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I Want My Mutually Assured Destruction

How 1980s MTV helped my students understand the Cold War



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For decades, I have taught courses on nuclear weapons and the Cold War. Conveying what life was like with the everyday fear of immediate destruction, especially to younger students, has become more and more difficult over the years. Students understand, in some general way, that nuclear war was a terrifying

possibility. But the “duck and cover” images—black-and-white stock footage of boys with slicked-down hair and girls in saddle shoes all dropping to the floor as if in a clumsy game—are now clichés. The nightmares of my childhood are, to them, just pop-culture kitsch.

In class, I’ve shown students movies from the nuclear age, hoping that Gregory Peck’s stoicism about the death of the world in *On the Beach* or Charlton Heston’s damnation of all mankind in the final moments of *The Planet of the Apes* might make them understand some of the smothering fear of living in a world on the edge of instant oblivion. I make them watch *The Day After* and read *Fail-Safe* and *Warday*. To younger people, these films and books now seem like relics from some lost civilization, full of mysterious, apocalyptic texts and angry cinematic gods.

But one medium from the Cold War, more than any other, gets through to my students: MTV, Music Television, which cannonballed into America’s cable systems in August 1981. When I show them videos from the age of glitter and spandex that are filled with images of nuclear destruction, they finally grasp how much the threat of instant and final war was woven into the daily life of young Americans who thought they were turning on the television just to tune out the world.

[*Read: A brief history of Soviet rock and roll*]

In fact, messages about nuclear weapons, nuclear war, and the end of humanity, by some counts, appeared almost *hourly* on MTV, making nuclear destruction second only to sex as the most ubiquitous video theme flooding the eyes of America’s youth in the 1980s.

When MTV landed in that first year of the Reagan administration, artists weren’t sure what to do with the new medium, and neither were their record-company bosses. One of the first VJs, Alan Hunter, told me that the music industry was initially flummoxed by the whole notion of videos. Executives wanted bands that toured and sold tickets; they didn’t want to spend money on cameras and studios to film rock stars lip-synching their own hits.

But the irresistible marriage of vision and sound took hold in American culture immediately, and almost overnight MTV became, as Hunter perfectly described it, “the wallpaper of people’s lives.” Videos soon evolved from disposable band promos full of wiggling butts and pouty strutting (although those would remain staples of the medium) into mini-movies that had a script and high production values.

Yes, some of the videos were about how girls just wanted to have fun, or about how boys wanted to date centerfold models. More than a few of them, as some of the industry pioneers have admitted, didn’t make a lick of sense. But a surprising number were about the Cold War—and the fear that it would turn hot. As Hunter said, artists had a platform that was subversive in its ability to mix entertainment and political messages.

Nuclear anxieties, born at almost the same time as rock, have a long pedigree in popular music. Even the granddaddy of all rock-and-roll hits, Bill Haley & His Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock,” was at first only the B-side of a novelty single called “Thirteen Women (And Only One Man In Town),” in which Haley fantasizes about life after the apocalypse, when the only people left ... well, you get the idea.

MTV, however, integrated these serious and frightening concepts into visual entertainment. The Australian pop stars Men at Work—for a time one of the most popular groups in the world—had a hit with “It’s a Mistake,” whose video features generals in Soviet and American uniforms playing soldiers like little boys—and starting World War III by accident. “Don’t try to say you’re sorry / Don’t say he drew his gun,” they sing while dressed as army grunts walking through a blasted forest. “They’ve gone and grabbed old Ronnie.” At this mention of President Ronald Reagan, an actor in a cowboy costume walks by and an old lady slugs him with an umbrella, presumably for destroying the planet.

Men At Work - It's a Mistake (Video)



Reagan in those years was everywhere on MTV. “Mr. Reagan says, ‘We will protect you,’” Sting laments in his elegiac 1985 video for “Russians,” but “I don’t subscribe to this point of view.” In a lighter vein, one of the most memorable videos of the time was the 1986 video for “Land of Confusion,” by Genesis, which used the creepy-but-hilarious puppets from the U.K. comedy series *Spitting Image* to weave a trippy story about Reagan having a nightmare. When Reagan wakes up, he wants a glass of water, but misses the button labeled “Nurse” and hits “Nuke” instead. A mushroom cloud appears outside his window.

Genesis - Land of Confusion (Official Music Video)



Mushroom clouds were even more common on MTV than the 40th president. In David Bowie's 1984 "Let's Dance" video, Aboriginal children cavort about as a nuclear blast suddenly appears in the distance. Over the years, Bowie said the video was about cultural oppression and racism, but perhaps, like so many other images of Armageddon in 1980s popular culture, it reflected a nagging fear that "developed" nations were going to destroy themselves and only the innocents in other lands would be witnesses to our immolation.

[Read: David Bowie's 1987 slump held its own weird magic]

This was all pretty heavy stuff for a channel that used hair gel and lip gloss by the truckload. In retrospect, the amount of political literacy the directors and bands sometimes assumed on the part of MTV's viewers is astonishing.

Consider the video "Two Tribes," by Frankie Goes to Hollywood. The Eurodisco band's first hit, "Relax," was released with so much edgy sexual imagery that the BBC banned it almost immediately.

But "Two Tribes" and its late-1984 video were different. The song begins with a mournful orchestral introduction playing over one of the BBC's actual public-service messages planned in the event of nuclear war. ("When you hear the air attack warning," the announcer intones, "you and your family must seek cover

immediately.”) A driving dance beat kicks in as the camera pulls back from an air-raid siren to show an arena filled with a clearly international crowd, exchanging bets and shouting with bloodlust.

Look-alikes of Ronald Reagan and Konstantin Chernenko (a sick old man who ruled the Soviet Union for about 20 minutes in between Yuri Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev) walk into a ring, and then proceed to beat the daylights out of each other. Middle fingers turn into punches, crotch kicks, bloody ear bites, a game of Roman knuckles, and strangulation. As the fight erupts into a riot, “Reagan” and “Chernenko” pause with looks of fear on their faces, and the camera zooms out to show us that we are actually at the United Nations in New York. Then, in case anyone is still trying to grasp the point, the whole world itself explodes.

Frankie Goes To Hollywood - Two Tribes



“Two Tribes” entered the British charts at No. 1, was a staple on MTV, and went to No. 3 on the U.S. dance club charts. It struggled on the American pop charts, however; Americans were sometimes unwilling to sing along when nuclear anxieties were stated so bluntly. Even Sting’s “Russians” peaked at 16 on the U.S. charts, which for him was practically a flop. But the video was popular—and got the message across.

Hunter posited that foreign acts were more likely to make obviously political videos about the Cold War, and the MTV record bears him out. Americans in the age of Reagan were feeling good; even as Frankie Goes to Hollywood was showing us the end of humanity, a buff Bruce Springsteen was pulling a young Courteney Cox onstage in the “Dancing in the Dark” video.

But some American artists knew how to make worrying about nuclear war more seductive: sex.

In 1981, Prince’s *Controversy* album included “Ronnie, Talk to Russia,” yet another song mentioning Reagan by name, but it wasn’t released as a single. A year later, however, Prince had a monster MTV hit with “1999” and its 1982 video, which was a romp of costumes, dancing, and sexuality, all lit with bright flashes as Prince and the Revolution sang about a nuclear judgment day. “War is all around us / My mind says prepare to fight,” Prince sang, but instead of fighting, the video made clear what we all should be doing in our last hours on Earth.

Sometimes the images on MTV were right in our faces, and sometimes they were subtler. Sometimes we didn’t get them at all. A misunderstood video of the era was the one for Timbuk3’s 1986 hit, “The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades,” in which the singer Pat MacDonald and his wife are living in a trailer in a postapocalyptic desert. American audiences zeroed in on the line that “fifty thou a year will buy a lotta beer” and thought the song was a college student’s ode to capitalism, instead of getting the joke that the world would be gone before graduation day.

Timbuk3’s producer, Dennis Herring, told me that a final verse had made the message clear but was cut for space: “Well I’m well aware of the world out there, getting blown all to pieces, but what do I care?” The video’s director, Carlos Grasso, and MacDonald himself confirmed that the whole thing was a riff on the end of the world. MacDonald told me that he was “kind of shocked” because he thought the point was “blaringly obvious.” He chalked the misunderstanding up to the literal-mindedness of U.S. audiences. Like Hunter, he thinks that foreign audiences were quicker to grasp irony, especially about politics, than Americans in those days.

[*Read: The Cold War is long gone, but the nuclear threat is still here*]

By 1986, the Cold War was already winding down. “Future’s So Bright” dropped when Reagan and Gorbachev were talking peace, which may have obscured the message. When Morrissey released “Everyday Is Like Sunday”—a 1988 ode to catastrophe inspired by *On the Beach*, in which he sings, “Come, come, come, nuclear bomb!”—the video showed a bored girl in a small town, and audiences could be forgiven for thinking the song was less about the end of the world and more about Morrissey just being Morrissey.

The Cold War imagery on MTV did not produce some sort of antinuclear revolt in the streets, but it infused an underlying nuclear anxiety into the popular culture across multiple generations. Hunter and his fellow VJs were amazed that MTV’s audience in the early 1980s was, as he said, “everyone from 8 to 84,” and he suggests that the experience of watching together made MTV the “the first social media” through which millions of people experienced the music and the messages together and at the same time. “You couldn’t change the channel,” Hunter said, because MTV was the only source of music videos, and if you wanted to watch Michael Jackson or Van Halen or Sheena Easton or Metallica, you had no choice but to sit there and watch whatever everyone else was watching.

And that meant you were going to watch a Ronald Reagan puppet blow up the world, and so were the millions of other people watching at that moment.

The effect was subtle, but real. Nearly 40 years later, I can remember watching MTV with my arm around a girl and having Men at Work’s “Overkill”—a video about insomnia brought on by fear of an inevitable nuclear war—push its way into my otherwise distracted consciousness. I wasn’t alone; people my age remember those videos, and many of the songs are still with us.

And as I remind my students, so are the weapons.



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