

Schwartz, Jessica, New York University, United States

The Secrecy System: Silencing Life and Sounding Death in the Atomic Age

In the early Cold War, the United States government developed a complex “secrecy system” to withhold information concerning the destructive capabilities of nuclear weaponry from the American public and its adversaries. This paper explores the silence endemic to nuclear culture - the literal of secrecy, the violent inaudibility of the bomb, and the trauma engendered by the incomprehensibility of its destructive aftermath – as both political strategy and public secret, “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated (Taussig 1999).” Aural orchestrations of civil defense that rehearsed nuclear attack and popular music that depicted nuclear apocalypse were culturally expressive vehicles endeavoring to make the inaudible audible. While these acoustic inscriptions could not be articulate renditions of what was being, or what could be, silenced, close analyses of these sonic and musical objects provide unique insight into cultural traumas, complicated fears, and desires engendered by the specter of the bomb.