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Front Cover: Origami Kunst by Andreas Bauer. Sadako Sasaki was diagnosed with radiation-induced leukaemia and subsequently tragically died at 12 years old, ten years after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. During treatment she set out to make 1,000 paper cranes, as according to Japanese myth she would be granted one wish on completion. She made it to 644, but was buried with the remainder by friends. The paper crane has since become an international symbol of peace and hope.

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The Atomic Cafe (1982):

Looking Back at Nuclear Paranoia from the 80s to the 50s in a Cold War Classic

By Wajiha Raza Rizvi

Directed by Jayne Loader and Kevin Rafferty, 1982’s The Atomic Café is a devastating take on the chronological snobbery of American disbeliefs and the scant knowledge of the A-experts at the advent of the atomic age. The film, informative yet entertaining, horrific yet hilarious, dwells on stereotypes of those first ten years of public ignorance and nuclear paranoia during the Cold War era, as well as errors and atrocities of its inventors.

With its wonderful montages of Cold War kitsch compiled with archival materials from the 1950s and 1960s reflect, The Atomic Café officially normalises the character of nuclear war. In doing so, it acts just like the other conciliatory propaganda films that were aimed at the American public for mystifying the nuclear fallout paranoia presenting a devastating collage is a true mirror of the official and unofficial attitudes towards American use of the atom bomb against Japan in the years following WWII and preceding the Cold War.

The film opens to the archival clips of the first successful Trinity Test at Alamogordo, a thriving Pre-
The film rivals any comedy in this sense because of what Peter Rollins describes as “film irony”. A powerful technique in which image and sound contradict each other through a process of compilation aimed at decontextualising, and recontextualising through exposé quotation or change of immediate context of shots for the purpose of reinterpretation. A powerful example of the simultaneous intermixing of these techniques can be seen in the newsreel of Hiroshima survivors that juxtaposes the clips of two radio comedians making fun of Hiroshima attacks, “It looked like Ebbets Field after a doubleheader with the Giants”. The sequence bears the spirit of an attack for a noble cause as the enemy dies for no cause. In another hilarious sequence, a doctor diagnoses a patient with nuclearosis (nuclear war paranoia) and, while looking at A-charts, comments “it is absurd that 85 percent of the population should be so fearful when only 15 percent would be killed in an all-out nuclear war.” These satirical montages reflect the faith and confidence of the United States public figures in the American dream. The God-gifted atom bomb becomes a symbol of American love for international peace, freedom, and democracy, until the red communists test their power. The communists’ paranoia first parallels and then dismisses the nuclear paranoia. The public faith in the American dream is reflected in their trust in “duck and cover” and “fallout shelter”, you live if you survive the alpha particles for eight to ten days. It also mirrors their trust in A&H-bombs compared to “red” fever as a Southern Californian businessman, who believes that “shopping centers are an expression of the free world”, sponsors a nuclear defense drill. Similarly, the lens of a Navy periscope in juxtaposition to an American family watching television evokes the meaning that the people are being watched. Critic John Olubunmi sees a dialectic collision between “the inherent perspective of the original archive and its radical reuse” during recontextualisation, which according to Paul Arthur inverts “conventional meanings” and causes “a politicised activation of suppressed ideas”.

The Atomic Café hints at several American wars, conflicts, threats, and fears of communism, the iron curtain. In a hilarious sequence, a father tells his kids that in case of mass deaths following a nuclear detonation, survivors would have more to eat and divide among themselves. The film also refers to several eastern and western block political tussles by naming leaders like Eisenhower, Truman, Nixon, Reagan, Wilson, and several U.S. military figures. This chronological snobbery is brutally honest about a history of American paranoia and the officially normalising attitude toward the nuclear war. Its powerful and disturbing intellectual montages of anticommunist, pronuclear, paranoia films prefer a strategy of subjectivity over objectivity to efficiently mix satire with drama with apocalyptic black humor to leave viewers immersed in the absurdity of American historical truth and Bush’s first-strike policy in pursuit of political ideals. Though now over 30 years old and reflecting on an era fast fading from memory it is for these reasons that The Atomic Café, is still relevant today and still very funny.

Wajih Raza Rizvi is the founding director of the Film Museum Society of Lahore. She collects the archives of Pakistani cinema, conducts research, produces films, and provides consultancy to a number of established film and media institutions.