

# Atomic Culture and Cultural Industry: Their Spread and Acceptance in America During 1940s and 1960s

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The invention and use of atomic weapons changed the world. After its usage in Japan in 1945, the newly invented atomic bombs gave birth to the so-called Atomic Culture. What made it possible, was the saturation of both information and imagery of such weapons to the general American public. As Zeman and Amundson discuss, the Atomic Culture is divided in three phases: early, high, and late. Additionally, the overload of these concepts – done by the cultural industry – lead to an ignorant population over atom bombs’ real capabilities<sup>84</sup>. It is important to note that over the years this obliviousness was still noticeable as the “high” Atomic Culture emerged in 1949, only changing in 1964 with the emergence of the “late” Atomic Culture<sup>85</sup>. Many scholars, however, treat the cultural industry as not the central actor, not giving it the importance it deserves. The historian Daniel Wright, for instance, suggests that the cultural industry shares its spotlight with, but not only, information published by the government<sup>86</sup>. This paper seeks to show that, above all, the cultural industry was the main source for the Atomic Culture to rise and spread over the U.S during the

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84. . Daniel Patrick Wright, “Duck and Cover: How Print Media, the U.S. Government, and Entertainment Culture Formed America’s Understanding of the Atom Bomb” (Masters Diss., University of Cincinnati, 2013), 5.

85. . Zeman and Amundson, Atomic Culture, 4.

86. . Wright, “Duck and Cover,” 46.

second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was popular and accessible to the common folk, and that people tend to mistrust information distributed by the government, which, in turn, lead to their own alienation.

As a social process, the Atomic Culture changed over time. As historians Scott Zeman and Michael Amundson write, the Atomic Culture was divided into three stages. The first sparked in 1945 with the use of atomic weapons in Japan, the first in human history<sup>87</sup>. This early stage was characterized by a “euphoric” feeling towards atom bombs, as well as Americans celebrating its use<sup>88</sup>. With the Soviets threatening American hegemony by testing their bomb in 1949, however, the next stage of the Atomic Culture rose, being known – unlike its previous version – by a sense of distress. This new phase, the “high” Atomic Culture, reflected the “concerns and fear”<sup>89</sup> of Americans during this period. One concept that successfully illustrates the High Atomic Culture is MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction, a well-known concept in international relations. As its name suggests, it rests in the assumption that, in a nuclear war, both parties (in this case, the USA and Soviet Union) would be able to inflict unacceptable damage to one another, which would lead to their own destruction. With American’s opinions towards nuclear power changing to a more critical note<sup>90</sup>, in 1963 the “late” Atomic Culture emerged. Zeman and Amundson assert that antinuclear movements pushed this new line of thought, highlighting the impacts of nuclear weapons for both the population and the government<sup>91</sup>. Concluding, there was a turn of viewpoints throughout the Atomic Culture’ existence: from joyful to fearful, and then to critical and logical.

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87. . Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson, *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 2.

88. . Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 3.

89. . Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 3.

90. . Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 4.

91. . Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 5.

The cultural industry, specifically newspapers and magazines, helped to influence people's mindsets over atomic weapons' existence. In an age where the power of the internet was still unheard of, there was no better way to disseminate news than magazines, newspapers, and radios. In the United States, magazines such as *Times*, *Life*, and *Popular Science*, and newspapers like *The New York Times*, were the most influential, where information related to atom bombs were easily found<sup>92</sup>. *Life* magazine alone was able to reach, in the post-war period, a staggering 22.5 million Americans<sup>93</sup>. During the early stage of the Atomic Culture, one way the cultural industry was able to impact the majority of U.S citizens was to publish information glamorizing atom bombs. By way of example, after the first strike on Japan, the images that circulated in the front pages of news sources such as *Life* (see Figure 1) were only of the mushroom cloud itself, not of the destruction that the bomb caused<sup>94</sup>. As a consequence, the mushroom cloud became popular because of its power and beauty. As the historian Costandina Titus notes, "spectacular imagery, poetic references, and colorful hyperbole focused the public's collective eye on the aesthetic of the mushroom cloud"<sup>95</sup>. Another example is shown in an article "So A-Bombs Aren't So Bad?," published by *Popular Science* magazine in 1949<sup>96</sup>. The article is comprised of an interview of two scientists, M.S Blackett, a Nobel Prize winner, and R.E. Lapp, who worked in the Manhattan Project. Both experts discuss, to a vast extent, the power and death reach capabilities of atomic weapons. When reading the title of the article, however, the infor-

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92. . Wright, "Duck and Cover," 14.

93. . Scott C. Zemen, "To See...Things Dangerous to Come to: Life Magazine and the Atomic Age in the United States," in *The Nuclear Age in Popular Media: a Transnational History, 1945-1965*, ed. Dick Van Lente (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.

94. . A. Costandina Titus, *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 105.

95. . Titus, *Atomic Culture*, 107.

96. . Volta Torrey, "So A-Bombs Aren't So bad?" *Popular Science*, May 1949, 124. Accessed 6 May, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=ZiQDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=pt-BR#v=onepage&q&f=false>

mation that the reader absorbs is nothing more than the opposite. As historian Wright points out, even though both scientists discuss about the risks and dangers of atomic weapons (even giving certain details about their destructive capabilities) the title of the article itself is able to change that whole notion<sup>97</sup>, since it suggests that they are not “so bad.” Taking that into account, it becomes clear that media was influential, and part of, the shaping of people’s minds towards believing atomic weapons are for peaceful purposes.

If examined carefully, however, some media outlets – after some time – released images of Japan’s ruins, denying the logic developed above. But, if considering the two first stages of the Atomic Culture already discussed, its



Figure 1: Mushroom cloud in Hiroshima. *Life Magazine* (20 August, 1945). <https://www.colinhemez.org/mushroom-cloud>

reason becomes clear. For the first time in its history, *Life* magazine published, in 1952, an article called *When Atom Bombs Struck – Uncensored*, which showed, as its name suggest, graphic photographs of victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki<sup>98</sup>. In the beginning, pictures of injured children are used, which undoubtedly shocked many readers. This strategy, if compared to the other articles pre-

97. . Wright, “Duck and Cover,” 19.

98. . “When Atom Bombs Struck – Uncensored” *Life*, Sept 29th, 1952, 19. Accessed 15 May, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=VYYEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA21&dq=Hiroshima&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj3rzUmKzpAhVS0HIEHVuACBcQ6AEwAXoECAUQA#v=onepage&q=Hiroshima&f=false>

sented, is the opposite of what sources such as *Popular Science*, and even *Life* itself did when the attack in Japan was still recent. This shift in personality from media – between 1945 to 1963 – can be explained by analyzing Atomic Culture’s stages. As its early stage was branded by happiness, articles such as the “So A-Bombs Aren’t So Bad?” make sense, as they portrayed the bombs as weapons not to be feared. Also, the drastic change in position from articles published close to 1945 to and after 1949 is, likewise, relevant, since now Americans have other opinions towards nuclear weapons. As seen, depending on which stage of the Atomic Culture the world was in, the information published by media sources changed their tone.

The Atomic Culture was dominating American civilization. Las Vegas, for instance is a prime example of a city where the acceptance of atomic weapons was clearly noticed during the 1940s and 50s. Vegas, because of its various forms of leisure, earned many nicknames: Sin City, Entertainment Capital of the World, City of Lights, among others. However, during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became known as the Atomic City. One of its most famous attractions, in the height of the atomic phase, was that people could witness – from the city – a live detonation of atomic weapons, done in a camp in Nevada.<sup>99</sup> The events that lead to such occasion were that in 1951 President Truman approved the creation of a test site in lower Nevada, but it was decreed that there would be “no civilian population within thirty miles.”<sup>100</sup> As Las Vegas stands at 65 miles<sup>101</sup> apart from the test site, the Atomic City was far enough not to suffer any side effects of the detonations, but close enough for the mushroom cloud to be visible. (Figure 2). Therefore – as reports show – people would gather on the rooftops of bars (such as

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99. . “Atomic Culture.” Atomic Heritage Foundation, last modified Aug 9, 2017. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/atomic-culture>

100. . C. Trussell, “Commission Says 5,000 Square Mile Area Will be Used to Speed Development of Weapons – Safety is Stressed.” *New York Times*, Jan 12, 1951, 1.

101. . “Nevada Test Site.” Atomic Heritage Foundation. <https://www.atomicheritage.org/location/nevada-test-site>

Atomic Liquors) and drink an Atomic Cocktail while watching the mushroom cloud<sup>102</sup>. To conclude, Las Vegas became known not only for its already existing assets, but because visitors could also witness a nuclear test from a distance, which is one of the factors that demonstrate the extent in which atom bombs – specifically – shaped the America-life in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Miss Atom Bomb and the Atom Dancer are examples of prominent figures born in the atomic culture that propagated the acceptance of atomic weapons. “Miss Atom Bomb” was a new category of beauty contests that emerged in the 1940s in the United States<sup>103</sup>, and its winner was present in the entertainment industry both to amuse and a sex symbol<sup>104</sup>. The most well-known was Lee A. Merlin, had her famous picture taken in Las Vegas<sup>105</sup> while she wore her renowned mushroom cloud outfit (Figure 3). Marilyn Maxwell, the Atom Dancer, was another well-known figure in the entertainment industry that shared the same ideas as the Miss Atom Bomb. Marilyn, in the movie “Key to the City,”<sup>106</sup> portrayed the Atom Dancer, a character known by her sensuality. Marilyn’s most defining feature was her heavily ornamented outfit, which represented atoms colliding (Figure 4). While in character, Maxwell danced, and because of the rapid movement of her hips, a chain reaction would start<sup>107</sup>. (process involved in the explosion of atomic weapons). Concluding, both the Miss Atom Bomb and the Atom Dancer are examples of people that helped to spread a favorable

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102. . “Nuclear Nevada,” National Endowment for the Humanities, July 31, 2011. <https://www.neh.gov/news/nuclear-nevada>

103. . “Prettiest Girls in Maryland,” *The Sun*, Sept 22, 1946, 119.

104. . Masako Nakamura, “‘Miss Atom Bomb’ Contests in Nagasaki and Nevada: The Politics of Beauty, Memory, and the Cold War,” *University of Hawai’i Press*, no. 37 (2009): 136, <https://www.jstor-org.lib-proxy.temple.edu/stable/pdf/42772003.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Afab1f47620256756ae4094be3db44582>

105. . “Miss Atom Bomb.” Nevada National Security Site, August, 2013. [https://www.nnss.gov/docs/fact\\_sheets/DOENV\\_1024.pdf](https://www.nnss.gov/docs/fact_sheets/DOENV_1024.pdf)

106. . Bob Thomas, “Dancer ‘s Screen Bump Put Through Laundry.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 30, 1949. <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1854417140?accountid=14270>, 4.

107. . Thomas, “Dancer’s,” 4.



and romantic image of atom bombs, once again stating the impact that atom bombs had in U.S society in the 40s and 50s.

The cultural industry should not be considered as only an auxiliary process to explain the alienation of U.S citizens, but as its key piece. Many scholars believe that the Atomic Culture is the result of a sum of factors, be it cultural industry, or governmental action. By analyzing this information in this manner, both the cultural industry and the government share a podium of importance. The cultural industry, however, should be taken more seriously because it played a much important role in the lives of social masses. Analyzing this fact in this manner does not deny the other's relevance but highlights the cultural industry's significance over the rest. During the Late Atomic Culture, as Zeman and Amundson discuss, due to U.S "involvement in Vietnam, publication of the Pentagon Papers, and the Watergate scandal," Americans were "increasingly distrustful of their government."<sup>108</sup>. This information is relevant because it shows that even if governmental information were accessible to the public, American's would take it a grain of salt. As written previously, information published involving nuclear bombs were

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108. . Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 5.

easily found in an industry that reached over 22.5 million people. Even with the different phases of the Atomic Culture, the cultural industry was able to pass information that formed the current American perspective. By way of example, when the High phase took its place, commercials such as “Duck and Cover”<sup>109</sup>. and “Walt Build a Family Fallout Shelter”<sup>110</sup>. were widely seen. The first illustrates Bert the turtle, that raised awareness of “proper” procedures to take in the case of a nuclear attack. The second taught people how to build their own fallout shelter. Both, consequently, represented the mindset from that time: of fear. Therefore, from this perspective, all these major information and data were published and found in media (part of cultural industry), which shows the importance, and relevance, of the cultural industry over any other industry to alienate the population.



Figure 2: Miss Atom Bomb, Lee A. Merlin. Las Vegas News Bureau  
<https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/energy/a20536/who-are-you-miss-atomic-bomb/>

The recent events in Brazil related to the Coronavirus are a perfect example to illustrate a contemporary mistrust towards information published by the government. According to John Hopkins University, as of the writing of this paper, Brazil is in second place in the mortality rate of the virus, with a staggering 140,537 deaths<sup>111</sup>. Brazil, in this case, serves as an interesting case study of

109. . Duck and Cover, Directed by Anthony Rizzo (Archer Productions, 1951).

110. . Walt Build a Family Fallout Shelter, Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, 1960.





Figure 3: Miss Atom Bomb, Lee A. Merlin. Las Vegas News Bureau <https://www.popular-mechanics.com/science/energy/a-20536/who-are-you-miss-atomic-bomb/>

a nation that, even though information is being propagated by governmental authorities, the general public simply decided to ignore due to mistrust. João Doria, governor of the state of São Paulo, is well-known by the Brazilian public for being for staying in quarantine. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, is not. Hanrikson reports that Bolsonaro, in his private Twitter account, attacks social isolation. According to the Brazilian president, if quarantine continues, “it will not be hard to know what awaits us,” followed by a magazine cover, that states, “in the country, 91 million people did not pay their bills on April.”<sup>112</sup> Of course, Bolsonaro is implying that the country is making a poor choice if deciding to stay home, since that impacts the economy drastically. Doria, however, takes a different approach. In a speech given on September 10<sup>th</sup>, the governor claimed that “people need to preserve themselves, use masks when leaving home, avoid agglomerations, and maintain hygiene.”<sup>113</sup> Bolsonaro and

Doria, therefore, are on opposite sides of the spectrum. One thing worth noting, however, is that even though Bolsonaro is the president of Brazil, and Doria is the governor of the state of São Paulo, whatever Doria decided to undertake in São Paulo stands, and Bolsonaro’s opinion on the matter is almost irrelevant. Even though

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111. . “COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU),” Johns Hopkins University, Accessed September 26, 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

112. . Hanrikson de Andrade, “Bolsonaro ataca quarentena: ‘Não está difícil saber o que nos espera,’” Notícias UOL, April 19, 2020, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/04/19/bolsonaro-ataca-quarentena-nao-esta-dificil-saber-o-que-nos-espera.htm>.

113. . Lucas Rizzi, “Doria: Discurso Negacionista de Bolsonaro Dificulta Fazer Política de Saúde,” Notícias UOL, September 10, 2020, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/ansa/2020/09/10/e-dificil-conter-covid-com-negacionismo-de-bolsonaro-diz-doria.htm>.

Doria defending social distancing, protests against him were being done in São Paulo<sup>114</sup>. Taking into consideration that Doria is the authority in São Paulo, these people against the governor's point of view are taking an information given by a governmental figure, and ignoring it, showing a mistrust towards the government. In summary, as people tend to mistrust information released by the government, as shown above, the cultural industry becomes the most accessible way to acquire information.

Interestingly, according to some authors, cultural industry is profitable. Armand Mattelart and Jean-Marie Piemme, in their research, try to trace the concept of "cultural industry"<sup>115</sup>. In this quest, the authors present Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of the term. For them, "the cultural industry is a clear illustration of the breakdown of culture and its degeneration into commerce."<sup>116</sup> Taking this point of view into consideration, the high tourist activity in Las Vegas during this time becomes much clearer. As said before, the Atomic City was booming with attractions that were molded by the Atomic Culture: sightseeing of mushroom clouds, drinking atomic themed drinks, etc. These activities – obviously – were tremendously profitable for the city. Only in 1954, around 8 million people visited the city<sup>117</sup>, which becomes even more significant when realizing that Vegas had 45,000 inhabitants<sup>118</sup>. Even though Adorno and Horkheimer define the cultural industry as being degrading, the point is that Las Vegas was the site that vividly portrays the Atomic Culture as being – firstly – profitable.

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114. . Aiuri Ribello, "Carreata pró-Bolsonaro e Anti-Doria Reúne Multidão e Fecha Paulista," Notícias UOL, April 19, 2020, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/04/19/pro-bolsonaro-e-contra-doria-sp-tem-2-protestos-contra-isolamento-em-24-h.htm>.

115. . Armand Mattelart, and Jean-Marie Piemme, "'Cultural Industries' the Origin of an Idea," UNESCO Digital Library (1982): 51.

116. . Mattelart, and Piemme, "'Cultural Industries,'" 52.

117. . "Las Vegas," History, December 2, 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/las-vegas>.

118. . Garry Boulard, *Louis Prima* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 102,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=k73NVncNfwsC&pg=PA102#v=onepage&q=wild&f=false>.

The saturation of atom bombs resulted in a population ignorant of their reality. As seen by the examples provided, the Atom Culture was prominent in the U.S during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a consequence, such culture – and the atom bombs, obviously – were heavily accepted and romanticized. “Americas largest population centers,” as Wright claims, “could seldom go twenty-four hours without coming face to face with some facet of the atomic culture.”<sup>119</sup>. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the Atomic Culture was present in the every-day life of Americans. A study done in 1946, interestingly, was able to show the extent in which this saturation impacted the population, especially in the way they saw atomic weapons. The study revealed that “47 percent of Americans were not worried or worried very little about the atomic bomb.”<sup>120</sup>. Considering that during this year the early phase of the Atomic Culture was in effect, and adding up the conclusions of this study, the alienation suffered by Americans due to the surplus of romanticized information regarding atomic weapons becomes evident. If, for example, the same research was conducted in 1950s – when the High Atomic Culture was in place – possibly the results obtained in this study would vary drastically. In conclusion, by saturating U.S citizens with information about atomic weapons, this resulted in an alienated population, which in the beginning, even commemorated its use in Japan.

Atom bombs and the cultural industry greatly influenced American society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As seen, in the early stage of the Atomic Culture, the information available to the general masses focused on the aesthetic aspects of atom bombs, which – in turn – made the popular and accepted by the public. However, after a period of time, these same sources began to publish information that clearly showed the bad side of atom bombs. This

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119. . Wright, “Duck and Cover,” 11.

120. . Michael A. Amundson, *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 58.

argument, as demonstrated, can be explained by analyzing the phases of the Atomic Culture. Las Vegas became an important city, where elements of the Atomic Culture were clearly seen in – for example – the watching of mushroom clouds from the city. The Miss Atom Bomb and the Atom Dancer further helped to perpetuate the acceptance and romanticism of atom bombs, related to the happiness and joyfulness portrayed by the Atomic Culture during this period. As discussed, the cultural industry should not be considered simply another factor that explains the Atomic Culture’s influence in the U.S, but the important actor, since people tend to mistrust information by the government. During the Coronavirus pandemic, the situation in countries like Brazil are a perfect example – in a real-life scenario – to illustrate this mistrust. In addition, in between the government and cultural industry, the latter is the most profitable, as seen in Las Vegas. In return, what this resulted in was an ignorant population over atom bomb’s both as an instrument, but its general role as well.

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