

ATOMIC NOIR



D'APRES LE ROMAN DE
Mickey
SPILLANE

Aspects of Postwar Paranoia

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On August 6, 1945, the United States detonated a small atomic bomb named “Little Boy” over Hiroshima, followed by a bigger one called “Fat Man,” exploded over Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Japanese people, mostly civilians, died as a result of the two explosions. These figures include the after-effects of the radiation in terms of burns and radiation poisoning that led to cancer and other diseases. The bomb-cloud over Nagasaki rose 11 miles into the sky. The world had never seen destruction on this scale before. The Japanese surrendered shortly thereafter, and the Pacific War—and with it, World War II—ended.

The United States was in sole possession of an atomic bomb until the Soviets exploded a device in 1949, thus initiating an arms race between the two superpowers. It is now generally acknowledged that Russia gained vital information by means of useful spies, many of them Americans clandestinely working for the Russians, although none of them were identified by the legendary anti-communist Senator Joe McCarthy.

Once the Soviets had their A-bomb, President Truman announced an accelerated program to build a hydrogen bomb, which was first exploded above a Pacific island called Eniwetok in the Marshall Atoll in 1952. It eliminated all traces of Eniwetok, which was uninhabited, and left a crater 6,240 feet deep and 164 feet wide at the bottom of the sea. The bomb was 450 times more powerful than the “Fat Man” exploded over Nagasaki. A few months later, in 1953, the Soviets successfully tested their first hydrogen bomb, jointly developed by, among others, Andrei Sakharov.

Countless tests by both powers by both powers followed.

It didn't seem likely that survival, or even limited warfare, was possible with the incredible fire and destructive power contained in thermonuclear weapons. The possibility existed that they could effectively destroy everything.

The other just as frightening aspect of thermonuclear power, beyond its explosive force, is contained in the after-effects: there are no antidotes against radioactive poisoning; even if used merely for the generation of energy, the fear remains that rays released by an accident will result in entire regions becoming uninhabitable due to contamination lingering for thousands of years.

The palpable fear of complete annihilation by a fiery wind, i.e., destruction by a thermonuclear blast, permeated America in the 1950s, particularly after the explosion of the much more powerful H-bomb. Annihilation seemed a possibility, a very real one. In that early atomic era, it was unthinkable to treat the subject in any way but a serious manner. Films dealing with the actual nuclear blast, the violence of the explosion, white heat and fire, annihilation and pure destructive power were few but highly effective in the early 1950s.



Death by irradiation claims its first U.S. movie victim: Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.*

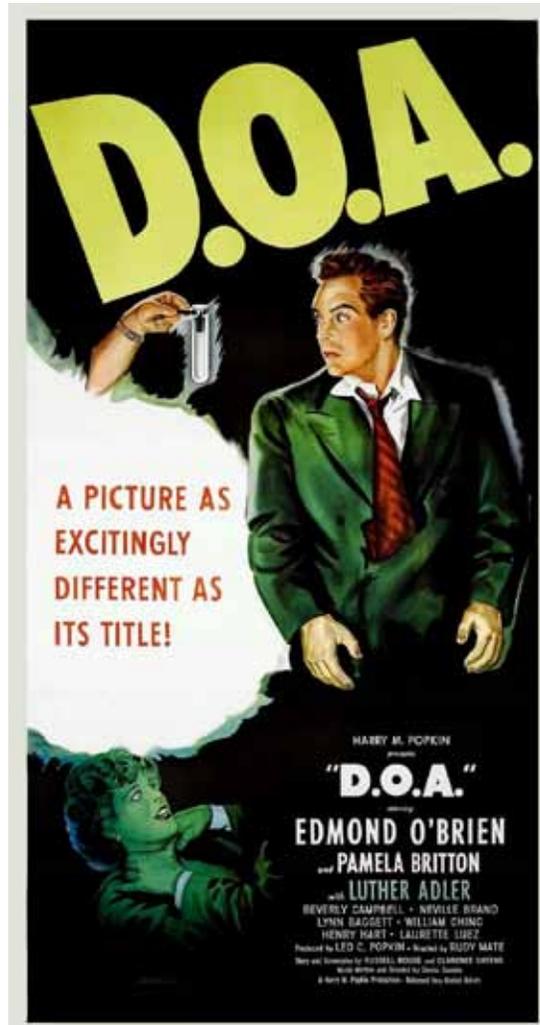
Dames and spies: Nuclear noir in the '50s

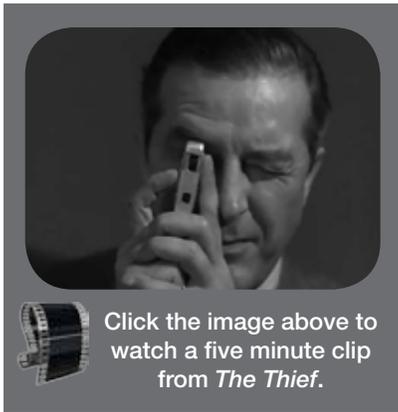
But what of noir? Paranoid fear is certainly an integral element of the noir style. Fate, brought on by the protagonists themselves, is inexorable in noir narratives. So doesn't the self-inflicted doom implied by the release of an uncontrollable force seem to perfectly fit the noir ethos?

Unlike the end-of-the-world films of the 1960s, the atomic noirs of the early '50s deal with the danger of nuclear power and radiation on a personal scale; the unfathomable nuclear danger is as much a part of the protagonists' entrapment as more conventional threats in a standard noir narrative, i.e. such as a sworn enemy, a femme fatale, a fatal false step. The most common plot device that reflected the nuclear zeitgeist involved the spy trying to steal nuclear secrets.

The atomic noir canon commences with *D.O.A.* (1950), directed by Rudolph Maté, who began his career in America as a cameraman in the 1930s. The film focuses less on the destruction of mankind by atom bombs and more on the killing of one man by means of radiation: the human body is the battlefield, vulnerable, helpless against an enemy that it cannot grasp with its senses, eating the man from within; he is still alive yet already dead.

Frank Bigelow (Edmond O'Brien), a certified public accountant, is poisoned with iridium, a fictitious substance based on a real radioactive element, made out in the film to be terrifically deadly. The movie opens with O'Brien bursting into a police station and going to the Homicide Bureau to report his own murder. Flashbacks reveal how it all happened. He had inadvertently come between the sale of





this iridium to some shadowy parties, perhaps foreign. The assumption is that the iridium is required for building of a nuclear weapon.

Bigelow is hunted down by a group of mobsters involved in the deal, led by Luther Adler as an Armenian-American dealing in such contraband; whether his ethnicity is a direct reference to the Russians is left open. The gangsters actually turn out to

be a McGuffin; the murder was committed for other reasons.

Espionage was a daily reality during the early atomic era, generating genuine paranoia on the national scene. Spy trials were conducted, some of them infamous; it was a generally acknowledged fact that spying was happening, as Soviet agents sought the secrets of advanced thermonuclear weapons that America possessed.

The Thief (1952) is a study of a scientist (Ray Milland) engaged in secret nuclear research, who is being blackmailed, presumably by Soviet agents, to steal “secrets.” The film’s experimental hook is that there is no dialogue, a gimmick meant to heighten the sense of paranoia and isolation felt by the spy. Milland, as always, is very good as the anxiety-filled scientist; it is questionable, however, whether the “no dialogue” experiment works; it might have been intriguing to hear Milland, in his own voice, accuse others while defending his actions.

Nonetheless, the film epitomizes the era during which it was made, with its palpable suspicion and angst, a reflection of the national hysteria about communist infiltration of American political and scientific elites. Rather exceptionally, the film shows regret and sorrow on the part of the Milland, as he tries to flee the country after killing an FBI agent who’d been tailing him. He is devastated by the depth to which he has sunk, leading him to surrender to the authorities and take his punishment.

The same year saw the release of *Split Second*. An escaped killer (Steve McNally), portrayed as intelligent yet utterly amoral, holds a group of



Rita Gam distracts spy Ray Milland in the Cold War noir *The Thief*



people hostage in a remote cabin in New Mexico, which unbeknownst to him happens to be located in a desert compound being used for a thermonuclear test scheduled to go off at 6 a.m. A strange parallel is drawn between the “irrational” passion of Kay Garven (Alexis Smith) and the threat of the impending detonation. She seems to represent, to the mian criminal and all the other men, an ancient male fear of being devoured by insatiable female sexuality. It wouldn’t be the only film of the era to draw that parallel. The film ends spectacularly with a really terrifying nuclear explosion, preceded by a screaming siren, to give its audience a sharp view of the power of nuclear weapons, as well as the inevitability of certain death if you are in its proximity.



Atomic City (1952) stars Gene Barry in an unlikely role as a scientist, whose son is kidnapped by shadowy figures after a ransom of nuclear “secrets.” Set in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the nation’s chief stomping grounds for scientific and military nuclear research, the film is surprisingly realistic, an underestimated, brutal thriller about the twin themes of child kidnapping and espionage, played very straight and fast, akin to topical thrillers Andrew Stone was making in those years.



In Robert Aldrich’s *World for Ransom* (1954), Dan Duryea is a world-weary World War II veteran turned private investigator, an exile earning his livelihood in Singapore. A Western nuclear scientist—played *really* against type by Irishman Arthur Shields—is kidnapped by a gang of mysterious figures with conspicu-

ously foreign names. The motive: gain nuclear secrets via abduction.

Nuclear Noir also encompasses Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953), where microfilm accidentally obtained by Richard Widmark most certainly contains nuclear secrets; more explicit in the film are the malignant Communist agents, principally the characters played by Richard Kiley, who wishes to steal secrets from the U.S. government. The FBI gets involved, though most of the interaction with Widmark is handled by local cops out to imprison him with "three-time loser" status.

More atomic secrets are covertly sought in *Shack Out on 101* (1955), by a Communist named Slob, played by Lee Marvin. This cheapie also has an undercover FBI agent (Frank Lovejoy), for good measure. *Shack Out on 101* dips into comedy due to the sheer wildness of Lee Marvin's behavior and the diverse antics



At the climax of *Kiss Me Deadly*, Gaby Rogers unleashes an atomic maelstrom on Los Angeles

of its campy characters, including "Mr. Stoneface" Frank Lovejoy, and the near-parody roles played by Whit Bissell, Keenan Wynn, and the voluptuous Terry Moore—"stacked" *de rigueur* according to the '50s standard—alongside a motley crew of beachside strays.

The true classic of this era is Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), based on the Mickey Spillane novel. Throughout the film everyone—the private eye, police, gangsters and damsel-in-distress—are chasing a valuable valise, unaware that the nondescript box has sufficient nuclear potential to waste them all—a veritable Fukushima in miniature.

The "radioactive female" notion is even more glaring in this film than in *Split Second*; the metaphor is Pandora's Box, which brought evil into the world. Here, Gaby Rogers plays Pandora, an agent of ruin, delivering everyone into her sphere to destruction; she is alluring and sadistic at the same time, a liar and a deceptive witch—and a very good actress, to boot. In the end, all is rendered kaput through the curiosity of a dame. The cataclysm seems inevitable because this perverse and deceitful woman is just made that way.

While misogyny is rampant in Spillane's novels, this very unsubtle equation of death, destruction, and womanhood is clearly the work of screenwriter A. I. Bezzerides, linking a typically evil Spillane dame to the fear of nuclear annihilation, drawing on mythical and unconscious fears and beliefs. From the perspective of the 21st century, you can only be confounded at what male writers got away with back then. The end of *Kiss Me Deadly* is a one-of-a-kind tour de force, one of the most spectacular endings to any film, ever.

Doomsday: message films of the '60s

By the end of the 1950s and into the highly politicized 1960s, atomic angst and the trope of nuclear threat became a cliché, a means by which ambitious filmmakers could "enlighten" their audiences by clobbering them over the head with the big message. A forerunner of such scaremongering tales is Akira Kurosawa's incredibly wooden, forced *I Live in Fear* (1955), which is nearly incomprehensible for a modern audience. Although his effort to convey the Japanese people's terror at being twice bombed is as understandable as it is honorable, this strange product is a torturous viewing even for Kurosawa and Mifune aficionados.





On the Beach (1959), produced and directed by the irrepressible Stanley Kramer, is a relentlessly depressing parable that must have pleased no one at the time of its release. Again, it's the end of the world; this time only Australia is spared. Gregory Peck plays a U.S. Navy nuclear sub captain who has lost his family to the Cold War between America and Russia and sailed to the land Down Under. Yet he is apparently incapable of accepting his loss—noble, selfless with his crew, but mourning and troubled. Fred Astaire is a resigned, cynical nuclear scientist whose last wish on Earth before the clouds of radiation reach Australia is to win a car race with a Ferrari. Far-fetched? You bet. Anthony Perkins, Ava Gardner, and most of the rest of the cast are conspicuous for their inability to articulate whatever it was Kramer believed was worth showing. In the end, one asks: what hath Kramer wrought?

Next in the series is the egregious *Fail-Safe* (1964), directed by Sidney Lumet. The film wastes Walter Matthau in a solemn and humorless exercise as the standard “mad” Herman Kahn-type of Pentagon egghead who is an advocate of “limited nuclear warfare.” If *On the Beach* was unsubtle, *Fail-Safe* is a brickbat smashing multiple times on one’s head. It ends with frozen, seconds-long screenshots of people in various social settings on the streets of New York accompanied by the sound of high-pitched and monotonous screeching in the electrical lines being melted by a nuclear blast—it’s 100 percent *poshlost*. This is Vladimir Nabokov’s term, which has entered the English language, standing for well-intended and heartfelt Bad Taste, usually resulting in unintentional (and often uncontrollable) laughter.

Mirage (1965), directed by Edward Dmytryk and starring Gregory Peck as an amnesiac nuclear physicist, marked the onset of a new era, showing the warmongers as our own military-industrial complex, acting from its own risky impulses to kill us all. The film seems to believe in all earnestness that such papier-mâché figures as the Major (Leif Erikson), are ready to be set upon us; there are no real enemies anymore except ourselves, lending an eerie solipsism that would typify these types of films. While opening the eyes of politically naive Ameri-



cans to the sinister shenanigans of the covert forces manipulating our society, the filmmakers often let the rest of the world and all its complexities off scot-free. These type of films soon began to predominate, year after year, until they are now utterly predictable: the villains are always corporate heads, generals, politicians, advertising execs, errant spy chiefs; to the last deadly one of them, they sit in Langley, Foggy Bottom, New York, and Washington, plotting our doom.

One bright spot was *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), which dealt with the hopelessness of a world that hung in a balance of terror between the two superpowers. The film was an epitome of the black humor movement in American culture in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. It was released in the same year as *Fail-Safe*, which had stolen *Strangelove*’s basic plot (Lumet was sued by Stanley Kubrick for plagiarism) while eradicating its humor. *Dr. Strangelove* dares to show the president and some in the military as actually having intelligence, but it otherwise makes fun of all and sundry—generals, politicians, Russians, Nazi scientists: The world blows up roaring with laughter and—yippee!—it doesn’t feel that bad at all. This classic black comedy seemed to close the Atomic age.

Science fiction came into the breach. If nothing else, this genre could show without qualms the terror of ultimate destruction,



Click the image above to watch a two-minute clip from *Fail-Safe*.



Gen. Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) advocates nuclear strikes in Stanley Kubrick's black comedy masterpiece *Dr. Strangelove ...*

adopting the theme of nuclear annihilation during the early atomic era. The Japanese exorcised their atomic trauma in *Gojira* (Godzilla, 1954), a film whose original Japanese version made clear who had unleashed this madness—America—and, with it this crazy monster Godzilla, who emerges from the ocean to destroy Japanese cities.

The payload pays off

It was not until 39 years after the initial hydrogen bomb test in 1952 that images depicting utter nuclear annihilation were presented onscreen: these occur during the recurrent nightmare dreamed by Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). We see her watching the children and mothers playing in a fenced-in park, innocents suspecting nothing might be impending, only to be engulfed by a fiery “nuclear holocaust.” In all its Dantesque detail, the scene graphically depicted burning, disintegrating human bodies quickly turning to skeletons,

then to dust; the end of everything we know.

This “burnt-to-a-crisp” aesthetic now predominates, as American post-apocalyptic literature, mixed into a stew with various flavorings of paranoid nostalgia, has taken root and criss-crossed into all genres. While the world itself has edged away from nuclear meltdown, celluloid destruction by any and all means has taken up the slack. It has proven to be a formidable—and terrifying—growth industry. ■



... and the devastating carnage is eventually visualized onscreen in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*