



The Atom Bomb and Popular Culture

A Bomb Under Reagan

Andy Parsons

By the 1970s the Cold War tensions were beginning to thaw, as people grew less worried about nuclear catastrophe than about the war in Vietnam.

But then, the Soviets moved into Afghanistan, Ronald Reagan took over the White House and Margaret Thatcher entered Number 10. Reagan's policy towards the Soviet Union was simple: We win, they lose. He increased production and brought more nuclear chips onto the table –

Could the Soviets compete? Many were terrified...

As membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament soared to an all-time high, songs about the bomb covered the charts. But while 50s pop culture was pro the a-bomb, and the 60s reflected a turn against it, by the 80s, pop culture portrayed people's fear of all-out confrontation. It reflected cynicism, panic...

and just plain confusion...

Phil Collins: Tell me why this is the Land of Confusion!

'I could use another one of those...'

Fear of nuclear destruction wasn't allayed by the UK Government's campaign Protect and Survive, which was aimed at getting people ready for the bomb. It had a much more serious tone than the old American favourite, Duck and Cover.

Dum dum, diddle dum dum.

But in giving tips on how to choose your fallout room or what to do if you have a dead body in the house,

its message was still defiantly trying to be positive: If we're prepared for an attack, we'll be okay. CND campaigners couldn't disagree more,

and gave the slogan a new twist.

The documentary Atomic Café

scrutinized how media had downplayed the gravity of nuclear destruction throughout the 50s and 60s. Now was a time to get real.

A fallout shelter in your basement will give adequate shielding from radioactive fallout.

It would be futile, desperately futile to construct what are called 'fallout shelters'.

The graphic novel and film 'When the Wind Blows' follows a sweet couple as they naively fall victim to an atomic attack. It brought home the haunting reality of death by radiation sickness, and the message that humanity was in for a whole other league of war.

I'm going to have an early night James. We could do with a good long rest after that blessed bomb.

Oh yes, yes it's bound to take it out of you. A thing like that.

The catastrophic impact of nuclear war

was also much more blatant in the BBC's second significant portrayal of nuclear holocaust: Threads explores the very dark irony that survival of nuclear disaster may be a fate worse than death...

The countryside is cold and full of unknown radiation hazards. By now - five to six weeks after the attack - deaths from the effects of fallout are approaching their peak.

TV in the US

also drew more gritty representations of the nuclear aftermath. In the made-for-TV movie 'The Day After', a bomb is dropped on Kansas City. But the film manages to keep American proactive heroism alive, by highlighting that the US struck first.

They're on their way to Russia. They take about 30 minutes to reach their target.

So do theirs, right?

Compared to Threads, The Day After downplays the horror of a city destroyed by nuclear weapons. And it also shows that Americans sure know how to stay positive.

What matters, is we're alive!

Global Thermonuclear War.

Meanwhile, Hollywood played on the fear that nuclear war could be triggered by accident. In Wargames, Matthew Broderick accidentally accesses a US military supercomputer, and almost starts a global nuclear catastrophe. The supercomputer calculates the odds of winning such nuclear roulette ... and has a change of heart.

The only winning move is not to play.

Something the new man in the Kremlin, President Gorbachev seemed to realize.

But the end of The Cold War gave way to a brand new nuclear villain...