

Jonathan Hogg, “The Family that Feared Tomorrow’: British Nuclear Culture and Individual Experience in the late 1950s.”
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Jonathan Hogg’s examination of the impact of nuclear issues upon individual experience in Britain during the 1950s is a valuable piece of research into a period of Cold War history that has predominantly been considered through the American post-war suburban experience. Hogg begins by recalling an event in 1957 where Elsie and Andrew Marshall gassed their three children before entering into a suicide pact and jumping into the sea. Hogg then notes how a subsequent article in the *Daily Mirror* entitled “The family that feared tomorrow” outlined the contents of the suicide note, which cited the threat of human extermination as a key factor in the couples’ actions. This incident, Hogg argues, provides a powerful example of how developing nuclear technologies produced a wide-range of cultural and personal responses while also demonstrating how “profound preoccupations with nuclear danger straddled class boundaries” (536). Hogg’s article therefore utilises Gabrielle Hecht’s (2006) use of the term ‘nuclearity’ (Hecht uses it to refer to the extent to which a nation is classed as ‘nuclear’) but re-appropriates it to reveal “the shifting set of assumptions held by individual citizens on the dangers of nuclear technology, assumptions that were rooted firmly in context and which circulated in, and were shaped by, national discourse” (537). ‘Nuclearity’ thus becomes a way of assessing the degree to which the nuclear referent was encoded within cultural activities.

Following on from these initial observations, Hogg’s first sub-heading “Rational anxieties” sets out the extent of public understanding on nuclear issues, noting that by the close of the 1950s “every adult in Britain had some knowledge of atomic bombs” (538), with individuals aware of “the instantaneous and lasting damage that atomic and thermonuclear weapons could inflict on themselves and their loved ones” (538). Hogg then insightfully sets out his position in relation to a selection of academic writings on nuclear threat, providing a thoughtful critique of Frank Kermode’s argument in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) that there are distinct similarities between modern fears of nuclear apocalypse and those of the ancient world. Hogg counters Kermode by observing the historical specificity of nuclear anxiety, which is “uniquely modern in that it is a response to a man-made threat of unprecedented magnitude” (539). Extending this argument, Hogg moves on to survey a variety of cultural responses to the thermonuclear era in fifties Britain, listing a collection of science fiction productions – notably Nigel Kneale’s *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953) and J.B. Priestley’s *Doomsday for Dyson* (1958) – as well as, fascinatingly, the giveaway of toy atomic submarines in packs of Cornflakes in 1957, which highlighted how “popular discourse was already dependent on a range of assumptions over the excitement and awe surrounding nuclear technology” (541). In picking out varying cultural phenomena Hogg therefore demonstrates the ways “nuclear culture coloured day-to-day life” (542) through various mediums.

While Hogg’s survey of nuclear culture in Britain during the 1950s is informative and thorough, he does not necessarily supply a sustained examination of each of the cultural artefacts cited. However, the final two sections do provide a skilful and detailed analysis of a series of articles from the *Daily Express* and *Daily*

Mirror, with Hogg arguing that the reporting of nuclear issues invariably combined an allegiance with “official” attitudes while also providing occasional nods towards broader public anxieties about thermonuclear destruction. Hogg writes: “while reinforcing ‘official’ nuclear vocabulary, newspapers also contained ‘counternarratives’ that reflected popular attitudes on nuclear technology” (544). He concludes by returning to the *Daily Mirror*’s reporting of the suicide pact and observes that many journalistic comments contained “an implicit understanding of the negative aspects of nuclear culture” (547), which, nonetheless, produced an assumption that “these negative intellectual and emotional characteristics had become a normalised component of British individual experience in the late 1950s” (547).

Hogg provides a comprehensive evaluation of cultural and individual responses to the rapid proliferation of nuclear technologies during the late 1950s. The use of the term “nuclearity” is, however, a little unclear and is not sufficiently mapped out. Hecht’s initial usage is only briefly mentioned and other than a short general definition, the article lacked a detailed explanation of precisely what “nuclearity” represented in relation to specific texts or artefacts. In articulating how certain articles, films, books or cultural productions “contributed to the concept of nuclearity” (545) it occasionally felt as though certain works were being viewed as symptoms of a broader sociological phenomenon rather than as unique representations that sustained a complex dialogue with their social and political contexts. Nonetheless, this is not to detract from a fascinating article which provides a much needed change of perspective when researching British cultural life in the 1950s. By moving away from canonical literary texts and exploring oral history, Hogg skilfully exposes how the nuclear referent seeped into the vocabulary of everyday life.

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