

Document Citation

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| Title | White light, white heat |
| Author(s) | J. Hoberman J. Hoberman |
| Source | <i>Village Voice</i> |
| Date | 1982 Mar 23 |
| Type | review |
| Language | English English |
| Pagination | 50 |
| No. of Pages | 1 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | The Atomic Cafe, Rafferty, Kevin, 1982 |

White Light, White Heat

By J. Hoberman

THE ATOMIC CAFE: A film by Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty. Produced by the Archives Project, Inc. At the Film Forum 1, through March 30.

HATSU YUME (FIRST DREAM). A videotape by Bill Viola. At the Whitney Museum, through March 28.

THE WEAK BULLET; THE LONER; GRAND MAL. Three videotapes by Tony Oursler. At the Kitchen, March 22.

A comic horror film (from the age of E.C. horror comics), Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty's *The Atomic Cafe* is the most gripping documentary so far this year. The film is a 90-minute compilation of U.S. government and educational propaganda about the atomic bomb, from the late '40s through the mid-'50s. To call it awful is to say that it works.

The spirit of collage filmmaker Bruce Conner hovers over this project, which piles ironies upon metaphors until the mind boggles. There's no need for the Raffertys and Loader to add their own comments—nothing could top the original voice-overs. A bomber pilot calls nuking Nagasaki his "greatest thrill. . . . It looked like Ebbets field after a doubleheader with the Giants." (Could this brain-stopping crack have inspired the notorious E.C. story of a baseball game played with dismembered chunks of human flesh?) Out at the paradisaal Bikini atoll testing site, the locals—"in their simplicity"—welcome the Americans by singing "You Are My Sunshine" in their native tongue. "They don't understand the world of atomic energy any more than we do," the narrator chirps. Back on the home front, according to the words of a catchy song, "Everybody's worried 'bout the atomic bomb (but nobody worries 'bout the day Our Lord will come)": priests praise the hydrogen bomb

while commies agitate for peace, proud parents display lead-lined snowsuits, real estate agents push individual bomb shelters ("this room is designed with an atomic war in mind"), and Vice-President Nixon rings the bell for mental health.

"We are in the era of information overload, and it means that information-retrieval is more tricky than information-recording," video artist Nam June Paik once observed. Cunningly mixed and continually funny, *The Atomic Cafe's* juxtaposition of official footage (with its sci-fi insistence on radio and TV transmissions) and "naive" folk expressions (rock, gospel, and country songs on the subject of nuclear obliteration, frothing "atomic cocktails," and related counter-phobic cultural fallout) does more to evoke the what-me-worry social madness of the Cold War than any documentary I've ever seen. Indeed, one of the most striking things about *The Atomic Cafe* is its illustration of the delayed psychological projection that gripped the American public. We dropped the bomb on Japan, ergo someone was bound to drop it on us. The film touches lightly (if unforgettably) on the victims of Hiroshima, to concentrate mainly on the angst-ridden fantasies of the victors.

Everyone should visit *The Atomic Cafe*, but I suspect the film will have its greatest resonance for those who were children during the early and mid-'50s, and who were actually shown portions of this footage in grade-school assemblies. (So total was the mobilization in New York when I started grade school in 1954 that we were issued dog-tags to wear like mezzuzahs.) The filmmakers put together a horrifying little sequence of kids practicing for nuclear war with a subliminal soundtrack of "London Bridge Is Falling Down," while exhuming a



The Atomic Cafe: This 1950 newsreel offers one man's answer to the bomb.

cute cartoon turtle who explains the concept of "duck and cover." You'll never question your paranoia again. "The bomb can explode anytime, day or night!" one narrator cautions as alert children demonstrate their training by pitching themselves off bicycles or taking shelter beneath the family picnic blanket in response to the big sh-boom. The film ends with an extended montage of pseudo-nuclear attacks culled from a dozen educational films, scored to the strains of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody." In the radioactive aftermath, the nuclear family has the penultimate word. "We were lucky!" exclaims Dad, after Mom and the kids emerge from under the couch. "There's nothing to do now but clean up the broken glass, relax, and wait for instructions from the authorities."

As fantastically stupid as this educational material is, I can't help thinking that anything—even the mixture of guilt and hysteria that characterized '50s bomb-think—is preferable to the numbed-out mass denial existing today. Unfortunately, *The Atomic Cafe* is no particular remedy. The film is better art than it is agitprop. The filmmakers' eschewal of facts and figures helps the flow but limits the use-value. There are too many "private" jokes: you have to know, for instance, the widespread incidence of leukemia in soldiers assigned to the Nevada test range to appreciate the full evil of the army training films on the subject. The movie simply takes this for granted, assuming that everyone understands that governments naturally lie and that nuclear war equals armageddon.

If I had to pick one film with which to dramatize the latter's actuality, it would still be Peter Watkin's 1967 *The War Game*—a simulated documentary which convincingly establishes that, for those unfortunate enough to escape instant obliteration, the experience of an atomic war will be something like Auschwitz in your living room.