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Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo”: Nuclear Trauma in the Films of Fritz Lang

By Walter Metz

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Introduction

As I sit down in to write about nuclear trauma in Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat* (1953), Americans are in the process of memorializing the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Earlier in the year, when historians attempted to tell the whole story about Truman’s decision in an exhibit at the Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian, political conservatives attacked the curators. In *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, Hiroshima scholars Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell analyze the discourse created by the Smithsonian controversy. On national television, George Will argued that the curators Obviously hate this country@ (qtd. in Lifton and Mitchell, 287) while Charles Sweeney (the pilot who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki) declared that the exhibit was “certainly un-American” and “might be close to treason” (288). On the floor of the U.S. Congress, Republicans violated every principle of American freedom (for which the World War II soldiers had fought) by threatening the Smithsonian with draconian budget cuts unless the exhibit was withdrawn. The head curator resigned in disgust and the exhibit was cleansed of many traces of the truth of what happened at Hiroshima and why.

In his recent book, *In the Name of National Security*, Robert Corber argues that the culture of the post-Cold War era represents a continuation of the discursive legacies of the Cold War. The Smithsonian debacle confirms Corber’s hypothesis. The precipitating event of the Cold War was Truman’s decision to deploy atomic weaponry as a message to the Soviet Union, whose forces had

recently arrived in the Pacific theater of war. Fifty years later, even after the end of the Cold War, the political debate over the decision's historical representation has intensified, not abated. As Lifton and Mitchell note in discussing the television coverage of the Smithsonian controversy, "If media treatment had changed at all, it had changed for the worse. In 1945, after all, no prominent figure publicly challenged the patriotism of David Lawrence, Norman Cousins, and the handful of other critics who raised questions about the decision to drop the bomb" (287).

Critic Dean MacCannell argues that discourse about nuclear culture has for too long mimicked public hysteria about the future without interrogating the past and how we landed in the mess in which we currently find ourselves embroiled. MacCannell argues:

Thinking about the ABomb always has taken the form of attempts to bring an imagined future moment, a moment of awful destruction, to bear upon the present. . . . I want to suggest that we reverse these procedures, and begin to try to figure out the bearing of the past upon the present. Nuclear technology, even without another Hiroshima, has already had a profound impact on social structure and consciousness. (33)

This chapter offers one sort of response to MacCannell's call: I want to investigate how nuclear trauma permeated early 1950s American culture, particularly in the film genre known as film noir. I select Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* since its nuclear referents are not on the surface of the text: we can use the text to see how ingrained nuclear discourse became in the everyday lives of Americans of the Cold War period.

In *The Big Heat*, a crime syndicate plants a car bomb which kills Katie, the wife of the film's central protagonist, Detective Dave Bannion (played by Glenn Ford). The explosion is filmed from inside Bannion's house, as he is putting his daughter Joyce to bed. As if it were an atomic blast, we see only the white flash of the bomb through the bedroom window. Shortly afterward, Vince Stone (played by Lee Marvin), the number two man in the syndicate, upon

learning that his girlfriend Debbie (played by Gloria Grahame) has been seen speaking with Bannion, throws steaming hot coffee at her, horribly scarring the entire left side of her face. The film forces Vince and the audience to confront the effects of his violence in the final scene when Debbie rips off her bandages to reveal scars which look suspiciously like radiation burns.

Film critics have frequently discussed the extreme violence in these scenes in particular and of late film noir in general. For example, in *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective*, Jon Tuska declares, "The violence in each episode is seen to increase as the characters become more and more savage" (343). Tuska analyzes *The Big Heat* as "a paradigm of . . . the film noir of circumstance" (340). However, despite offering a cultural history of film noir, Tuska does not specify *which* circumstances or define the cultural rationale for such excessive violence.

Critics of Fritz Lang's films have not been more forthcoming with their historical interpretations of the film. In *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*, Paul M. Jensen focuses on the relationship between the violence and characterization: "After the sadistic Vince throws a pot of coffee at her, one side of her face is horribly burnt and scarred, while the other remains clear and attractive. Thus, a different and opposite face is seen depending on the profile shown" (185). While such an analysis is pertinent to the dramatic effect of the scalding, it is not helpful in probing beneath the film's surface. Such formalist and immanent approaches do not engage historically with why such an excessively violent scalding scene is present in the film in the first place. The scene is taken for granted as a device which forwards the plot, positioning Vince as a horrible guy and Debbie as a misguided victim. Thus, both film noir and Lang critics would have us believe that *The Big Heat* implements violence for violence's sake. After reading the criticism of the film,

I am left wondering, Where are the cultural well-springs from which the violence in *The Big Heat* springs?

As I have attempted to preview in my synopsis of the film, I believe the violence in *The Big Heat* emerges from a cultural anxiety over nuclear proliferation. While the bulk of this chapter is dedicated to supporting this assertion via close textual and contextual analysis, I would like to briefly defend this analytical approach to a surface plot about a police detective who fights corruption to rid his city of a crime syndicate. By what logic does this film engage issues of nuclear trauma? In each of the film's violent confrontations, nuclear imagery looms large. The image of the flash without directly seeing the bomb's damage connects the car bombing to a cliché common to 1950s films featuring the detonation of a nuclear device. The burns on Debbie's face suggest the consequences of radiation poisoning, a connection to atomic warfare that would have been common knowledge to a 1953 audience member, despite government attempts to censor the effects of radiation.

Columbia Pictures hired Fritz Lang to direct *The Big Heat* in early 1953. The shooting was completed in April. However, since Columbia's focus was on its AA@ picture for the year, *From Here to Eternity*, *The Big Heat* was not released until October. In a sense, these two films form an ur-text for a Cold War re-visitation upon World War II: *From Here to Eternity* enacts the calamitous beginning of the war at Pearl Harbor while *The Big Heat* allegorizes its apocalyptic end at Hiroshima.

The Big Heat was adapted from the eponymous novel by William P. McGivern, first published in 1952. After publication in novel form first, McGivern's work was then serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* from December 1952 to February 1953. Both the film and the novel

versions of *The Big Heat* narrative circulate the energies of the atomic era. However, I will argue that the novel connects the nuclear to issues of race while the film forges the relationship between atomic energy and gender. Ashton, a black youth falsely accused of a crime in the novel, is the central figure in helping Bannion crack the case against the syndicate. The novel concentrates on the syndicate's apocalyptic effect on the inhabitants of the city, including Ashton and his family. However, the film adaptation replaces the Ashton character with Selma, a disabled woman. In a junk yard which is represented more like a wasteland, Selma gives Bannion the key information that Ashton had provided in the novel. Unlike the other adaptations studied in this dissertation, the novel and film versions of *The Big Heat* do not differ in their cultural historical references, but reveal transformations in how these references-- those expressing nuclear trauma--are socially located. This chapter traces the shift from the novel's attention to race to the exploration of gender in the film.

The Political Unconscious of Post-Hiroshima America

Always historicize is the famous beginning of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (9). The message has apparently slipped by the critics of Fritz Lang's films. Since the 1960s, Lang criticism has operated from a formalist framework intent on thematizing his films, mostly via the structure of Fate. For example, in defending Lang's American films, Robin Wood argues, The central characterising tension of Lang's cinema. . . is that between morality and fate (qtd. in Jenkins, 147). As *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, Stephen Jenkins's revisionist examination of Lang, explicates, fate is such a nebulous concept as to be almost meaningless in a critical sense.

In the case of *The Big Heat*, the dominant framework of Fate has been expressed via the phrase, Hate, murder, and revenge. The critics are referring to the Brechtian refrain in the theme song to *Rancho Notorious*, another violent Lang film from the early 1950s. Almost every critic of *The Big Heat* in one way or another invokes this most ahistorical analytical framework, which refers to the way in which Lang's characters are predestined to follow a path of violent revenge. In *Fritz Lang*, Lotte Eisner declares, "The rhythm of *The Big Heat* is a relentless action, spurred by hate, murder and revenge (there is a parallel to *Rancho Notorious* in that the detective is more keenly motivated to his investigation following the murder of his wife)" (329). Eisner properly identifies the formal elements of the film--*The Big Heat* does study how Bannion avenges himself against the criminals who murdered his wife--but is completely silent in addressing why the film would choose to activate such a plot line, and toward what political ends.

The theme of fate and revenge does make sense, however, within the logic of Cold War discourse: revenge looms large in sorting through the traumas of the nuclear age. In *Hiroshima in America*, Lifton and Mitchell address the large role revenge played in the decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan. Discussing the way in which the use of the bombs was marketed to the American people, Lifton and Mitchell study the work of William Laurence, the science reporter for *The New York Times* whom the Pentagon recruited to be their atomic press agent. Revenge was important in Laurence's thinking: "Impulses of revenge for Japanese war-making and atrocities served to protect him from concerns about civilian victims: >Does one feel any pity or compassion for the poor devils about to die? Not when one thinks of Pearl Harbor and of the Death March on Bataan" (18). For Laurence, and consequently for the majority of Americans, revenge became a perfectly legitimate psychological mechanism to defend the use of violence as a means of conflict

resolution.

Thus, as Jameson suggests, themes in texts not only can be historicized but should be. I employ *The Political Unconscious* as my methodological point of departure because I want it clear that I am not critically reconstructing *The Big Heat* as an allegory of nuclear war. Historicizing a discursive construct like fate and revenge and tracking their resonances within a film text is not the same as arguing that the text reflects its social context by mapping historical events onto narrative ones. Among other things, *The Political Unconscious* is a rigorous warning against the dangers of reductionism implicit in such allegorical criticism. Invoking Althusser's critique of expressive causality, Jameson cautions against constructing a vast interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artifacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more fundamental narrative, of a hidden master narrative which is the allegorical key (28). Thus, while I would reject the notion that the ultimate key to *The Big Heat* is its anxiety over the nuclear, I do think that such a historical component is vital to a political analysis of the text in particular and early Cold War culture in general.

Jameson offers a way to interpret texts historically beyond the limitations of allegory because he too is interested in demonstrating the necessity of a vital political criticism of texts. In his argument's most radical gesture, Jameson asserts, "This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method. . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (17). Much like the New Historicism outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, Jameson's solution lies in refiguring the relationship between text and context. Jameson remains healthily suspicious of critics who purportedly declare history as purely textual. Jameson's alternative

formulation declares that AHistory is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious@ (35).

In the case of *The Big Heat*, the previous critics have stripped the film=s political potential by refusing to historicize its representational strategies, especially with respect to its nuclear referents. Using Jameson=s approach, I claim that *The Big Heat* is historically informed by a subtext filled with nuclear trauma. The film=s imagery expresses an indirect yet specifiable engagement with early 1950s discourses about nuclear warfare and its consequences for humanity. In short, the political unconscious of *The Big Heat* is inundated with nuclear energy.

Jameson=s combination of historical and political criticism using the language of psychoanalysis justifies the unique methodology I employ in this chapter to investigate *The Big Heat*. Whereas all of the other chapters in the dissertation deal with historical energies on the surface of the text, at the literal level, my investigation of the nuclear components of *The Big Heat* narratives relies on a subtextual investigation. Following Lifton and Mitchell=s psychological interrogation of Hiroshima=s effects in America, I employ the language of psychoanalysis to investigate the unconscious components of nuclear trauma in early 1950s American culture.

Historical Criticism, Film Noir, and Nuclear Trauma

My critique of the previous Lang critics= formalism is not meant to imply that I am the first critic to apply history to film noir or *The Big Heat*. Quite to the contrary, a number of historical claims about film noir (the genre emerges from postwar disillusionment) and *The Big Heat* (the film

reflects early 1950s hysteria over criminal corruption and Communism) have become commonplace. However, the long-term effect of much of this criticism has actually worked to close down on the sort of interpretive historical project proposed here.

The impoverishment of historical criticism of film noir can be traced to the attempts in the early 1970s--typified by Paul Schrader=s seminal *Notes on Film Noir*--to trace the sources of the genre. While an innovative and useful first attempt to locate film noir historically, Schrader=s largely sociological approach produces a reductionistic account of the relationships between the films and the historical context. Working necessarily with broad strokes, Schrader makes claims for the way in which the social context of post-war America influenced the films. Discussing post-World War II disillusionment, Schrader argues, *The disillusionment that many soldiers, small businessmen, and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film* (171-2).

Such a literal view of the direct relationships between texts and history is precisely what worries Jameson: *The conventional sociology of literature or culture, which modestly limits itself to the identification of class motifs or values in a given text, and feels that its work is done when it shows how a given artifact >reflects= its social background, is utterly unacceptable* (80-1).

While Schrader=s limited scope is largely determined by his survey approach, the reductionistic results of his analysis are unavoidable: *As the rise of McCarthy and Eisenhower demonstrated, Americans were eager to see a more bourgeois view of themselves. Crime had to move to the suburbs* (180).

Schrader=s essay intended to be a point of departure for subsequent in-depth historical film noir criticism. However, not much work has succeeded him to specify the historical context of

films noir with the kind of theoretically-informed and detailed analysis envisioned by Jameson. Film noir critics, such as the critics of *The Big Heat* quoted above, merely take for granted the A pessimism@ of the post-war era and treat violence as a vague historical force permeating film noir.

The legacy of Schrader=s essay has largely been to make critics fearful and apologetic about connecting film noir to history. Critics hesitate to boldly cross the bounds of previously accepted connections, a necessary step for transformative political critiques of cinema. For example, in making one of the few timid forays into connecting *The Big Heat* to nuclear trauma, in effect laying the groundwork for this present chapter, Stephen Cooper demonstrates the historical timidity commonplace to film noir criticism. In A Sex/Knowledge/Power in the Detective Genre,@ Cooper briefly asserts that there might be a connection between *The Big Heat* and the atomic bomb:

Set in the Cold War 1950s, when such stabilizing structures of bourgeois ideology as the family, with its emphasis/dependence on monogamy and self-control, were under special pressure to compensate in the face of unprecedented global instability--largely a consequence of the biggest homewrecker of them all, the Bomb--*The Big Heat* would seem to situate its protagonist in a less compromised, less ambiguous, and thus less credible relation to women than the one acted out by Bogart=s wolfish Sam Spade [in *The Maltese Falcon*]. (26)

However, in a footnote to his argument, Cooper all but apologizes for making this historical connection:

This detour into the contextual world of fact, although it is merely a detour, should signal my tendency to disagree with [Alastair] Fowler=s contention [in *Kinds of Literature*] that in A trying to account for generic change. . . it is not a good idea to turn immediately to explanation in terms of external causes, which may actually be quite remote.@ While I would not wish to argue that it is a good idea to turn exclusively toward the external, neither do I think that the conditions of history are ever really remote from any artistic development. The sooner we can see the connections, I would say, the better for responsible criticism. (31)

Cooper reacts in such a way as to completely validate the ahistorical critics like Fowler with whom he purportedly disagrees. Rather than tracing the detailed historical connections between *The Big Heat* and the big homewrecker, Cooper lets Fowler scare him away from history, never discussing the connection again.

Another critic who is sensitive to the traumatic historical components of Lang's cinema is Andrew Sarris. However, like Cooper, Sarris tends to state the connections rather than exploring their political significance. In introducing an interview with Lang, Sarris argues, "Fritz Lang's cinema is the cinema of the nightmare. . . . If this vision be called paranoid, Lang's films might be said to recall the century of Hitler and Hiroshima with the post-Freudian punch-line: 'I'm not paranoid. I am being persecuted'" (309). While brilliantly provocative writing, without further amplification, the analysis rings hollow. The present chapter expounds on Sarris's observation within an analysis of how and why the characters of *The Big Heat* specifically react to the persecution of Hiroshima.

Some film noir criticism does not shy away from exploring the historical connections to a specific film. One example is Philip Kemp's "From the Nightmare Factory: HUAC and the Politics of Noir." Analyzing *Where Danger Lives* (John Farrow, 1950), Kemp interrogates the contradictions embedded between the text itself (which he argues validates a Marxist critique of post-war capitalism) and the film's production circumstances (it was made by virulent anti-Communists at the height of the Red Scare). Defending himself against ahistorical critics, Kemp quotes Michael Wood's *America in the Movies*:

It seems that entertainment is not, as we often think, a full-scale flight from our problems, not a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes which tame them. . . . We should perhaps. . . ask, not how so many interesting meanings crept into flawed and ephemeral films, but how these films could possibly have

kept such meanings out. (qtd. in Kemp, 270)

Wood's point about the saturation of history in all films, even popular ones, expresses the rationale for exploring the atomic trauma in *The Big Heat*. Given the nuclear anxiety in the early 1950s over the development of hydrogen bombs capable of erasing all life on earth, how could *The Big Heat* not have circulated these worries? The concern of this chapter will thus not be *whether The Big Heat* is about atomic trauma, but how and why it activates these historical connections.

Many critics have specifically discussed the relationships between *The Big Heat* and history, but largely only with respect to crime. At the time of the film's release, critics noticed its engagement with contemporaneous discourses about crime. In his review of the film for *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther noted, "And the first thing you know, his nice detective, his home-loving family man, is mixed up in the stickiest lot of knavery since the Kefauver committee was on the air" (43).

The critic who has most fruitfully pursued the crime intertext of *The Big Heat* is Peter Biskind. In *Seeing is Believing*, his book about the politics of 1950s Hollywood cinema, Biskind analyzes the film's Right-wing vigilante ideology. Biskind connects the film's paranoid anti-crime narrative to wider slippages between crime syndicates and Communism as forces threatening the fabric of America. Biskind argues that--like Lee Mortimer and Jack Lait's *Washington Confidential*, an hysterical anti-Communist expose of crime--*The Big Heat* implicitly critiques Kefauver as woefully naive, vastly underestimating the criminal threat. Mortimer and Lait, Biskind describes, "painted a picture of a >giant conspiracy= that >controlled practically all crime in the US=. . . . To Mortimer and Lait, one conspiracy was very much like another, and they quickly tied Big Crime (particularly drugs) to Big Communism" (191). Biskind continues by analyzing the

ways in which the film praises Bannion=s vigilantism in his quest to rid the city of the gangsters: ARevenge is a perfectly adequate motive in films of the radical right@ (192). Biskind=s historical engagement with the slippages between crime and Communism is a very effective analytical framework, and provides interesting political insights into the meaning of the film.

However, from a different perspective, one sensitive to the historical implications of a narrative about the nuclear, *The Big Heat* could equally be seen not to reinforce revenge as moral but to critique dominant discourses about revenge as a solution for resolving conflicts. Biskind=s theory of textual meaning is monological and does not envision multiple meanings in a text or multiple connections to historical discourses. Instead, I will illuminate *The Big Heat* as a dialogic text which activates a number of historical traumas. While crime and communism are certainly important to the film, they are not its sole historical and political referents.

Thus, most criticism has been limited by generalities (Schrader and Sarris) or single-point connections to the Cold War (Kemp and Biskind), but two books stand out as the exceptions: Tom Conley=s *Film Hieroglyphics* and Catherine Russell=s *Narrative Mortality*. Conley=s book attempts to locate the violence in post-war American films noir within the bounds of several specific historical traumas. Recalling Jameson=s liminal, subtextual space between the text and the context, Conley states, AMy aim in this book is to consider what seems to be working in that median area, between spectator=s fantasies and the facts of the film, and how the viewing of film can be an act of reading and, more cursively, of writing@ (ix). Drawing heavily on Derrida=s attention to the importance of writing, Conley attempts to track the way in which the rebus--the symbolic presence of writing within a film--expresses the text=s political unconscious (although Conley does not invoke Jameson). In the book=s tour-de-force application of this method, Conley

connects the Lang film *Scarlet Street* to the horrors of the Holocaust. Analyzing an early scene in which the protagonist stands under a sign in Greenwich Village which reads AJEWELRY,@

Conley argues:

Jewelry allows other inflections to bear upon the protagonist, to mark and endow him with traits running in directions other than the narrative. JEW(EL)RY: thus the word that is a mannequin enclosing another term, the EL, to be heard during the first primal scene, is first anticipated in the center of JewELry. If it is subtracted from the word, the remainder is Jewry, which brings forth the phantasm of genocide at the moment of the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, a time synchronous with the production of the film. Jewry will be what is redeemed (in the pawnshop) through the passage of Christopher Cross. EL subtends the sign of the Hell of the unimaginable dimensions of the camps. (26)

Conley=s bravura analysis is precisely the cure for the twenty-year drought in historical film noir criticism: Conley offers bold, provocative, well-specified claims which connect the text to its many and varied historical referents.

Scarlet Street offers a useful point of departure for addressing the relationship between Lang and nuclear trauma. Besides the concentration camps, the other historical referent of World War II atrocity is of course the genocide produced by the atomic bombs. By no coincidence, the actor who played Christopher Cross stands also at these crossroads. Edward G. Robinson, the star of *Scarlett Street*, was the emcee of the most barbarous spectacle in the history of American culture. As part of the celebration of the end of World War II in late 1945, Robinson hosted a Hollywood-produced spectacular at the Los Angeles Coliseum. One of the events at the show was a grotesque re-enactment of the Hiroshima bombing. The advertisement for the event, published in the October 26, 1945, edition of *The Los Angeles Times*, perfectly expresses Hollywood=s vigor for the brutal spectacularization of history: AThe nation has written the story, but Los Angeles is best qualified to tell it@ (1). Lifton and Mitchell describe the frightful event:

A re-enactment of the atomic bombings (narrated by Edward G. Robinson) climaxed a Tribute to Victory program at the Los Angeles Coliseum. One hundred thousand cheered

as a B-29, tracked by searchlights, skimmed over the top of the stadium. As it roared away, a terrific explosion shook the ground, and a mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke erupted. (79)

While Conley does not discuss the star intertext of Edward G. Robinson in reference to *Scarlett Street*, he could have used such an analysis to further detail the way the film engages the historical trauma of World War II. Most pertinent in connecting the film to Hiroshima involves the way it codes trauma as a performance. At the end of *Scarlett Street*, in a scene the censors eventually forced to be excised, Christopher Cross travels to see a man get executed for a crime Cross really committed. Cross gleefully sits atop power lines to get a better view as the man is electrocuted.

Lifton and Mitchell discuss the many ways in which the atomic bomb droppings were always already conceived of as performative, even before the horrors inside the Coliseum in October 1945. For example, they describe how the Trinity test served as a demonstration by the makers of the atomic bomb to an audience of politicians who had just spent \$2 billion on its development. More nefariously, the Japanese always remained the primary audience, the ones who would be overwhelmed by the weapon and quickly surrender. The Russians increasingly became an audience with the growing antagonisms between the two countries in 1945 about postwar policies@ (159). From its inception to well after its use, the atomic bomb had always been a signifier of the performative. The post-war cultural engagement of the bomb as performance (in theatrical Hollywood spectacles and in films) was merely a continuation of its historical articulation, not a radical break.

The second critic who has forwarded a dialogical historical framework for analyzing film noir and Lang's films is Catherine Russell. In *Narrative Mortality*, Russell analyzes mostly European New Wave cinema, but also Lang's last American film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*

(1956). Russell argues that over the course of the fifteen years after World War II, culminating in the New Wave movements, cinema became saturated in narrative mortality. The discourse of death in narrative film (2). Russell sees the trauma of World War II as having produced the historical conditions which led to narrative mortality: The isomorphism of life and narrative in the bildungsroman tradition collapses history into identity. In an era of atomic weapons, multinational capitalism and sociocultural heterogeneity neither identity nor history can be so neatly parceled out (3).

Russell also argues that narrative mortality, as represented in the late American films of Fritz Lang and the New Wave movements, may signify a solution to such devastating historical traumas: Narrative mortality may in fact be an imaginary solution to the contagion of violence that characterizes postwar history. While the image of apocalypse approximates the instantaneity of death as an allegory of discovery, it is also an allegory of necessity (20). Russell applies this theory of narrative mortality as a cinematic working through of historical traumas to Lang's strangest American film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956). In this film, Tom Garrett (played by Dana Andrews) agrees to allow his friend, Austin Spencer, to frame him for murder in order to demonstrate the flaws of capital punishment. As Tom and Austin carry out their plan, Tom is arrested and tried for the murder. However, Austin dies in a car crash just as he is about to come forward with the evidence that will clear Tom! Shortly before the execution, Tom's girlfriend, Susan, discovers evidence that clears Tom of any wrongdoing. However, while celebrating with Susan, Tom accidentally misspeaks, proving to her that he really did commit the murder, and that the scheme with Austin was all a ruse to avoid being executed. Susan again rushes to the prison, this time to keep the governor from signing Tom's pardon. The film ends with Tom scheduled to

be executed.

Russell connects the film to the Rosenberg executions of 1953: "If it was >un-American= to disagree with the verdict reached in the Rosenberg trial in 1953, and if *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is read as a deconstruction of symbolic power structures that depend on exclusion, then the film=s uncanniness can also be traced to the historical traumas of the period@ (65). The film quite literally mortifies the image, both via Dana Andrews= grotesquely rigid acting and through its ludicrous plot turns. The final plot twist--with the revelation that the hero really is the murderer, after we have invested all our energy into hoping for the truth to be exposed thus proving his innocence--literally stops the narrative dead in its tracks.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt engages a relationship between the historical context (the Rosenberg executions) and the narrative structure of the film. At first, the film seems conservative: the Hollywood plot contorts so as to demonstrate the folly of opposing the death penalty. The film=s ending seems to have demonstrated that capital punishment is correct, as the moral do-gooder exposing the evils of capital punishment has turned out to really be a murderer. However, upon closer scrutiny, those very same contortions--due to their improbability--activate the film=s ironic position with respect to these events, leading to a critique of the conservative surface of the film=s plot, in effect also producing a progressive message denouncing the death penalty. In other words, the excessive lengths to which the film has to go to argue for the death penalty in effect provides the auto-critique of its own dominant ideological position.

Like *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, *The Big Heat*=s narrative structure is imbued with its historical material. The nuclear trauma at the heart of the film is expressed via the film=s chain of violent events--what I term its nuclear chain reaction. So far, I have been examining the previous

critical responses to *The Big Heat*, to film noir, and to Fritz Lang to argue for a subtextual, dialogical view of reading texts historically. I have merely previewed an examination of the nuclear circumstances of the early 1950s. In the next section, I embark on such a historical analysis.

Nuclear Trauma in Early Cold War America

In *Hiroshima in America*, Lifton and Mitchell demonstrate that the events at Hiroshima are pivotal to current historical understanding: AYou cannot understand the twentieth century without Hiroshima@ (xi). The first atomic bombing was the inaugural moment of the Cold War, in which the American government immolated 70,000 Japanese people in order to solidify its position with respect to the other emerging superpower, the Soviet Union.

Lifton and Mitchell argue that despite the historical importance of Hiroshima, most Americans do not remotely understand its implications for their lives. This is so because most American social institutions have systematically worked to suppress reasoned dialogue grappling with the events. Before, during, and after Hiroshima, the government used the rationale of national security to keep the American public ignorant of atomic issues. Such has been the case ever since, much to the detriment of both Americans and the inhabitants of the rest of the world who have been, directly or indirectly, the victims of this most anti-democratic system of governance.

The suppression of key information about Hiroshima--and about the political apparatus which enabled such an atrocity to happen--has been a long-standing effect of the bombing within the United States. The social psychological result has been what Lifton and Mitchell term Apsychic numbing,. . . a diminished capacity or inclination to feel@ (337). The authors examine

the AHiroshima Syndrome,@ our collective refusal to deal with the moral consequences of the bombings, Alest our 1945 actions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki become retrospectively unethical and unlawful--in the eyes of the world and, still more troubling, our own eyes as well@ (313). Lifton and Mitchell argue that such refusal has produced a pattern of distancing and denial about the realities of Hiroshima. For example, as early as one day after the bombing, they argue, its mental erasure--to accompany the physical immolation already accomplished--had begun. Using interviews and documentation of President Truman=s meetings at the White House, Lifton and Mitchell demonstrate that during the Cabinet meeting on the night of August 7, one day after the most important event of the twentieth century, Hiroshima was not even mentioned. Lifton and Mitchell conclude, AA pattern of personal, and collective, distancing had begun@ (26).

No single event of cultural distancing more precisely indicates the problem than the story Howard Zinn tells at the beginning of his history of the Cold War, *Postwar America: 1945-1971*. Arguing that a significant shift occurred in everyday Americans= wartime relationship to the government between 1945 and 1971, Zinn compares the celebration in New York City on August 15, 1945 to the Bunker Hill protest of the Vietnam War in 1971. Documenting the trust Americans had in their government in 1945, Zinn argues, AAn entire city was annihilated by American technology in a burst of righteous brutality, with no protest from the American public@ (xiii). Zinn describes the August 15 Times Square celebration of the Japanese surrender: A>The metropolis exploded its emotions. . . with atomic force=@ (Arthur Krock of *The New York Times*, qtd. in Zinn, 3). For Zinn, nothing could better express the extent of the American denial of Hiroshima than a public party in which ticker tape rained on New Yorkers at the same time as nuclear fallout was still settling over the wastelands that were Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Such psychological distancing goes a long way toward explaining the relationship between Hiroshima and American cinema. Quite simply, for Hollywood after the L.A. Coliseum spectacular described earlier, Hiroshima conceptually ceased to exist. The narratives of the two Hollywood films purportedly about the Hiroshima missions--*The Beginning or the End* (Norman Taurog, 1947) and *Above and Beyond* (Melvin Frank, 1952)--end before the bombs are dropped and the devastation begins. In fact, not until the 1980s, with films like *Testament* and *The Day After*, did direct representations of the effects of nuclear devastation against populated areas appear in Hollywood fiction films. This is why an incipient criticism about nuclear anxiety must locate itself within the subtextual structures of the popular, apparently non-nuclear films of the Cold War era. The nuclear energy of a film like *The Big Heat* needs to be accounted for precisely because its indirect representational strategies are indicative of the evasions of Hiroshima within the general populace.

The apparatus of denial also explains the biggest problem in arguing that *The Big Heat*, a 1953 film, expresses the psychic energy of nuclear trauma. The atomic bombs were dropped eight years before, but due to government control of information, news about the devastation of Hiroshima was released slowly. For example, the still photographs Yoshito Matsushige took in Hiroshima on the day of the bombing were not published in an American media outlet until they appeared in *Life* magazine in September 1952. Moreover, the human effects of the atomic bomb were completely erased. As military information concentrated on aerial shots of structural damage, Americans learned very little of the direct and indirect physiological effects of the bombs, including radiation damage, until the early 1950s. This is why *The Big Heat*'s representation of Debbie's face as scarred by radiation poisoning is so startling: the moment when Debbie rips off her

bandages represents one of the earliest times American audiences would have been exposed--via any media outlet--to such a horrific mutilation of a human body.

The years 1952 and 1953 are also significant years in the discursive history of nuclear trauma in America because these are the dates for the re-activation of worry about nuclear weaponry spurred by the development of the hydrogen bomb. The United States confirmed its test of a thermonuclear device in November 1952, while Americans learned of a similarly successful test in the Soviet Union in August 1953. The Soviet development of the hydrogen bomb in the early 1950s is a significant development in the history of American nuclear trauma because it marked a shift in discourses of culpability. With the arrival of the bomb in the hands of the Soviets, the discursive positioning of the nuclear threat could be externalized. It would now be the Soviets who would be irresponsible with the bomb, denying the earlier irresponsibility of the United States government in its use of the bomb to exact revenge upon Japan. Such a shift occurring in the early 1950s is a significant contextual precondition for *The Big Heat*'s investigation of nuclear trauma and its production at the hands of criminals (as metaphors for governments).

With the arrival of bombs hundreds of times more powerful than the ones used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, eight-year-old fears which had never been dealt with in the first place returned with a vengeance. Discussing Robert Oppenheimer's and James B. Conant's personal reactions to the development of the hydrogen bombs, Lifton and Mitchell analyze, AWith the advent of a new generation of weaponry, with which they had no previous involvement, they can undergo a form of nuclear backsliding in which those human images become conscious, and they experience stirrings of guilt in relation to them@ (227). The development of the hydrogen bomb

by both Cold War combatants thus worked to surface repressed nuclear fears buried in the collective unconscious since 1945.

In addition to the development of the hydrogen bomb, other nuclear occurrences in 1952-53 also help explain why *The Big Heat* could resonate with atomic trauma.ⁱ Most directly relevant to what influenced American spectators of the early 1950s is a series of notorious atomic tests in the southwest United States. In "Rescripting the Nuclear Threat in 1953", an analysis of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugene Lourie, 1953) as a text traumatized by nuclear discourses, Alexander Hammond explores these historical conditions. Hammond argues, "By the summer of 1953, atomic bombs going off near Las Vegas had become the most familiar sign in the culture of the climax toward which the Cold War was building" (186).

In *The Big Secret: Film Noir and Nuclear Fear*, Mark Osteen also argues that 1953 was the pivotal year in which public opinion began to turn against the U.S.-based atmospheric testing of atomic weapons. Drawing from Howard Ball's *Justice Downwind: America's Atomic Testing Program in the 1950s*, Osteen points out, "The Upshot-Knothole series of tests, conducted from March to June 1953, were very dirty tests and dumped radioactive fallout all over downwind communities. These tests also involved realistic field exercises that exposed soldiers to radioactivity" (qtd. in Osteen, 90). It was within this cultural environment that the nuclear components of *The Big Heat* would have been read. How to read *The Big Heat* as a nuclear text is a problem I take up now, via a version of New Historicist criticism, the post-structural methodology known as nuclear criticism.

High and Mass Culture as Nuclear Missives

Codified in 1984, nuclear criticism offers a way for intellectuals to come together to seriously discuss the cultural effects of living in the nuclear age. As such, it participates in the work of the New Historicism and the political criticism of the sort advocated by Jameson. Nuclear criticism attempts to cure psychic numbing about Hiroshima by analyzing nuclear events. As Ken Ruthven defines it, nuclear criticism is a courageous attempt to face up to the unpleasant fact that nuclearism is a culturally dominant force in late twentieth century life, and. . . tr[ies] to theorise the implications of that fact for cultural studies in general. . . . One aim of nuclear criticism, therefore, is to avert the dangers that might follow from. . . collective amnesia@ (78, 95). The inaugural essays of nuclear criticism were published in a special Summer 1984 issue of the literary journal, *Diacritics*. Jacques Derrida=s essay, ANo Apocalypse, Not Now: Seven Missives, Seven Missiles,@ has become the critical practice=s most debated site. Punning on the apocalypse as expressed in St. John=s vision of the seven seals, Derrida makes seven miss/ive/ile attacks on the cultural complex of nuclearism.ⁱⁱ The essay=s main contribution, in his second miss/ive/ile, is a defense of literary critics= authority to discuss nuclear issues: AIn our techno-scientifico-militaro-diplomatic incompetence, we may consider ourselves, however, as competent as others to deal with a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being fabulously textual, through and through@ (23). Derrida argues that nuclear war is Afabulously textual@ because it has never happened: it is solely a literary phenomenon.

Derrida=s insight opens up discussion of a wide array of texts, since it rejects earlier, literal interpretations of what literature qualifies as nuclear. Previously, only novels (and films) about nuclear war counted as the appropriate subjects for a nuclear criticism. Derrida=s sentiment is endorsed by the introduction to the *Diacritics* issue, which makes a call for more criticism of the

unconscious expression of nuclear fears: AThe field would invite. . . criticism [of] the sort that reads other critical or canonical texts for the purpose of uncovering the unknown shapes of our unconscious nuclear fears@ (Klein, 2).

However, in other ways, the new nuclear criticism proved to be just as confining as other methodologies of literary analysis. Most problematic has been the way in which nuclear criticism has privileged studies of high culture while neglecting low, popular culture. In an odd critical gesture, Derrida inaugurates this trend by declaring the worth of high culture over more popular grapplings by science fiction novels: AI believe that the nuclear epoch is dealt with more >seriously= in texts by Mallarme, or Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in present-day novels that would offer direct and realistic descriptions of a >real nuclear catastrophe= (27-8). In addition to opening up a difficult historical question (can pre-nuclear texts be Aabout@ the nuclear era in any meaningful way?), Derrida separates texts according to cultural status as well as according to the direct nuclear referent. Such an identification of high texts with complex, indirect referencing and low texts with simplistic, direct referencing is clearly not accepted by the present analysis of *The Big Heat*. With this film and novel, we are presented with the most formulaic of film noir plots, which nonetheless activates the noir formula for a complex critique of American nuclear discourse. Derrida notwithstanding, *The Big Heat* grapples with the nuclear epoch just as seriously as Joyce ever could have (but in my opinion did not).

Implicit in Derrida=s privileging of high culture is also a reverence for modernist over popular culture. Lifton and Mitchell are examples of nuclear critics who also fall into this critical trap. From a cultural studies perspective, *Hiroshima in America* reads like a diatribe against all American popular culture as completely complicit with the goals of the military industrial complex.

In their analysis of the 1947 film *The Beginning or the End*, Lifton and Mitchell construct Hollywood producers as a straw men, with the studios attempting to curry favor with the government so as not to be suspected of Communist sympathizing. In early drafts of the film's script, a critique of the bombings was entertained. However, this material was rapidly edited out as the government became increasingly involved in the production. Lifton and Mitchell argue, "The movie industry's capitulation on *The Beginning or the End* reveals how Hollywood, no less than the press, eagerly served the official narrative, acting out of a perceived patriotic need to do what the military and their President desired" (366). However, Lifton and Mitchell never then move on to examine any texts, like *The Big Heat*, which might have grappled with the nuclear question in less than direct ways.

Instead, Lifton and Mitchell turn to modernist novels in order to unearth subtextual fictional critiques of American nuclear policy. They argue for the importance of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as investigations of Hiroshima trauma. *Cat's Cradle* begins with a reporter interviewing people about where they were on August 6, 1945, and ends with world destruction. Lifton and Mitchell emphasize the way Vonnegut's fiction attends to questions of history and memory: "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a survivor's effort to make sense of a world dominated by the threat of holocaust and the reality of numbing. It is about feeling and not feeling, about remembering and not remembering" (378).

Almost all nuclear critics of history and memory, in fact, concentrate on the modernist works of fiction and film to demonstrate their point. Michael S. Roth's *Hiroshima Mon Amour: You Must Remember This* is a case in point. With respect to cinema, the films of Alain Resnais have almost single-handedly cornered the market on this topic. Roth begins the essay with the

argument, The films of Alain Resnais have stood out as an extraordinarily rich body of reflection on the connections among history, memory, and trauma. Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, written by Marguerite Duras, is an important exploration of the possibility of living with the past and of living without it (91).

Roth continues, In charting some of the vicissitudes of writing history as a problem of memory, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* forces the viewer to confront some of the crucial problems concerning the construction of a past with which one can live, especially in regard to our (limited) capacities for representing that past to another (91-2). Roth's praise of modernism for forcing the viewer's reaction presents a critical paradox, as modernism from the start was an artistic practice attempting to heterogenize the text, to construct a writerly forum in which the reader could break out of the confines of the dominant meaning of a classical text. However, Roth's seemingly misguided interpretation of modernist practice actually comes quite close to addressing how these texts are actually interpreted by the critics. Modernist criticism has established itself as its own orthodoxy, enforcing a particular view of the text, which the viewer must then adopt or be forever confused about its significance.

I certainly do not wish to demean *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s significance as a text about history and memory. In a culture in which Hiroshima has been systematically suppressed, the film makes a significant gesture towards coming to terms with atrocity. However, I think *The Big Heat*, a run-of-the-mill genre piece from the heyday of Hollywood, also achieves a history and memory status without ever attempting such a project. Certainly the film never forces its viewer down any such interpretive path. However, what is Bannion's struggle with the death of his wife via the bombing of her car if not an engagement with the most pervasive trauma to

confront humanity in the twentieth century: the fear that at any moment our loved ones could be vaporized off the face of the planet? This is a question of history and memory as profound, and as pertinent, as any asked in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

Further debasing popular culture as incapable of displaying a discursive engagement with Hiroshima, Roth concludes his essay with a counterpoint examination of a Hollywood film, *Casablanca*. Operating from an intertextual reference in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Roth argues:

I am aware that in many ways a comparison between these two films could turn out to be downright silly. But the wink to *Casablanca* that Resnais gives us near the end of his film should not be neglected. . . we are given the allusion to *Casablanca* precisely because they see that this powerful romantic claim is (perhaps like all powerful romantic claims) impossible. (100)

Roth's equivalence between Hollywood and a naive romanticism is not borne out by a nuclear criticism of *The Big Heat*. The Lang film, just like the modernist text *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, is anything but forwarding romantic claims. In fact, it goes so far as to suggest that any possibility of interpersonal relationships between people have been irrevocably severed by the nuclear condition. Every potential heterosexual relationship--Katie and Bannion, Vince and Debbie, Debbie and Bannion, Bannion and Joyce--has been forever erased by film's end. Such a radical swallowing of the interpersonal is not even within the bounds of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: at least He and She have a brief affair in which they both come to learn the other's perspective on what happened at Hiroshima.

While most other nuclear criticism has insisted on tracking the direct nuclear energies of high cultural texts at the expense of examining popular texts, some work has followed Derrida's model and explored the indirect expression of nuclear trauma in canonical modernist texts. In *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word*, the most accomplished of the post-

Diacritics attempts at nuclear criticism, Peter Schwenger analyzes Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's*

Rainbow as a nuclear text:

It should be clear why I am now turning to a text that is ostensibly not about Hiroshima, a novel in which the bombing of that city is relegated to its usual place in Western literature, to the unconscious, here a textual unconscious. But I hope to show that such an unconscious is the real subject of the book, the Real enveloped within the dream that is *Gravity's Rainbow*. (57)

Schwenger's critical approach--looking toward the social energies circulating unconsciously within a text--is precisely the appropriate methodology to take with respect to a suppressed issue like nuclear trauma. However, he does not consider that popular texts might have a similar unconscious relationship to our culture, to admit that popular texts also have Areal subjects@ beyond their surface narratives. While Schwenger insists on a division between high texts worthy of symptomatic study and insignificant popular texts unworthy of a similar analysis, I argue that the nuclear trauma indirectly expressed in *The Big Heat* is as Areal@ as any of the other high cultural texts studied by nuclear criticism, be they A direct@ like *Cat's Cradle* or A indirect@ like *Gravity's Rainbow*.

A few essays outside of the tradition of nuclear criticism, but sympathetic to its goals nonetheless, have attempted to mine the nuclear energies of the popular cinema. When read through the framework of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, two such essays reveal the political debate activated by the study of popular texts. Jameson theorizes that even popular texts in support of dominant ideological positions can potentially rupture to express the Utopian possibility characteristic of a resistant folk culture:

If the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are A managed@ and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses--the raw material upon which the process works--are initially awakened

within the very text that seeks to still them. (287)

Jameson's analysis uncannily predicts the argument between the two essays which have attempted to track the nuclear energies of popular American cinema: Susan Sontag's *The Imagination of Disaster* (1961) and Hammond's *Rescripting the Nuclear Threat in 1953*. Sontag's essay analyzes 1950s science fiction films as expressing widespread fears over the nuclear. For example, Sontag's reading of films like *Godzilla* argues that, *The accidental awakening of the super-destructive monster who has slept in the earth since prehistory is, often, an obvious metaphor for the Bomb* (220-1). Sontag argues that such films serve to forestall debate and policy changes with respect to the nuclear:

What I am suggesting is that the imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an inadequate response. . . . The films reflect world-wide anxieties, and they serve to allay them. They inculcate a strange apathy concerning the processes of radiation, contamination, and destruction which I for one find haunting and depressing. (227)

Sontag thus takes the first of the positions with respect to mass culture articulated by Jameson: the attitude that mass culture films manage and contain any criticism of dominant nuclear discourses.

Reacting directly against Sontag, Hammond articulates the Utopian possibility of mass culture by analyzing the 1953 film, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*: *Sontag suggests that such films functioned to neutralize the culture's collective nightmares of holocaust by translating what was alien and unthinkable into the familiar and banal. . . In the case of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, the translation worked in the opposite direction for its 1953 audiences* (182).

Hammond supports this hypothesis by comparing nuclear policy rhetoric to the nuclear fears articulated in the film. Unlike the calm and seemingly logical arguments about nuclear war forwarded by the American government, the film demonstrates the illogic and senselessness of

nuclear war: AThe monster is not waging >war= in any humanly meaningful sense; it is deconstructing the structures of human culture that arose while it lay dormant. . . . No language, this film implies, and certainly not the language of war, can make human sense of the >monstrousness= of what nuclear weapons do to cities@ (193).

Similarly, I position *The Big Heat* as a critique of the dominant attitudes toward the nuclear inculcated by official discourse. The film attacks contemporary discourses assuaging nuclear anxiety. For example, one of the common discourses forwarded in the 1950s about nuclear war was that it would not occur because the political leaders would be putting their own wives and children at risk. In her 1984 essay AThe Nuclear Sublime,@ Frances Ferguson critiques such a logic: APutting woman and children first, then, may function as a rationale for avoiding nuclear disaster, but one may also feel some dismay in the face of the recognition that such a justification for the continuation of individual existence has not previously held particular sway@ (7).

The Big Heat provides a more direct refutation of the dominant discourse, demonstrating not that protection of women and children would prevent the war but that women and children are indeed the primary targets of attack. While the combatants remain protected by their skyscrapers and police buildings, women are constantly victimized in the film: Lucy is tortured and murdered, Katie is immolated, Vince brutally burns the dice girl=s hand with a cigarette, kidnapping is threatened against Joyce, and Debbie=s face is burned. Virtually the only man physically traumatized in the film is Vince (at the end when Debbie scalds his face with the steaming coffee), but by this point in the narrative, he has been effectively feminized. I turn to investigating *The Big Heat*=s critique of such a gendering of the bomb=s violence when I discuss the film.

This section has attempted to reveal the importance of a New Historicist approach to

nuclear culture not rooted in archival information but instead in the direct interrogation of the textuality of the nuclear age. A major lacuna in such Nuclear Criticism has been the reluctance to treat popular culture with the same potential to engage nuclear trauma as high literature and art cinema. In the next section, I attempt to demonstrate that the popular culture of the early Cold War period was interrogating nuclear trauma. I do so by arguing that William P. McGivern's novel, *The Big Heat*, explores the cultural components of nuclear trauma.

The Nuclear Social Energy of William P. McGivern's *The Big Heat*

Like most detective novels, William P. McGivern's *The Big Heat* (1952) begins with the introduction of a mystery. In the novel's first scenes, we learn that Tom Deery, a cop, has committed suicide. Later in the novel, we learn that Tom, the records manager for the city's police department, has killed himself because he has been facilitating a criminal reign of terror led by Mike Lagana and Max Stone, and can no longer stand the guilt. Tom has left behind a twenty-page letter culled from his records which implicates all the guilty parties. In a redemptive final gesture, Tom leaves the letter for his wife to take to the newspapers. But Mrs. Deery has other plans, and quickly uses the letter to blackmail Lagana. The rest of the novel revolves around Detective Dave Bannion searching for Tom's letter.

This letter which Tom leaves behind is the item which propels the novel's plot. Nuclear criticism has positioned the importance of writing in a way that helps us to understand how the letter functions as an atomic engine. In *An Apocalypse, Not Now*, Jacques Derrida argues that literature and the arms race have in common a project of stockpiling. That is, literature is based on an accumulation of texts. If, as in a nuclear war, all traces of the archive of texts were

eradicated, literature would cease to exist. Derrida argues:

Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive --that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism. (26)

In an uncanny way, the plot of *The Big Heat* replicates Derrida's concern with the threat nuclear war poses to the archive. The criminal syndicate is up in arms because Tom has stored all of the pertinent documents necessary to send them to jail in a safety deposit box. The surface plot of the novel is really about the gangsters' quest to stop Bannion from gaining access to the archived information. The gangsters in effect want to immolate the archive in the way a nuclear war would. When Bannion figures out the power of the archive, he pleads with Mrs. Deery to give him access to let the big heat fall. Invoking atomic imagery, he implores her to come save his society: "A whole city is dying" (165). Via Bannion and Derrida, it becomes clear that the big heat, while superficially a term for the cleaning up of corruption in the city, also evokes a nuclear discursive subtext.

If Tom's letter is the atomic bomb that drives the plot of *The Big Heat*, more nuclear effects result as a consequence of the gangsters' attempts to stop Bannion's quest for the truth. *The Big Heat* constructs its plot around a series of sadistic punishments in what I will term the novel's nuclear chain reaction. The novel's atomic trauma begins with the syndicate's atomic bombing of Kate Bannion's car. The rest of the novel then becomes a propagation of the radiation effects as the repercussions of the bombing spread throughout the city. The perpetrator of the car bombing, Max Stone, lets his atomic fissionable personality get the better of

him as tortures a woman to death by burning her body with a cigarette. Then, Max scalds his girlfriend Debbie's face with coffee.

By making Max Stone a carrier of destructive atomic energy, the novel discursively creates historical connections between criminality and the nuclear. The historical connection between criminality and the nuclear is by no means an isolated one within Cold War culture. Many critics of the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan associated these actions with criminality. Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, considered the American military bombing of Nagasaki a war crime. In *Burning Conscience*, philosopher Gunther Anders and atomic bomb pilot Charles Eatherly argue that Hiroshima guilt would lead to criminal behavior. In other words, Anders and Eatherly argued that the bomb perpetrators would turn into criminals on the home front as a reaction to their complicity during war. Scientist Eugene Rabinowitch argues that Hiroshima was a crime carried out in Americans' names without the consent of the American public at-large.ⁱⁱⁱ If some public discourse connects the atomic bombings to a criminal element (e.g. the military, politicians in Washington), *The Big Heat* also connects criminals to the atom bomb. This ironically suggests a disjunction between representation wherein in the historical real the state is the criminal and in the novel the state is the savior--denying the United States' involvement and perhaps casting the Soviets as the new criminals, now that they have the bomb.

The novel amply expresses the threat to the city these criminals pose. The novel's Bannion most passionately articulates this position when he declares, "AA whole city is dying" (165). Clearly the argument is hyperbolic, as the only cities that really died were Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But by indirectly invoking these dead cities, the novel activates nuclear trauma. The novel's representation of a nuclear threat to an American city should also not surprise us. As

Hammond describes, early 1950s American culture was haunted by the possibility of the nuclear destruction of major urban areas:

On 5 August 1950, not quite a year after the USSR tested its first atomic bomb, the cover of *Collier's* magazine featured a mushroom cloud and firestorm raging in vivid color over mid-town Manhattan--an illustration for John Lear's story projecting the effects of a Soviet nuclear attack on New York City and calling on the nation to prepare for Hiroshima, USA. (Rescripting, 181)

Not only was the nuclear threat to American cities part of public discourse, it was also visualized in various ways, including magazine covers and the film version of *The Big Heat*. In Baltimore in the Morning . . . After: On the Forms of Post-Nuclear Leadership, Dean MacCannell explores Cold War discourses linking the city to the nuclear threat. Specifically studying urban planning discourses, MacCannell argues that American social planning had secretly hoped for a Soviet nuclear attack in order to cure the social malaise in our urban areas. Using Lacan's post-structural theory of the unconscious in order to seek the unconscious of post-nuclear demographic shifts (34), MacCannell sees no mere coincidence between the white flight to suburbia in the 1950s and the widely visualized nuclear threat to major American cities.

However, in *The Big Heat*, Bannion's movement ironically represents a reversal of the white flight to the utopian suburbs. Bannion begins the novel happily married, living in a natty family home complete with lawn and flower beds. However, the atomic blast kills his wife, forcing Bannion back into the city to confront the criminal bombers. Bannion's reputedly safe suburban living arrangements have been bombarded back to the Stone Age by (Max) Stone's atomic blast.

Coincident with the 1950s white flight to the safe suburbs, of course, is the concentration within urban areas of those who remained: the underclass and large minority populations. This

historical development is something that only the novel version of *The Big Heat* addresses. In the novel, Bannion befriends a black youth, Ashton, who is wrongly accused of committing a crime. As repayment for his fair treatment by Bannion, Ashton gives Bannion the vital clue he needs to track down Katie=s murderers. In the novel, the citizens of the city--specifically coded as largely black and poor--rise together to help Bannion purge the city of the criminals and their nuclear threat.

MacCannell=s essay addresses the racial component of American nuclear discourse which resonates with the novel. He argues, AAfter World War II, as is well-known, there was a historically unprecedented and rapid demographic shift in the United States which, in less than two decades, produced a rigid new parallelism of oppositions with black-urban-poor on one side and white-suburban-rich on the other@ (39). In a brilliant critical move, MacCannell in effect establishes that the arms Arace@ was one of the first ARace@ issues of post-war America.

MacCannell supports his thesis by analyzing James Bryant Conant as the link between nuclear and urban planning policy. A former president of Harvard University, Conant had worked on the atom bomb project during the war. After the war, he became interested in education, and was responsible for creating what we know as the modern American public education system (if only his educational theories had worked as well as his bomb!). MacCannell proceeds to analyze Conant=s famous Cold War book about education, *Slums and Suburbs* (1961). In the book, Conant advocates sacrificing the cities, choosing to focus the post-Sputnik surge of money for public education on the suburbs, an area where he felt it would do the most for America=s future. Conant=s racism, MacCannell argues, has become the dominant public discourse with respect to both social and war planning: ABombs which kill cities, not agriculture, are no longer viewed by

our leaders as a threat; on the contrary, they have taken on a potentially positive prospect. The city will absorb the impact, and in so doing also cure itself of our officially designated >social problems=: crime, poverty, disease, high infant mortality rates@ (45).

As frightening as it might seem, MacCannell=s hypothesis is confirmed by a number of sources both contemporary and current. The title of Martha Bartter=s analysis of nuclear war fiction is self-explanatory: ANuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal.@ In her famous analysis of the nuclear referents in 1950s science fiction movies, AThe Imagination of Disaster,@ Susan Sontag similarly claims that these films often fantasized about starting over again in the cities: AAs in *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1957), the whole movie can be devoted to the fantasy of occupying the deserted metropolis and starting over again, a world Robinson Crusoe@ (218). Such an insight was not solely forwarded by intellectuals, but also by the popular discourse of the day. An article in the March 2, 1956 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* claimed in deadly seriousness, AThe atom bomb development may come to be looked at in historical perspective as what I refer to as >Nature=s slum clearance program= A (11).

Early 1950s fiction also envisioned the nuclear threat to the city in a positive light. In Bernard Wolfe=s *Limbo* (1952), a science-fiction novel about nuclear war, a man returns from a tropical island after World War III to discover his home city completely rebuilt. The narrator of the novel describes the significance of this miraculous development: AApparently the H-bomb had in one great continental sizzle accomplished what the reformers and uplifters had never been able to: with a spurt of social-engineering efficiency it had cleared the slums from America overnight@ (qtd. in Bartter, 149).

The glorification of nuclear war as Aurban renewal@ is precisely the sort of rosy rhetoric

that *The Big Heat* manages to debunk. When Lagana and Stone get through with detonating the city, it is left as a wasteland, with human casualties sprawled over the suburban and urban landscape. While the nuclear policy decisions worked to fragment black and white, rich and poor, by sacrificing some and protecting others, the novel version of *The Big Heat* unifies a wide range of people in a fight against the criminals cum atomic perpetrators. Thus *The Big Heat* nuclear subtext sets out a discursive critique of dominant historical discourse, pointing out that users of the bombs are criminal and that the suburb is safe@ thesis is racist and fallacious. Yet it is ultimately contradictory as well for it can be read as identifying the criminal with the subversive element (gangsters, communists) and as suggesting that U.S. authorities are no longer the criminals of the nuclear era.

Fritz Lang=s *The Big Heat* as Nuclear Noir

In *The Big Secret: Film Noir and Nuclear Fear*,@ Mark Osteen identifies a new subgenre of the film noir which he dubs the Anuclear noir@ (81). Osteen discusses a wide range of films which circulate the social energies of the atomic era. Most often, he studies films in which nuclear materials are directly represented. For example, he believes *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) Arepresents the culmination of the nuclear noir cycle@ because it ends with apocalyptic destruction: the femme fatale opens a box of plutonium, killing both herself and the detective.

While Osteen never discusses *The Big Heat*, he does suggest that some nuclear noirs do not directly represent atomic materials in the way *Kiss Me Deadly* does. For example, in his analysis of *The Lady From Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1948) as a nuclear noir, Osteen argues:

The nuclear theme emerges in the apocalyptic words of the partner of disabled lawyer Arthur Bannister, George Grisby: Alt=s coming. . . First the big cities, then maybe even this. It=s just got to come.@ But with the help of the narrator, Welles= Michael O=Hara,

he plans to be 1,000 miles away when they start dropping those bombs.@ (82)

Like *The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Big Heat* (and its source text) is thoroughly imbued with nuclear trauma, despite the absence of any direct signifiers of atomic materials. As such, it qualifies as one of the most important nuclear films noir: it typifies nuclear culture in the early 1950s by representing the ever-present Anon-presentness@ of the nuclear threat.

The film version does transform some of this nuclear material from its novel source. In the novel, Bannion gets the information he needs to irradiate the nuclear threat from Ashton. However, in the film, Bannion journeys to a car junkyard where he meets a disabled woman named Selma Parker. In the film, Parker gives Bannion the vital clue that leads him to his wife=s killers. As Bannion walks toward the office at the junkyard, in the background across the array of dead cars, we see a sign announcing the name of the junkyard: AVictory Auto Wrecking.@ Like Conley=s analysis of the AJEWELRY@ rebus in *Scarlett Street*, the name of this junkyard illustrates the nuclear political unconscious of *The Big Heat*. If the celebration of Hiroshima at the L.A. Coliseum was AA Tribute to Victory,@ the imagery in *The Big Heat* here provides a more ironic commentary on victory than tribute. In fact, the imagery of the nuclear graveyard reveals the price of that victory from the point of view of the bomb damage. What was implicit in the victory, this scene makes all too clear, was the destruction of two cities, two vast spaces now just lifeless wastelands.

Bannion walks through a huge array of demolished cars which activates an image of apocalypse. If an atomic blast sent Katie=s car here, then maybe more of these cars arrived in the same way, as a result of atomic devastation. The image of demolished cars was a typical one in early Cold War culture to signify nuclear destruction. Hammond argues, AThe AEC=s testing

program in Nevada had given the American public over two years of regular exposure to media images of the ritual of countdown and mushroom cloud, of troops crouched in trenches beneath blowing sand and dust, *of cars and mannequins and houses destroyed by blast* and heat effects [my emphasis]@ (187).

The human consequences of this devastation are even more dramatically expressed when the denizen of the AVictory Auto Wrecking@ shop appears. The Lang critics have never known what to make of Parker=s disability. Wood argues:

Between the death of Lucy Chapman and the death of Debbie Marsh. . . comes the brief but crucial appearance in the film of another female character, Selma Parker/Edith Evanson, the crippled woman who works for Dan Seymour=s wrecking company. . . the image I think everyone retains is of her hobbling on her stick between the rows of wrecked cars toward Bannion, who is on the other side of a chainmail fence. (19)

From the perspective of a nuclear criticism, however, the scene displays the human effects of the use of atomic weapons, effects that were systematically censored from the American people by their federal government so that the production of nuclear weapons would continue to expand the economy.

Colin MacArthur goes a bit further than Wood in interpreting this scene. He positions Parker as a representative of humanity: AThe physical disability operating in Lang=s mise-en-scene is suggestive of the imprisonment of a basically humane person working for an indifferent employer and, perhaps more generally, of a representative of the citizenry under Lagana@ (66). If Lagana is responsible for the atomic blast which killed Katie and produced the wasteland that is the AVictory Auto Wrecking@ junkyard, then MacArthur=s view of Parker as a citizen under Lagana is right on target. Parker=s disability is what citizens get under Lagana, and what we can all look forward to if our bellicose nuclear policies continue to be implemented. While AA Tribute to

Victory@ celebrated a policy of using atomic weaponry to immolate hundreds of thousands of Selma Parkers and then participated in the censoring of human effects, Conley=s hieroglyphic criticism activates *The Big Heat*=s more ironic view of AVictory@ by putting before us Selma Parker as a visual testament to the human effects of atomic weaponry.

Like the novel, the film version of *The Big Heat* traces the effects of atomic devastation from the victims directly back to the perpetrators. The film indicts a militarist nuclear policy by establishing its links to criminality but moreover to an aggressive, patriarchal masculinity. If the novel connects and critiques race and class issues (black/working class/urban vs. white/middle class/suburban) to the arms race, the film explores the gendering of the bomb. This can most clearly be seen in the scene in which Vince Stone (the film changes his first name) scalds Debbie=s face with hot coffee. *The Big Heat* uses Vince to demonstrate the homologous causal relationship between fission and masculinity. Vince is to the film what Jack Shadoian says Cody Jarrett is to *White Heat*, Aa walking A-bomb@ (173). Both Vince and Bannion represent bombs waiting to go off, steaming with repressed energies, longing to explode and wreak vengeance. The film refuses to make much distinction between their desires: that Bannion is frustrated over the corruption in his police department or that Vince is frustrated he has to take his orders from a sniveling has-been like Lagana hardly seems to matter. However, the film does distinguish between their ability to control their seething rage. Bannion is able to, while Vince is not. Even after Katie=s death, when Bannion could have become the vigilante that Biskind sees him as, he always remains within the bounds of the law. When he finally tracks down Larry Gordon, the man who planted the car bomb, Bannion does not shoot him, but leaves him, knowing that the syndicate will kill him for having squealed. When Bannion goes to kill Mrs. Duncan so that Athe big heat@ will fall, he begins to

choke her, but stops. Finally, when he is about to shoot Vince Stone at the film's climax, Bannion refuses, and decides to let the judicial system do its work.

Unlike Bannion, however, Vince Stone possesses no such restraint. His hyper-masculine personality is figured as a repressed rage that achieves critical mass all too often. When Stone sets his mind to destroying the city, he does so. As in the novel, Stone's car bombing of Katie sets off a nuclear chain reaction of destruction, threatening every area of the city. When Stone suspects Debbie of infidelity with Bannion, he does not hesitate to irradiate Debbie's face. Even though his weapon is steaming hot coffee, his action has an apocalyptic effect on Debbie.

Vince's use of coffee to irradiate Debbie's face is an interesting choice. Osteen identifies how often nuclear noirs rely on atomic drinks. With respect to *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), Osteen argues: "A romantic secrets--Alicia's love for Devlin, his inability to express his love for her--blend with the uranium ore secreted in the bottle to suggest that emotions may be, like wine, either tonic or toxic--or even, for Devlin, radioactive" (82). Similarly, Osteen argues that in *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Mate, 1949), the main protagonist unwittingly drinks "luminous" (radioactive) poison" (85). Coffee is *The Big Heat*'s radioactive drink, a point which surfaces again during the film's last moments. *The Big Heat* uses its radioactive coffee to critique dominant nuclear discourses by representing its devastating effects on Debbie's face. As the August 8, 1945, issue of *The Washington Post* reports, the bar at the National Press Club served "Atomic Cocktails" for 60 cents (qtd. in Hammond, "God's Nation", 5). While popular discourse joked about atomic drinks, *The Big Heat* and other nuclear noirs concentrated on the deadly effects of nuclear culture, even its drinks.

Vince Stone as a walking atom bomb expresses the fusion of man and bomb that both

David Halberstam and Lifton and Mitchell declare is the ultimate psychological consequence of the Bomb's use. While discussing Edward Teller's obsessive pursuit of the hydrogen bomb (known as the Super during development), Halberstam describes, Teller's career, his psyche, and the Super were all blended together as one: Those who opposed his bomb opposed him (91). Lifton and Mitchell concur about the forging of human subjectivity and the Bomb. In describing journalist William Laurence's obsession with defending the decision to use the Bomb at Hiroshima, Lifton and Mitchell discuss his personal merger with the weapon, a breakdown of boundaries between man and bomb to the extent that each came to represent--to support, enhance, and speak for--the other (19).

Nuclear critics have worked to theorize this fusing of man and Bomb in a number of ways.

Ken Ruthven argues that the scientists used their identification with the Bomb to express an otherwise limited masculinity:

Nuclear scientists and engineers employed on the Manhattan Project benefited from a symbolic system of representation which enabled them to equate their real power (in terms of education, income and social prestige) not only with their intellectual power (over a feminised Nature whose hidden parts they were probing) but also with their phallic power (over woman in particular) and their nuclear power (over Germans and Japanese). (63)

A man who considers himself In-Vincible, Stone provides a fictional representation of a man-bomb merging which circulated throughout American culture's engagement with the Bomb. Like Ruthven's vision of the scientists, Stone uses his power to torture the film's women characters. He suffers from what Osteen, quoting Georg Simmel, calls a human radioactivity: These characters draw others toward themselves (with that fascination of an abyss) only to explode into violence (81).

One of film's most devastating critiques of dominant nuclear discourses occurs in the

scene when the politicians try to stop Vince from hurting Debbie. The film here critiques official discourses about the stability and well-being of nuclear culture by revealing that the politicians are not in control of those in direct contact with the bomb: the Amilitary@ (Vince and the criminals). Anxiety over who really controlled the Bomb began with the bombing of Nagasaki, which was never directly authorized by President Truman. As the Cold War progressed, it became obvious that the government was increasingly dominated by the military industrial complex and its lust to create bigger and better bombs. Even the Republican President Eisenhower warned of the dangers of this arrangement at the end of his presidency.

The Big Heat similarly warns of the problems created when the military tells the politicians what to do. The scene in which Vince scalds Debbie=s face with coffee positions the city=s politicians as completely under the sway of Vince the gangster-warrior, no matter what atrocities they are forced to witness. As the stakes of the scene evolve, the politicians are revealed to be increasingly ineffective. Before Vince scalds Debbie, Commissioner Higgins tries to calm Vince, but Larry Gordon, Vince=s lieutenant, stops him. Shortly afterward, Higgins again attempts to deflect the tension of the situation, declaring AI suggest we call it a night@ to which Vince shouts back, AI suggest you shut your mouth.@ After Higgins= peacemaking proves to be ineffective, and Vince has scalded Debbie, she runs into the card room. When someone suggests that they get Debbie to a doctor, Higgins fearfully quivers that AThey=ll have to make a police report.@ Vince angrily responds, AThat=s why we=re sending you.@ The end of the scene illustrates how much the politicians are willing to be bullied by the gangsters, to the point of not only remaining silent during the atrocity, but actively covering up the consequences for the benefit of the militants. Such was the case after Hiroshima, when the politicians censored the bomb=s effects from the American

population for the benefit of the military who wanted to build more bombs. The relationship has been fairly consistent throughout the Cold War, as the government conducted secret experiments on American citizens with the explicit approval of the civilian politicians, all in the interest of National security.@"

If the film explores the relationship between the Bomb and a horrifying abuse of power through Vince, it also interrogates a Cold War discursive relationship between the Bomb and the figure of Woman via Debbie. Previous nuclear critics have studied this latter representational phenomenon in 1950s nuclear noirs. In the best of these analyses, Carol Flinn argues that *Kiss Me Deadly* positions its women characters as representational stand-ins for the atomic terror. Flinn describes, "By placing the literal 'key' of the narrative (i.e., the key to the locker where the atomic box is hidden) inside of Christina Bailey's body, woman's sexuality (her own 'hot box') is constructed as the film's final object of inquiry and ultimate source of terror" (124). *Kiss Me Deadly* thus simplistically and literally figures the nuclear threat as embodied by its women characters.

Debbie also comes to signify the carrier of apocalypse. Debbie's body has in fact been marked with the sign of nuclear fission--the radiation burns on her face--and becomes the film's angel of death. Albeit at Bannion's sly and manipulative prodding, Debbie nevertheless becomes the fulfillment of his eschatological prophecy to Mrs. Duncan: "There's no future for you Mrs. Duncan. None at all." Whereas Bannion began to strangle Mrs. Duncan but could not finish the job, Debbie shoots her in a cold, deliberate fulfillment of Bannion's prediction. Debbie also turns the criminals' methods against themselves, as she makes sure the radiation effects torture Stone as well, employing her own pot of steaming coffee to make him feel the sting of being a victim of a

nuclear attack.

The fact that the central female character of both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *The Big Heat* comes to serve as a human manifestation of atomic vengeance should not surprise us. Implicit at the beginning of the American atomic program was the gendering of the bomb. In a racist as well as sexist gesture, *Stars and Stripes* held a beauty contest in Nagasaki in May 1946, crowning a Miss A Bomb.^{iv} Back at home, MGM studios (also responsible for *The Beginning or the End* (1946), the extremely patriotic defense of the official narrative of the bombing of Hiroshima) marketed Linda Christian as the Atomic Bomb,^v complete with publicity photos in which she is clad in a bikini.^{vi}

Such explications of the gendering of nuclear culture could continue endlessly, drawing in a huge web of intertexts. For example, in July 1946, a nuclear bomb tested at Bikini Atoll carried a picture of star Rita Hayworth. *The Big Heat* forges what now seems like an in-joke at such nuclear star power. When Bannon first meets Debbie in the gangster's bar, The Retreat (itself a kind of a fallout shelter for the criminals to hide from the big heat),^{vii} the music track carries the song, Put the Blame on Me.^{viii} This is of course the famous song in *Gilda* (1946) that femme fatale Rita Hayworth sings to another film noir protagonist played by Glenn Ford. The explicit intertextual reference in *The Big Heat* at this moment is that Gloria Grahame represents yet one more femme fatale drawing Glenn Ford into her clutches. However, given the Retreat's imagistic status as a fallout shelter, Hayworth's signification as an image appropriate to be pasted to an atomic bomb, and Grahame's subsequent transformation into an atomic avenger, there are nuclear components in the allusion as well.

In more general terms, many nuclear critics have connected the nuclear and the feminine.

In *The Bomb and the Baby Boom*, Terrence Holt argues, "The onset of the Cold War, with its threat of nuclear destruction, was answered at home by attempts to domesticate a liberated female sexuality of which the Bomb seemed the apotheosis" (207). However, unlike *Kiss Me Deadly*, in which we are to see Woman as the Bomb's pure destructive potential with respect to an innocent male detective, *The Big Heat* positions Debbie as the heroine punishing the criminal forces who launched the Bomb in the first place. It is through the complex relationship between Bannion, Debbie, and Vince that the gendered nuclear politics of *The Big Heat* part company with *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Caryl Flinn's identification of the trope of splitting characters in films noir to demonstrate their conflicted identities provides a point of departure for such a comparison between the two films. Flinn argues:

Kiss Me Deadly keeps within the noir tradition by characterizing its female characters as duplicitous, placing them in an array of deceptive doubles. . . . Lily is divided in two, first enjoying the identity of the Alily white innocent who asks for Hammer's protection and later revealing herself as the evil Gabrielle and effectively operating as Hammer's angel of death. (115)

The Big Heat similarly presents the post-scalding Debbie as a split character. Most critics of the film have noted the importance of the visual splitting of her face into two sides. Charles M. Berg claims, "The result leaves one side of Debbie's face horribly disfigured while the other remains attractive. Throughout the rest of the film, Lang shows us first one side of the face, then the other, depending on the dramatic or emotional nuances of the particular scene to be emphasized" (217).

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, critics like Berg refuse to explore the political and historical specificity of what those dramatic nuances might mean. Instead, I argue that Debbie needs to be read in her historical context and as a sign of the nuclear subtext: she has been split by

Vince's atom, her character Atwinned@ as the result of an apocalyptic fission.

The investigation of the nuclear effects on subjectivity has been one of the obsessions of nuclear criticism. For example, Osteen argues that Athe fragmentation of the self [is] the real fallout of the nuclear age@ (89). Analyzing the nuclear noir, *The Thief* (Russell Rouse, 1952), Osteen argues that the main character=s A dual allegiances and secret life have split him like the uranium nucleus@ (85).^{ix} Debbie differs from these other nuclear traumatics, however, in that, by film=s end, she is a victim, not a perpetrator, of atrocity. Debbie seems to passively embody femme fatale status at the beginning of the film, but by the time she is irradiated, she flees from Vince=s gang of criminals, not to return until she is prepared to dole out punishment for their crimes.

The film=s ending provides a further opportunity to reflect upon the usefulness of tracking the nuclear political unconscious of 1950s cinema. After he shoots Debbie in retaliation for her scalding his face, Vince runs out onto the outdoor patio overlooking the city. As Bannion chases Vince out onto the patio, the film produces the fight for the city that has been inevitable since Vince demonstrated the lengths to which he would go to bend the city to his will. The men exchange gunfire until Vince runs out of bullets. Bannion, standing over Vince=s huddled yet unrepentant body, is faced with the film=s final apocalyptic decision. Should he give in to his desire and punish Vince in the way the gangster punished Katie, or should he operate within the boundary of the Ajust war@ and let the authorities send Vince to prison? Contrary to Biskind=s reading--an analysis of the film as a Right-wing vigilante narrative--Bannion consciously decides to end the violence at this point.

As my invocation of the Ajust war@ attests, I see this scene as resonating with the

American decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan. This moment demonstrates the instability of the film's signifying systems with respect to nuclear trauma: in most of the film's other moments, Vince is the one associated with the bomb perpetrators, not Bannion. Nonetheless, here it is Bannion's decision whether to turn radioactive that carries the moral nuclear dilemma: Is Bannion justified in reproducing the militarism with which Vince confronts him? Was America justified in meeting the Japanese barbarism of Pearl Harbor and Bataan with a vastly more gruesome response? Moralists are in relative agreement that the answer to the latter question is no. As David Hoekema argues, "The attack on Hiroshima clearly and unequivocally violated the just-war tradition in Christian ethics" (12). Surprisingly, from a cultural history perspective, the film's answer to the former question is also no. Despite fairly unwavering American support of the bombing of Hiroshima in public opinion polls,^x Bannion makes the contrary, ethical decision. The film's ultimate testament is thus its brutally frank interrogation of the unfortunate decision by American leaders in 1945, who, unlike Bannion, lacked the courage to overcome their feelings of vengeance, retaliating like to like..

In an epilogue, the film continues its analysis of the impact of nuclear trauma on our everyday lives. Having purged the department of its contamination of weak leaders supporting criminal deployment of power, Bannion returns to his desk at the police station. After asking for some coffee from Hugo, another of the cops working in the squad room, Bannion receives a call to respond to a hit and run accident. On his way out, Bannion quips, "Keep the coffee hot, Hugo." In the background of the film's final image is a sign imploring people to "Give Blood Now." A number of critics have focused on the way in which Lang's films terminate ironically. In discussing *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), Reynold Humphries argues, "The logic of the ending

either shows itself to be artificial or else draws attention to another textual logic that dare not speak its name openly (150). The logic of *The Big Heat* that Adare not speak its name is, I have argued, nuclear trauma, manifested most grotesquely by Bannion=s bizarre invocation of hot coffee, the film=s atomic drink.

Lang critics have certainly not been insensitive to the viciousness of this moment. Wood best articulates its apocalyptic dimensions from within a Aconventional@ reading:

Lang=s cautious, probing attitude that qualifies every judgment makes an easy satisfaction impossible (we would get *no satisfaction from blowing up a civilisation* that contains Lucy Chapmans, Selma Parkers, and Debbie Marshes). One is left with a sense of discord and disturbance--with the sense of a culture to whose problems there will be no easy solutions: a disturbance crystallized in the film=s last line: AKeep the coffee hot.@ [my emphasis] (20)

Wood expresses the apocalyptic components of the ending: we are disturbed because a Acivilization@ really was almost destroyed by the criminal syndicate. Furthermore, as the new hit and run case attests, the threat of criminality in the city has not been eradicated by the incarceration of Vince and Lagana.

However, from the perspective of a nuclear criticism, Bannion=s remark about the coffee refocuses our attention on the threat to our civilization more than Wood the conventional critic could ever have guessed.^{xi} What can Bannion possibly mean by telling Hugo to keep the coffee hot? If anyone should know the ghastly effects of Acoffee@ (i.e., atomic radiation), it should be Bannion: it vaporized his wife and it brutally scarred the face of Debbie, the only other woman in the film about whom he cared. Given the way Glenn Ford delivers the line--with what I would term a disgusted contempt--Bannion could be read as delivering an ironic commentary on the drama we have just watched. For the film has implicitly worked to critique the United States=

nuclear policy throughout, and continues to do so here: keep producing the bomb, and the masculinities necessary to use it, and the hot coffee will continue to burn us.

To again reinforce the human effects of this nuclear warfare, the film ends on another written rebus. As MacArthur describes, Bannion gets his coat and, with his partner, exits past a poster which reads >Give blood--now!= The bleak cycle has begun once more@ (78). The rebus produces the grimmest reminder that the cost of the projected war (be it with Italian-American gangsters or Soviet Reds) is always human: the sign is the film=s way of reminding us that humans bleed blood, not coffee.

Conclusion

Axel Madsen=s essay, *Lang,* published in *Sight and Sound* in 1967 just before the director=s death, offers one of the few insights into the effect of nuclear trauma on Lang=s Cold War American films: *A*To him, the twentieth century is Dachau and Hiroshima more than it is Einstein@ (109). Madsen=s sense of Lang as traumatized by World War II is confirmed by an off-hand comment made by the director during an interview. Complaining about how Cold War television shows like *A*Rat Patrol@ (ABC, 1966-1968) and *A*Combat@ (ABC, 1962-1967) glorify World War II violence, Lang quips, *A*What this country needs is perhaps an atomic war to learn how to be human@ (qtd. in Madsen, 110). My nuclear critical analysis has argued that McGivern=s 1952 novel and Lang=s 1953 film express a message similar to this pessimistic observation. In both texts, *The Big Heat* as a critique of dominant nuclear discourse offers a look at the horrific effects of a bellicose culture in which dropping the bomb proved an acceptable method of conflict resolution. What Dave Bannion learns by the end of the film is that the path of

vengeance followed by Vince Stone can only lead to a moral and physical destruction. The apocalyptic events threatening the city in *The Big Heat*, like Lang's mock atomic war, teach Bannion how to be human. Unfortunately for Lang, and for the country at large, no one seemed to notice.

That no one seemed to notice raises the obvious reservation to my method in claiming that *The Big Heat* is a text about nuclear trauma. Where is the evidence that American spectators in 1953 would have read the text in this way? No such evidence of spectatorial activity is available. However, wider cultural events connect the visual look of the film to mid 1950s American images of the devastating effect of the Hiroshima bombings. The Hiroshima Maidens project is a case in point. In 1955, Norman Cousins, a long-standing critic of the atomic bombings, decided to raise money to bring some of the young women whose faces had been disfigured by radiation damage in the Hiroshima bombing to the United States for plastic surgery. Dubbed the Hiroshima Maidens project, it eventually resulted in twenty-five hibakusha (the Japanese name for the survivors of the atomic bomb) receiving treatment in New York City. In a belated, theatrical re-activation of the human horrors of the Bomb, the Hiroshima Maidens appeared on the May 11, 1955, telecast of NBC's *This is Your Life*.⁴ This television show offered a mediated spectacle which brought the American public quite literally face-to-face with the human effects of radiation damage. As Lifton and Mitchell describe, *This* remains perhaps the only instance when the personal costs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki came vividly to life for mainstream America--and the survivors' experience was at its core⁴ (253).

However, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate via its analysis of the scarred face of Gloria Grahame, Hiroshima trauma circulated within American culture throughout much of the

early 1950s. For what is Debbie if not an American version of a Hiroshima Maiden after her city is immolated by Vince=s nuclear explosiveness? The lessons that historical scholars have drawn from the Hiroshima Maidens experience are the lessons that *The Big Heat* illuminates. In *The Hiroshima Maidens and American Benevolence in the 1950s*,@ Michael J. Yavenditti argues, AAs symbols of violated innocence the twenty-five >maidens= struck sympathetic chords among Americans in ways that twenty-five males and females of varying ages would not@ (35). *The Big Heat* similarly pursues the gendered nature of atomic trauma by tracking the effects of radiation damage throughout the city as it is inscribed on women=s bodies.

This chapter has attempted to interrogate a denial and deferral of the cultural consequences of Hiroshima which began in 1945 and continues to this day. Part of that interrogation necessarily lies in tracing the political unconscious of filmic texts which, while not directly about Hiroshima, could only have been forged by its traumatic consequences. However, an event that traumatic can never stay repressed for long. By the early 1950s, as this analysis of *The Big Heat* has demonstrated, the nuclear energies of Cold War culture were at their boiling point. It is only by looking to films like Lang=s which unconsciously offer alternatives to dominant nuclear discourses that we can learn how to cool off our collective coffee. If not, the results will be, like Debby, written all over our faces.

This chapter has contributed to an understanding of the politics of early Cold War American culture by arguing that despite censorial restrictions on nuclear discourse, popular culture did respond to a repressed nuclear trauma. Such a conclusion was reached via an intertextual methodology sensitive to the complex relationships between the context (nuclear trauma) and the fictional subtextual representations in films like *The Big Heat*. The “webs of

significance” in play here involve the ways in which a film seemingly about gangsters and car bombings expresses the social energies of a culture terrorized by the atomic age. As an adaptation, *The Big Heat* relates to its source not via transformation, but via a different activation of the novel’s subtext subtending nuclear trauma. Whereas the novel used the African-American character of Ashton to examine the racial component of American nuclear discourse, the film, because of censorial constraints, instead expresses the subtext of nuclear trauma by gendering the bomb.

Endnotes

ⁱ Other non-nuclear Cold War events also participated in increasing the perceived threat of a global nuclear conflict. The Korean War, which had been raging since 1950, was still underway at the beginning of 1953. When a July 1953 armistice was signed without a victory, it did little to quell fears of a massive confrontation with Communism in Asia. Stalin died in the spring of 1953, causing immediate unease at the future governmental policies of the Soviet Union. The first Republican president of the modern era took power in January 1953, with his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, clamoring for a Holy war against Communism.

ⁱⁱ For this insight, I am indebted to Ken Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism*. See pages 70-78 for a detailed analysis of Derrida’s brand of nuclear criticism.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on the positioning of the atomic bombings as criminal behavior, see Lifton and Mitchell, 162, 235, 249.

^{iv} For more information on this event, see Alexander Hammond, *AGod’s Nation Interprets the Bomb*, 8.

^v For more information on the Atomic Bomb, see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, 85.

^{vi} The name bikini, of course, in itself forges the link between gender and the Bomb, as it refers both to a two-piece bathing suit worn by women and the Pacific atoll where the United States conducted its post-Hiroshima atomic tests.

^{vii} The Retreat is figured as a fallout shelter in the film only. In the novel, the bar is called the

Triangle. In the film, in the scene at the Retreat before the atom bombing of Katie=s car, we are not shown the stairs on which one has to walk to descend into the bar. However, in the scenes after the bombing, the film shows Bannion walking down a large set of stairs. Perhaps, like the bar at the National Press Club in 1946, the Retreat also serves Atomic cocktails.@

viii Although given what is about to happen to Debbie=s face, the lyrics should perhaps be changed to APut the Blame on Maim@!

ix Lifton and Mitchell use the concept of Anuclear doubling@ to suggest a psychological counterpart to the character fission analyzed by Osteen. Lifton and Mitchell argue that the pressures of the bomb split politicians into two halves: one a military, uncaring half in charge of deploying the bomb, and another humane half in charge of statesmanship bent on avoiding its use. Unfortunately for the world, the military half won in the decision-making process involving Hiroshima. See Lifton and Mitchell, 136.

x Lifton and Mitchell report that Harris polls have remained unchanged at 64 % in support of the use of the Bomb and 21% opposed. Of course, the public would not be privy to the complete story until the declassification of important documents in the 1970s. Even after this, though, psychic numbing continued to forestall a reasoned look at all the evidence against the necessity of dropping the Bomb.

xi In order to move beyond Robin Wood=s auteur and genre-based approaches toward more political and historically-informed work, my sentence construction here parodies the bravura ending of his seminal essay, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur.”