

substance of Owens' Trickster discourse—but he fails to say much specifically about its humorous aspect. Since there are no other full-length studies of the works of Louis Owens, one wishes that LaLonde had applied his considerable critical skills to examine these important matters, too. Nevertheless, this is an indispensable work for anyone wishing to pursue serious study of the works of Louis Owens. *John K. Donaldson. George Washington University.*

**Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 386 pp., \$24.95 (paper).**

Jerome F. Shapiro (Hiroshima University, Japan) intends to challenge a central tenet of the burgeoning field of nuclear culture studies. Following Susan Sontag's argument in "The Imagination of Disaster," critics such as historian Paul Boyer (*By the Bomb's Early Light*, 1985), film scholar Mick Broderick (*Nuclear Movies*, 1991), and cultural critic H. Bruce Franklin (*War Stars*, 1988) claim that popular cultural representations of the atomic bomb lack adequacy, seriousness and verisimilitude. As a result, most people are ill-prepared to understand the consequences of nuclear conflict, and remain pathologically "numb" to the dangers of nuclear weapons. In Shapiro's view, this "pathology of response" model is wrong. It fails to account for Hollywood's near constant production of films with atomic themes since 1949, when the Soviet Union successfully detonated its own atomic bomb. And, it depends on impoverished and insulting notions of artistic production and audience reception. To Shapiro, these errors stem from political and intellectual biases which pervade the field of nuclear culture studies. As a corrective, he offers his analysis as one who is "stridently and unfashionably apolitical ... regarding the morals or ethics of nuclear technologies" (9). He looks at atomic bomb cinema for evidence of the way "human beings use [the] traditional narrative structures and imagery[of an ancient apocalyptic tradition] to understand unprecedented events" (5).

Shapiro spends much of the first chapter establishing the narrative and symbolic roots of atomic bomb films. He discovers filmic precursors in the usual places, Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (Fr., 1902), Lang's and von Harbou's *Metropolis* (Ger., 1927), Cooper's and Schoedsack's *King Kong* (USA, 1933). Readers with any background in film will find little new in these pages. The more important section of the chapter establishes what he means by apocalyptic. In a compelling weaving of ideas drawn from religion, psychology, and cultural theory, Shapiro distinguishes an empowering Jewish apocalyptic tradition of continuance from a dangerous "catastrophic millenarianism" espoused by such divergent groups as the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas and liberal antinuclear activists (38). The Jewish apocalyptic tradition tells stories of "survival and self-actualization under oppressive conditions" (31). Specifically absent is the promise of "transcendental salvation," which denies the efficacy of human actions (29). Instead, the apocalyptic of continuance is characterized by hope, humor, a sense of human responsibility, and a commitment to "repair a fractured world" (28). In chapter 8, devoted to "Japan's Atomic Cinema," Shapiro finds a narrative analog in both *kaijū eiga* ("mysterious creature films") and *hibakusha* ("explosion-affected people") cinema. Combining playfulness and seriousness, these films seek to restore the balance between nature and modernity in the wake of foundational crises. Truly apocalyptic narratives, American and Japanese atomic bomb films encourage reflection on "persecution, culture shock, political powerlessness, social change, 'the dismal fate of humanity,' and death" (28). While I would have welcomed a more thorough explication of the ways specifically fantastic popular narratives do such important cultural work, Shapiro presents an analytic model sensitive to the symbolic nuances of culture and capable of demonstrating precisely how Americans and Japanese have used traditional narrative forms to understand their rapidly changing realities.

Unfortunately, these supple ideas are handled stiffly. Chapters 2 through 7 treat films exhibited (and mostly made) in the United States between 1945 and 2001. Treating a select group of films as typical cultural artifacts of reasonably constructed historic periods, each chapter measures films by the degree that they embody the fullest potential of the apocalyptic imagination. Films that display a fascination only with cataclysm are "minor" examples (72). Movies that dramatize spiritual transformation, such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, USA, 1957), in which William H. Whyte's Organization Man takes a mystical journey of self-discovery, serve as evidence that "Americans" were working through both atomic

and other anxieties. I find Shapiro's interpretations of such films as *Them!* (Douglas, USA 1954), *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick, Gr. Br., 1964), and *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, USA, 1968) interesting and plausible. In particular, I appreciate his attention to religious and spiritual themes of American and Japanese popular culture, especially in light of the condescending treatment they are often given in academic cultural criticism. But American studies readers accustomed to well-researched thick descriptions of the historical context of cultural artifacts will find Shapiro's efforts in this direction unpersuasive. Too often Shapiro finds the meanings of symbols and names in J. E. Cirlot's dictionary of symbols, rather than in a historically specific cultural milieu. Likewise, evidence of audience response is drawn solely from the abstract psychological and psychosociological theories of Erik Erikson, Peter Clecak, and others. It is, admittedly, difficult to recover the experience of past viewers, but, solid historical research into the conditions of reception, especially of films that attained "cult" status, and so attracted a devoted and often documentable following, can, minimally, help scholars identify anachronistic or idiosyncratic readings. This criticism is particularly distressing to make in light of the chapter on Japanese atomic cinema, where Shapiro carefully combines culturally specific psychological theory with compelling research on the conditions of audience reception to produce a powerful analysis of the functions of bomb films in Japanese society. The chapters on American bomb films lack this culturally and historically nuanced accounting of the form, function, and audience of apocalyptic atomic cinema. Readers looking for solid interpretations of American and Japanese bomb films will find them here, but those looking for new insights into the social functions of American popular culture will be disappointed. *Eric Drown, George Washington University*

**David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 352 pp., \$19.95 (paper).**

*Death of a Nation* is a senior historian's account of the intellectual, cultural, political, and economic commitments of the founding fathers of American studies and the "paradigm dramas" enacted by their intellectual descendants. Unable to believe the Progressive faith that capitalism and democracy might be finally synthesized in a way that would preserve the autonomy of the United States, and equally unable to believe that Marxism offered Americans a usable future, Anglo-Protestant male intellectuals of the 1940s experienced a crisis of faith. Whereas once such men had been able to believe that America's natural endowment would enable it to avoid the sins of such alien ideas as capitalism and communism, the corporate and military power used to protect "American" interests in foreign markets during and after World War II meant that the United States was irrevocably part of the history of the world. Faced with the de facto end of an exceptional American history, some men tried to recover their faith by asserting the universality of American political values that had only appeared to change. Others wrote elegies for a lost America, now corrupted by international capitalism, conspicuous consumption and the decentering claims to Americanness of women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Jews, David W. Noble's generation of scholars became "historians against history," which is to say they celebrated what they saw as the timeless essence of the United States. Conceiving of American history and culture as the product of an exclusive dialogue between Anglo-Protestant men, they monopolized the power and privileges of "American" for men like themselves. Other American histories were silenced.

Readers of Noble's previous works (*Historians Against History*, *The American Adam in the New World Garden*, *The Progressive Mind*, and *The End of American History*) will be on familiar ground. Once again, Noble reviews the foundational narratives of such American historians as George Bancroft, Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles and Mary Beard, William Appleman Williams, and such literary critics as Vernon Louis Parrington, F. O. Matthiessen, Henry Nash Smith, Robert Penn Warren, and Leo Marx. In *Death of a Nation*, Noble extends the argument of his earlier works in four ways. First, Noble reveals the personal imperatives of the first and second generation of American studies scholars' investment in the national exceptionalist narrative of United States history. In so doing Noble explains the seemingly arcane debates over interpretive method between Myth-Symbol critics and New Critics as an attempt to