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NUCLEAR DYNAMITE A documentary by Gary Marcuse.

Film blasts scientific arrogance

-- Marke Andrews.

Back during the hot days of the Cold War, the superpowers had so many nuclear weapons that they began devising ways to use them for peaceful purposes. Plans were made to blast a harbour in Alaska, melt the oil in Alberta's Athabasca tar sands and create a canal to divert the Siberian River to the Caspian Sea. The U.S. set off 15 bombs in its program; the U.S.S.R. blasted 135 before the leak at Chernobyl ended that country's nuclear-construction ambitions.

Using priceless old footage and modern-day interviews, Vancouver film-maker Gary Marcuse reconstructs this anything-goes attitude scientists and governments adopted toward health risks. One clip, from a U.S. Army film, states that public concern over radiation is "as potent and irresistible as the evil spirits of the Indians." As one scientist from the era recalls: "It gave you the feeling of playing God."

Tonight, 7 p.m., Pacific Cinematheque; Oct. 3, 4 p.m., Robson Square.

Article accompanying review of Nuclear Dynamite documentary
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Playing with Dynamite

-- Marke Andrews

When Vancouver film-maker Gary Marcuse read *Firecracker Boys*, a book about plans to create a harbour in Alaska using five nuclear explosions, he knew he had to make a film about it.

Nuclear Dynamite, which plays in its full 72-minute length today (4 p.m.) at Robson Square, then in a 52-minute version Thursday (8 p.m.) on CBC's Nature of Things, examines programs both the United States and the then-Soviet Union had for using warheads for industrial purposes.

The Americans abandoned their program in the 1960s after signs that strontium was finding its way into milk. The Soviets, who shrouded their program in secrecy, continued until the Chernobyl disaster ended their mushroom dreams.

Marcuse was fascinated by the conflict between "the atomic dreamers" and the fledgling environmental movement.

"The collision between these two forces represented a shift in the way the world was perceived," says Marcuse. "It was a clash between those who believed atomic technology could shape the planet and those who looked at the planet as a fragile, enclosed, threatened biosphere.

"Atomic technology was the first of a whole series of earth-shaking technologies that gave us the opportunity to alter the surface and the chemistry of the planet."

In North America, scientists in the early 1950s felt it took a lot of radiation to cause damage in humans. Within 10 years, most had changed their minds.

"[Nuclear Dynamite] is a story of how our picture of the world has changed radically in 50 years? In the early 1950s, people did not see the world as a small place," says Marcuse.

"I was struck by the parallel between the debate over the use of atomic energy in the '50s and the debate today over the use of biological engineering. Back then, we cracked open the subatomic arena and saw all kinds of possibilities, then realized the limitations of using it.

"Fifty years later, we've cracked open the genetic code and are seeing all kinds of opportunities for modifying the planet. We're now only beginning to sense what the problems are in this area."