



The Atom Bomb and Popular Culture

Mad about A Bomb

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By the end of the 1950s, public opinion about the bomb had started to shift. The cold war was escalating – but many in the West were questioning nuclear weapons. “Ban the Bomb” messages were starting to pop up in the cultural mix.

In an episode of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*,

not-so-young Robin is sceptical about a dangerous new weapon called gun powder. If he'd been allowed to sell that invention, in time it could have destroyed the whole world. Even Robin Hood was tapping into the fears of the nuclear age.

The haunting ‘*On The Beach*’ explores a world in which such evil mischief has led to human extinction. In this film, World War 3 has just wiped out humanity in the northern hemisphere. The fallout is heading south, and our heroes in Australia choose to take a suicide pill – with a nice cup of tea – rather than die of the radiation sickness coming their way. I think I'll have that cup of tea now.

The film urges us to put a stop to nuclear tensions, before it's too late. But by 1962, it was already almost too late...

In the run-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US had tried and failed to invade Cuba, and the Soviets had kindly offered to put some nuclear missiles on the island. The US got mad, the USSR got madder. And the doctrine of M.A.D. – Mutual Assured Destruction – was tested to the limit. For two weeks the world was minutes away from nuclear catastrophe.

Of course it's a friendly call...

The most notorious film

about how both sides are setting themselves up for mutual assured destruction was Dr Strangelove.

The image of Major Kong falling to a gleeful death riding a bomb was a sharp satire of the madness of the nuclear arms race.

By the mid-1960s, everyone from the Searchers to Bob Dylan, to the Byrds was singing in bomb protest. Even the powers-that-be wanted to prevent the madness from ever escalating

again. In 1963, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty prohibited above ground testing. But the terrorizing fear of imminent nuclear war was still fresh in people's minds.

The post-nuclear film had emerged – and the UK versions were far more radical than their American counterparts. The most shocking post-apocalyptic portrayal was in 1965's *The War Game*, a drama-doc that explored how society would collapse in the aftermath of nuclear attack. It won an Oscar, but the BBC feared its stark realism would cause panic among viewers, and didn't broadcast it until the mid 1980's.

The film adaptation of the novel

Planet of the Apes put realism aside in its post-nuclear world, where surviving humans are enslaved by a race of advanced apes. Charlton Heston thought he'd somehow landed on an alien planet. Until he discovers that post nuclear hell is here on earth.

You blew it up! Ah damn you! God! Damn you all to hell!!!!

With the looming reality of Mutual Assured Destruction, popular culture in the 60s had faced the madness of atomic threat...

and that was before the nuclear turmoil of the Reagan Years.