

Reading Guide – Duck and Cover: Civil Defense

For the second day of unit one we examine the role played by civil defense training in shaping atomic culture in the United States. Civil defense programs were designed by the US government primarily to protect citizens in the event of a nuclear attack on American soil. As you read this week, and watch the film *Atomic Café*, try to come up with other potential justifications for civil defense training and programming. Did Americans really believe it was possible to survive a nuclear war by “ducking and covering” under a school desk, or retreating to a backyard fallout shelter? If so, how can this be explained? If not, why participate in civil defense at all?

Assigned Materials

- Tracy Davis, “Civil Defense Concepts and Planning,” from *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (2007) 9-57.
- WATCH: *Atomic Café* (1982) 1hr25min

Questions to Consider

Tracy Davis is a scholar of performance studies. Her book *Stages of Emergency* was groundbreaking because it was the first study to examine the phenomenon of civil defense from the angle of performance and theatre. This chapter is a tad dense, so feel free to “closely skim.” As you read, try to get a sense of the diversity of civil defense programs, and the historical groups and actors who were most interested and active in implementing them. What were some possible psychological, social, ideological, or even political, uses for civil defense programs?

Atomic Café was produced in 1982, during a period of renewed intensification of tensions between the USSR and the USA. The film is a documentary composed of archival film footage, but it is also a political statement with an argument. What, in your opinion, is the main message of this film? **As you watch, be sure to take notes.** Bring with you to class a list of at least three “moments” or clips from the film that you find particularly interesting/troubling/confusing/important. Write down the time in the film when these clips arise so we can review them in class.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21H.211 The United States in the Nuclear Age
Spring 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.