to the molecular particle?
• How do atomic histories give rise to fantasies of nuclear futures?
• From genetically damaged victims to ultra superheroes, how has the bomb and radiation challenged our notions of “the human?”
• How does the culture of nuclear containment impact postwar sexuality?
• How does this cinematically representable blast produce unseen, unobservable effects, and how can cinema render the invisible visible?
• What are the psychological effects of survival, and how may cinema engage traumatic experience?
• What is the relationship between traumatizing visuality and narrative?
• How does film culture manage our collective nuclear politics and sense of shared fate and responsibility?

Required Texts:


Recommended:

Course Requirements:
1. Weekly questions
3. Robust class participation

Weekly Questions: For each of our meetings you will be asked to prepare a 150-300 word (typed) reflection on the film and readings for the week. As these texts are, in some weeks, rather disparate, you may focus on one particular detail, or work out some of the ways these text may be connected. Ideally, this reflection may be formulated as a substantial question or set of questions followed by your own tentative answer. You might also briefly explain how you arrived at this question. These short weekly writings will hopefully be the prompts for our in-class discussion and, as the semester unfolds, they will help you track your own set of critical interventions (thus preparing the way for your final paper.)

Seminar Paper: This is an opportunity for you to write an article-length, publishable, and, above all, original essay on a topic related to this course. I expect you to make use of some course materials, but also to stake out some new ground. I will not accept papers that have been submitted for another class; this should constitute new work. Please adhere to either the MLA or Chicago Manual of Style format.

Participation: This graduate seminar presumes attendance and robust participation. Come to class having done the reading and watched the films, ready to jump into discussion with questions, connections, and thoughtful responses to the material.

Course Schedule
Week 1 (Aug. 26): A Tale of two Hiroshimas
Screening: *A Tale of Two Cities* (US War Department, 1946, 12 min.)

Read: Hersey, *Hiroshima*
Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 1-67

Week 2 (Sept. 2): Apocalypse and the Portrait
Screening: *White Light/ Black Rain* (Okazaki, 2007, 85 min.)

Read: Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Week 3 (Sept. 9): You Saw Nothing at Hiroshima
Screening: *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959, 90 min).

Read: Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*
Week 4 (Sept. 16): Atomic Archives, Impossible Futures
Screening:  
*La Jetée* (Marker, 1962, 28 min)  
*On the Beach* (Kramer, 1959, 134 min.)  
In class *Duck and Cover*

Read:  
Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” *Diacritics* Vol. 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), 21-31. JSTOR  
Boyar, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, “Introduction”

Week 5 (Sept. 23): Raymond Burr goes to Tokyo
Screening:  
*Gorijia* (Honda, 1954, 98 min.)  
*Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (Americanized Version starring Raymond Burr, Honda, 1956)

Read:  
Peter Schwender and John Whittier Treat, “America’s Hiroshima, Hiroshima’s America” *boundary 2* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring, 1994): 233-253. JSTOR  
Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster.” 1961  
[http://www.iiiieee.net/random/id/id.pdf](http://www.iiiieee.net/random/id/id.pdf)

Week 6 (Sept. 30): Denucleated Cities/ Nuclear Noir
Screening:  
*Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955, 106 min.)  
*House in the Middle* (Federal Civil Defense Administration, 12 min.)

Read:  
Davis, “Fortress L.A.” From *City of Quartz*.  
Recommended: Boyar, *Bomb’s Early Light*, 289-351.

Week 7 (Oct. 7): Regrets and Reservations
Screening:  
*The Exiles* (MacKenzie, 1961)

Read:  
Silko, *Ceremony*  
Piper, “Police Zone: Territory and Identity in Leslie Marmon Silko’s ‘Ceremony.’” *American Indian Quarterly* Vo. 21, No. 3, (Summer, 1992), 483-497  
Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert*, excerpts, TBA

Week 8 (Oct 14): Mutant Humanism and the Nuclear sublime.
Screening:  
*The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, 1957, 81 min.)  
*Medical Aspects of Nuclear Radiation* (FCDA,1950, 20 min.)
Week 9 (Oct 21): Messianic Narratives
Screening: The Ten Commandments (DeMille, 1956, 220 min).

Read: Nadal, Containment Culture 69-154 (Part II), esp. chapt. 4.
      Boyar, Bomb’s Early Light, 211-240

Week 10 (Oct. 28): The Hindu Sublime
Screening: Dil Se (Ratnam, 1998, 163 min).

      Aravamudan, “Introduction” and “The Hindu Sublime, or Nuclearism Rendered
      Cultural.” From Guru English.
      Kabir, “Allegories of Alienation and Politics of Bargaining,” South Asian

Week 11 (Nov. 4): Interlude: Ariel Bombing and Area Studies
Read: Chow, The Age of the World Target

Week 12 (Nov. 11): Pre-atomic Visuality
Screen: Early Cinema
      Kwaidan (Kobayashi, 1965, Part II, Hiochi, The Earless)
      The Invisible Man (Whale, 1933, 71 min.)

Read: Lippt, Atomic Light (Shadow Optics), Chapters 0–4.
      Begin Reading Gravity’s Rainbow!

Week 13 (Nov. 18): Japan’s Disintegrating Mise-en-scene
Screening: Woman of the Dunes (Sun no onna, Teshigahara, 1964, 123 min.)
      The Cure (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1997, 111min.)

Read: Lipitt, Atomic Light (Shadow Optics), Chapters 5-6.
      Recommended: X, Man with the X-ray Eyes (Corman, 1963, 79 min).

Week 14 (Nov. 25): Profane Revelation
Read: Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, 1-282 (Parts 1 and II).

Week 15 (Nov. 2): In Pynchon’s Zone
Read: Gravity’s Rainbow, 283-776 (Parts III and IV)