

**The Planet Earth as Scene, not Scapegoat:  
Reflections on Mimetic Theory and  
Film Images of Nuclear Bombs Exploding**

One of the many big questions set out by the organizers of the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion is this: *Has the natural environment itself become the scapegoat for modern culture?* This is an intriguing question; I will carry out some explorations on the terrain it maps, leading eventually to a survey of some images of nuclear bomb explosions in movies. It is necessary from the outset, however, to run on the spot a little and consider terminological pointers. “Modern culture” must in this context mean technological industrial civilization -- not everybody after the Ancients-- because it is only following the scientific revolution that we acquired the means to successfully overpopulate, poison, exhaust and destroy the resources of the planet. Next, when we ask if the natural world can be considered our “scapegoat,” we must be cautious in deciding whether we mean “scapegoat” in its strict sense or “scapegoat” in the looser sense as “sacrificial victim” (Girard 2000). The scapegoat proper, the victim upon which our modern technological industrial culture must be founded,

however that culture might be described in detail, must escape our consciousness: that scapegoat, if I have understood Girard, is necessarily a victim difficult to acknowledge, own, identify; it will elude us, it will attempt to remain repressed. The mere fact that we are already asking whether the natural world is our scapegoat implies a self-consciousness about the victimary status of the earth; that awareness itself should prompt us to prefer the term “sacrificial victim” to “scapegoat.” So let us sharpen the question: is the natural world the sacrificial victim of modern culture? One more caution: even if we reach the conclusion that it is proper to speak of the natural world as in some sense the sacrificial victim of modern culture, the question of the identity of the (hidden) scapegoat for whom the natural world is substituting will remain. The sacrificial victim is a substitute for the (real) scapegoat.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The original act of violence is unique and spontaneous. Ritual sacrifices, however, are multiple, endlessly repeated” (Girard 1977: 102). “Ritual sacrifice is founded on a double substitution. The first, which passes unperceived, is the substitution of one member of the community for all, brought about through the operation of the surrogate victim. The second, the only truly ‘ritualistic’ substitution, is superimposed on the first. It is the substitution of a victim

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belonging to a predetermined sacrificial category for the original victim. The surrogate victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it” (Girard 1977: 102).

The question the conference organizers have posed is not a trivial one to dismiss quickly. A first reason not to dismiss it quickly is that Nature is hurting. I capitalize Nature deliberately. We do well to avoid the posture of the pious eco-activist saint, the violently resentful prophet of ecological doom. Green politics is young, but already it confronts the obstacle of deaf ears. All the same it would be obtuse, oblivious, and obstinate not to pause, at least, over the ecological damage the natural world is suffering. If anybody needs a refresher, one convenient survey is offered by Marilyn French in her polemical Beyond Power. The rise in Green politics as a significant political force in national elections in the West shows the growing awareness of the facts of this damage. Consider, too, the now-familiar image of the planet hanging in space as filmed by the astronauts. That blue globe suspended against the darkness, in roundness and oneness, is not anything we should be embarrassed to acknowledge loving, any more than we should be ashamed of loving a good meal or a warm bed or the front door of home after a hard day at work. Perhaps it is anthropomorphic projection to speak of the globe as an object of love, but equally it would be cynical masochism to harrumph away the planet's ecological fate as a matter of indifference in the name of some theoretical rigour. Sebastian Moore, one worker in mimetic theory, has been so bold as to suggest: "The mind of Jesus was a mind that saw the world as

God sees it – and as the astronauts saw it translated by technology into a visual aid, a ravishing blue ball in space – the human world knit in love as opposed to the human world knit by the torturous relationships that are only stabilized by scapegoating” (1998: 159). So whether we view the one planet earth by way of enlightenment rationalism and warily sidle away from a vocabulary of “creation,” or via theology we speak of the earth as a gift from God or object of divine and thus human attention, it requires little effort to imagine it as a “suffering” thing. Maybe it was not always so; maybe for centuries the earth gave us as much trouble as we gave it, and we sacralized it not as a divine friend providing plenty whom we feared losing but a rough ungenerous deity from which we were obliged to beg for subsistence. But now humanity seems to have become, in mimetic terms, a monstrous double of Nature. Our global civilization now seems curiously face-to-face with “Nature,” as if fascinated to witness how much of our violence the planet can endure, alternately horrified and amazed at the ecology’s ability to sustain our punishing development.<sup>2</sup> I am attempting less to be alarmist

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<sup>2</sup> This seeming to be our monstrous double may well be in reality, I suggest, an effect of

than only to observe some important, unhappy facts.

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culture itself: the planet was always finite; it is not the planet that has changed, it is we the self-aware species that has grown in numbers. So the planet is not revealing itself to us, we are revealing our own monstrosity to ourselves. One thinks here of Girard's remarks on Levi-Strauss and the monstrous spectre of overpopulation.

A second reason not to dismiss the question is that violence done to the earth might seem to be a necessity – whether legitimated by myth or defensible by reason – of technological industrial society. We emphasise under this second reason humanity as the cause of the earth’s degradation, rather than the degradation as effect. Mimetic theory brings us a heightened awareness of the mechanisms by which violence is displaced, the lability of the objects of violence, the irrationality of the selection of victims in the moblike blindness of sacrificial regeneration. A case can be made that the earth itself is now the “victim” of the collective industrial violence of the human species, regardless of the political frameworks in which we manage our affairs, a sacrificial substitute for the entirety of the global community. The sacrificial victim, we recall, must come from outside the community. If we can imagine a global human community without human victims, then would the earth – nature – as the one remaining thing “outside” of the (human) community not have to become its sacrificial victim? Let us set aside briefly whether we use “violence” here only as a metaphor (indeed, what “only as a metaphor” might mean). As a species, we excel at inflicting violence on one another. Eric Gans’ extremely serviceable definition of the human should never be neglected: *“humanity is the species for which the central problem of survival is posed by the relations within the species itself*

*rather than those with the external world*' (1993: 2; Gans' emphasis ).

Nevertheless, let us mightily suspend our disbelief and imagine, for a moment, that a well-working capitalism has slowly spread around the globe; let us imagine that quietly, calmly, incrementally, things have gotten better for most people and people are fed, clothed, housed, educated, and entertained and socialized in a satisfactory way; let us imagine we have despite our monstrous incivility arrived somehow at a kind of workable world stability without socialism.<sup>3</sup> Even in such a desirable state of affairs, the ripping and tearing of the earth would be necessary.

Even in the most utopian formulations of a human future, some "violence" – metaphorically speaking (?) – will have to be done to the earth; the problem of feeding, clothing, housing ourselves will require digging, drilling, mining, plowing, cutting, clearing, harvesting. Is it absurd to speak of these activities as violence? Like Lady Macbeth after the murder of Duncan, some of us feel haunted by the signs of the unintended consequences of the most environmentally sensitive industry and technology: the ethical line between use and abuse of nature seems exceedingly fine or perhaps even vanishing as the size and force of the

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<sup>3</sup> I say without socialism because I can not bring myself to formulate any latent squibs or manifest diatribes against the unqualified evil of capitalism. Indeed, although some workers in mimetic theory might disagree with me, I would have to say that I follow Eric Gans' principle that there really is no outside to the market model of society. This does not mean we have to accept everything corporations or consumers do as legitimate or wise or commendable merely because human exchange in its most free forms takes place in the market.

global human community grows. Certainly, both the cheerful technophile and the prudent economist of capitalist growth will insist, “Oh, but such violence is not violence at all, it is simply productive labour that founds civilization.” The anxious green activist will reply, “Your catch phrase ‘productive labour’ is only self-justification that legitimates the myth of industrial innocence. Capitalist industry is violent, not innocent, and we must renounce its violence and change our consumerist ways.” A second reason to take our opening question seriously, in short, is the understandable if perhaps mistaken inclination to interpret the activity of our industries and technologies itself as “violence.” To glance quickly ahead at our sample-topic: certainly it is difficult to witness the dozens of nuclear bomb test explosions in the documentary Trinity and Beyond: The Atomic Bomb Movie, a relentless succession of ever-bigger mushroom clouds -- explosions in the New Mexico desert, explosions on Pacific Ocean islands, explosions in the atmosphere, explosions underground, explosions underwater -- and not to feel a certain nausea at the awesome technological power so exuberantly released by the scientists. One is sorely tempted to denounce those responsible for the tests as cruel torturers of an innocent earth, not to mention cavalier producers of human and animal victims. Such denunciation proceeds from resentment, yes, but loving the bomb testers requires a capacity for love perhaps as awesome as the bomb

itself.

I began by saying the question whether the natural world is the sacrificial victim of modern technological industrial society was worth asking, and I still say that. However, in following this intuition, we have reached a feeling of impasse. Recall our first reason for entertaining the question was that Nature was hurting; but recall, too, we were immediately made self-conscious of the anthropomorphism inherent in the assertion, the personification of Nature. It may well be that particular gesture of anthropomorphic extension is nothing to be disowned or denied. Jonathan Schell, in fact, has spoken of our need to think of the planet earth not only as a unified organism, but also and more boldly as a person, an entity modelled on the concept of the human person.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, our first reflection brought us into the awkwardness of thinking of the earth as a victim under the sign of “pretending” the earth is like a human being, and a certain hesitation over that particular substitution. Recall our second reason: even in a utopian scenario of a productive peaceful future, relations between humanity and

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<sup>4</sup> “When it comes to trying to predict its tolerance to perturbances, we are in the position of someone asked to deduce the whole of medicine by observing one human being. With respect to its individuality, then, the earth is not so much like a cell as like an individual person. Like a person, the earth is unique; like a person, it is sacred; and, like a person, it is unpredictable by the generalizing laws of science” (Schell 1982: 78).

the earth would involve some sort of “violence” against nature. Is anything we do to the earth “violence”? Such metaphorization runs the risk of permitting an accidental disrespect to the human victims of human violence. If, following Girard, we should seek to demystify the myths that conceal human victims, then we may aim to respect the difference between felling an old-growth cedar tree or hauling pulling a large tuna from the sea on the one side, and the ritual murder of one of our own human kind on the other side.

Considering both reasons for endorsing the question, then, we are made aware almost immediately of an awkwardness in substituting the non-human for the human by frank anthropomorphism or metaphorization. This awkwardness accompanies any attempt to dissolve the boundary that separates human culture from the natural world. Whence that awkwardness? Perhaps what we do in forcing the idea of the natural-world-as-victim is to blur definitions so far that the scene of culture itself becomes an occupant of the center of the scene, a participant on the scene. With the phrase “the scene of representation,” I am invoking the center-periphery formulations that Eric Gans has elaborated in his generative anthropology with such patient, persistent genius. And such a procedure does not quite work, given that the the scene of representation itself must needs be kept

distinct from the figures that appear upon it. The natural world would then better be grasped as the scene upon which culture, including its sacrificial dramas, is played out. Following Gans, my inclination is to suggest that we would do best to consider “nature” as the (floor or ground of the) scene of representation itself, and to avoid thinking of “the natural world” as a displaced figure of the human victim and therefore of the scapegoat. It is wisest to resist the temptation to represent nature as a sacrificial victim, or scapegoat, no matter how much “violence” we do to the earth.

Gans seems to lean in such a direction, for example, in a revealing footnote that reflects on our species’ postmodern self-consciousness in Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology (1993). It is essential to attend to the way in which Gans tries to tease apart the primarily technological violence named by “Hiroshima” from the uniqueness of the Holocaust perpetrated against the Jews.

The slogan “Auschwitz and Hiroshima,” by its apparent equation of a questionable but rational military action with the industrialization of the most inhuman sacrificial practices, may also be seen as the beginning of a new forgetting of the primacy of the ethical that is often expressed today in terms of ecology. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons, as opposed

to the scapegoating violence of the Nazis, transcends the ethical to the extent that its effects cannot be confined within a scene of human conflict, however broadly defined. Such reminders of the physical limitations of the planet become a source of new resentments and invidious distinctions, characteristically articulated in terms that deny the ethical essence of humanity and even suggest a kind of antihumanist pantheism. But.... not even the noblest sacrifices for the sake of nature can escape the context of the human scene of representation that alone gives them meaning. Nothing in nonhuman nature, not even our fellow primates, can offer us a substitute for the virtual human community to which we are condemned to belong. (209)

Those effects of nuclear bomb devastation that might be considered specifically ecological or environmental are designated by the phrases “effects... [not] confined within a scene of human conflict, however broadly defined” and “reminders of the physical limitations of the planet.” Gans’ mimetic theory clearly appreciates the fragility and vulnerability of the planet earth; under the name “Hiroshima” he reads the “technological” component of “the end of the

limitlessness of modern experience” which inaugurated the postmodern era (its more properly social component named by “Auschwitz”). As ecological eco-activists patiently and remind us, there are limits -- we do live in an age where many ostensives point to ecological limits. What Gans suggests is that we ought to concede our being tied from the origin to “the context of the human scene of representation that alone gives... meaning” to those limits themselves, and gives meaning to even “the noblest sacrifices for the sake of nature.” To give the notion its Girardian spin, just as the romantic does not want to be alone, but to be seen alone, no ecological activist wants to be alone with nature, but only to be *seen* alone with nature (finally, in the full analysis). Our consciousness of the limits of nature itself, in other words, is necessarily mediated by our consciousness of our human competitors’ presence on the scene of representation—the scene that allows representations even of “nature” itself. Our practices regarding the earth, our relations with the earth, are mediated by “the virtual human community to which we are condemned to belong” at the origin, and must continue to be so mediated.

In a later but related passage from Signs of Paradox, Gans elaborates somewhat more polemically: “Both Hiroshima and Auschwitz put into question the scenic configuration that has been from the outset the distinctive form of

human interaction” (163). In the landscape of nuclear devastation, and in the film Hiroshima Mon Amour (1963), Gans continues, we witness a threat to scenic culture itself: “Technological violence has exploded the boundaries of the scene, destroyed its closure. The world has become omniscient *par la force des choses*; self and other can no longer defer their mutual recognition” (163). Gans calls this exploding of boundaries and seeming obliteration of limits an “apocalyptic vision” and clearly, once more, he designates the “Hiroshima” model of postmodernity as one mistaken in placing its “emphasis on physical destruction.” The mistake, Gans suggests, tempts us toward the error of thinking that the threat of nuclear annihilation somehow returns culture to a state of nature: “Culture, and cultures, go on after the Bomb; the ‘Hiroshimists’ only repeat the impatience of the first Christians in thinking that deferral has been abolished and culture returned to a state of nature” (163).

Now it is a fact that in Gans’ originary scene of the origin of the sign, of language, of the human, the object-of-attention is motivated in part by appetitive instinct. The circle or pair of protohumans reaching for the object in the abortive gesture of appropriation are motivated initially by appetite, and additionally by mimetic intensification. In this respect, Gans’ originary scene would seem friendly to the notion that “nature” as a whole can itself become the object of sparagmatic

violence or collective sacrificial violence. The earth is the central object from which would we tear food and resources for survival (compare our our utopian scenario above under the second reason). That is, given that Gans' originary "victim" need not be a human victim, need not be the human victim of a collective murder, the earth itself could be figured forth as a "victim" of collective violence in the sparagmos. However, to figure forth the earth in such a way would be to forget the primacy of language in Gans' thought: originary thinking is thinking about the human, but the minimal institution of the human is for Gans, unlike Girard, linguistic exchange of the name-of-God and not collective murder of the misrecognized sacred being. (The emergence of the sign precedes the sparagmos in Gans; the emergence of the sign follows the frenzy of the generative collective murder, the scapegoat event, in Girard.) It is because of this primacy of language that even in recognizing the limited nature of the earth, Gans chooses not to privilege the "Hiroshima" model of postmodernity that subordinates the ethical holocaust of Auschwitz to the technological holocaust figured forth by nuclear destruction (or for that matter by environmental degradation). The natural limit is always already a cultural limit, or apprehended only as a cultural limit. To pretend otherwise is to occlude the question.

Girard, by contrast, does not place an object of appetitive desire at the origin of the sign. The human victim of human collective murder -- the object of our first non-instinctual attention and the original signifier -- is not an object of appetite, but an object which comes into view because of the autonomously pacifying effect of collective murder itself. The human victim of human collective murder in Girard's originary scenario is the unmotivated and arbitrary substitute for the appetitive object which might have been anything at all, which might have been whatever was needed to set into motion the crisis of intraspecific competition, the mimetic crisis preceding the emergence of the sign. Now Girard's originary scene also leads us away from thinking of the natural world as "victim" -- but by a different route. It is precisely because the originary victim in Girard is human that the divine revelation must also take the form of the human -- in the person of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Girard's thinking does, however, allow us to locate the planet earth as an object potentially destroyed by human conflict, even though it remains awkward to see the whole planet earth as the sacrificial victim of modern culture. This turn in his thought brings us toward nuclear bombing and toward

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<sup>5</sup> It may be that the slippage toward substitution of "nature" for "Jesus" creates my hesitation with the chain of signifiers that would link "nature" to "scapegoat." No matter how much I care about the earth, I care for it not in the way I care about Jesus. Nor could the earth, conversely, be said to care for me as Christ (or God) does.

filmmakers' attempts to imagine the beginning of the end of the world. It brings us to ponder briefly our capacity to destroy the planet, everything living, us included. It asks us to focus not, however, on analogies between global environmental destruction and the community's destruction of the one victim in sacrificial violence. Rather, here, we are to focus on the earth once more as an object of desire: as the unified one object of global "territory" in the now-defunct war between the old mythic superpowers of the Cold War. We must remember the years just preceding the end of the Cold War and recall our fear of sudden, unexpected nuclear annihilation. When Violence and the Sacred (1977), The Scapegoat (1986) and Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (1987) first appeared in English translation, the unnerving rituals of the Cold War were still being icily conducted. Girard's thought itself came to its fullness (one reviewer called Rene Girard the "man of the moment" of 1980), but the revolutions of 1989 had not yet brought down the crumbling Berlin wall. The fear of global thermonuclear warfare was "in the air" then the way that fear of terrorist attack is "in the air" now. The early 1980's saw the emergence of the trend of "nuclear criticism." Girard and like-minded colleagues were certainly participants in that trend (see McKenna 116–26; Siebers, "The Ethics of Nuclear Criticism: Conclusion" 220–240; Girard 1984). In short, the late 1970's and early 1980's

were decades in which the threat of nuclear annihilation obtruded itself on public consciousness with a boldness not seen since the early 1960's, and it is perhaps not coincidental that Girard's thought itself has been characterized as "apocalyptic"-- essentially and not merely incidentally "apocalyptic" -- by his most powerful intellectual progeny.<sup>6</sup> If we can recall what it felt like to be watching America and the Soviet Union lean against each other in that standoff called Mutually Assured Destruction, then the excerpt that follows may have its proper resonance. This is a bit from the section of Things Hidden called "The Disappearance of the Object and Psychotic Structure."

Desire becomes detached from the object, bit by bit, and attaches itself to the model. This development is accompanied by a marked aggravation of the symptoms [of psychosis] – for behaving normally is not is not a matter of escaping from mimetic desire (no one can do

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<sup>6</sup> Gans: "Girard accounts for the persistence of the sacrificial in the Christian world by its (necessarily) imperfect understanding of the Gospel message, which he reformulates in explicitly victimary terms. But Girard's reinterpretation of the Christian revelation is the historical product of another revelation, that of the Holocaust. Following the Hiroshima rather than the Auschwitz model of postmodernity, Girard sets out our historical crux in the apocalyptic terms of nascent Christianity, which believed the last judgment to be imminent: we must abolish sacrificial violence or perish; utopia now or annihilation. But were this the case, we would indeed be doomed. In the nonviolent utopia of universal love, there would be no means available to carry out the essential cultural operation of differance: deferral through differentiation" (Signs of Paradox 166).

that) but of not giving in to it to the extent of losing sight of the object entirely and only being concerned with the model. ( 311)

Think of America and the Soviet Union as model-obstacles in the quest for global supremacy and think of planet earth itself as “the object.” Outlining madness between individuals, Girard could be outlining madness between political empires. The Cold War at its height presented rival parties threatening to engage in “losing sight of the object entirely and only being concerned with the model.”

The United States of America and the Soviet Union, each in mimetic determination not to permit the other to win a nuclear war, threatened to give in to the extent of losing sight of the object entirely: the object lost sight of, the planet earth itself as habitable space fit for culture and civilization. The trite absurdity of the contest needs little elaboration. There can be no “reason” in a nuclear war, no “object” (pun intended), as Jonathan Schell and others have demonstrated, because full-scale nuclear war destroys the very thing over which the war is being “fought.” So although Girard’s thought might lead us away from thinking of the planet earth as sacrificial victim just as Gans’ does, it nevertheless allows us to locate the earth as the object forgotten, erased, obliterated by psychotic neglect in the worst forms of mimetic rivalry.

Two qualifications. First, to resist naming the planet earth as sacrificial victim is not to deny the “real” or argue for cultural solipsism, to gleefully romp in misunderstanding under the deconstructive banner that reads there is “nothing outside the text” or language.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, I wholeheartedly affirm the “modest realism” stance of Paisley Livingston (1988: 91–95) and echo his plea that humanistic studies avoid the temptation of blindly worshipping the “two cultures” model, which drove a wedge between humanities and science, and relegated religion and esthetics to the domain of the inconsequential, where “culture” means gift shops, craft fairs, literary awards and tourism. The courage of Girard and Gans in sharing a scientific view of the world and a faith in the resources of language, which sets them distinctly apart from Foucault and other radical postmodern thinkers who would wish away the scientific enterprise in the name of a clever but fanciful culturalism (see Lewontin, Rose and Kamin), should be commended and celebrated. Second, I am not denying that there are “limits”

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<sup>7</sup> Gans: “Presence (on the scene of representation) as the deferral of (worldly) presence is the reality of language; on this point, as we might expect, the naive experience of the ostensive is rendered self-aware by the declarative. Language is always already non-presence; we have no quarrel on this point with Derrida. But unlike the presence of metaphysics, which subsists within the context of the declarative, ostensive presence is not conceivable as the presence of the sign alone” (*Signs of Paradox* 1997: 58; my emphasis).

to the natural world: to resist the chain of signifiers that makes the natural world a scapegoat does not mean to endorse the improbable notion that our technological expertise will smoothly provide solutions for every problem technology itself creates as such problems arise. There is no evasion in this hesitation of the finiteness of the planet's resources; on the contrary, our first two "reasons" above for respecting the question foregrounded that finiteness in different ways. Gans has spoken directly of the need for mimetic theory to place a "premium" on our relationship with the ecological world.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Conflict is inevitable within society as an open system. It was deferred and controlled but not simply eliminated at the origin, and we cannot conceive that this will change in the future. Resentment cannot be abolished; on the contrary, it will only continue to proliferate as

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society acquires additional degrees of freedom. What limits conflict is not abstract uniformity but social differentiation, no longer ritual-based but professional and consumerist. The ever-proliferating resentment generated by the social order can only be contained by the *fuite en avant* of ever-increasing differentiation. This model puts a premium on our growing knowledge of the natural world and the uses to which we may put it – including maintaining and restoring the ecological equilibrium” (*Signs of Paradox* 166-67; emphasis added).

What I am reiterating is that we are “condemned” to think about the natural world as the stage of the human drama, that we do best to love it as the scene upon which the human drama is to be played. But it is probably best to see it function only as the scene, not the victimary figure occupying the center of the scene. If nuclear conflagration is ever to destroy the earth because of the failure of Mutually Assured Destruction, a disciple of Girard might point to our failure as a species to to hear the call of the prophetic truth revealed by Jesus: either renounce violence, or accept the consequences of your violence. That either/or is the import of Rene Girard’s apocalyptic vision. The same scenario of nuclear conflagration would be read differently by an enthusiast for Eric Gans, not primarily as the failure of the Gospel, but as the failure of human language to do what it has from its origin been meant to do: defer violence through representation. Both thinkers, however, Girard with his prophetic Christian rhetoric and Gans with his dialectics of cultural paradox, are united in foregrounding the avoidance of that utterly undesirable happening. Their common ground -- faith in culture and in religion to do good -- should be grasped as a thing outweighing any theoretical divergence. In the worst-case scenario of nuclear conflagration, for both the leading thinkers of mimetic theory, the tragedy would consist in the human failure to turn away from (the representation of)

violence and choose real violence instead.

In the upcoming reflections on movies that feature a nuclear bomb presence and meditate on the “end of the world,” we witness an obstinate insistence on the primacy of the human figure and the relegation of the natural world to a substrate for action or a scenic ground. This insistence tends to lend substance to my preliminary remarks here, and indeed, these remarks are the result of reflections inspired not only by Girard and Gans but by the filmmakers’ efforts themselves. However, I make no claim for the truthfulness or imaginative exhaustiveness of the films. On the contrary, one is free to decry their failure sufficiently to describe natural destruction as such as a sorry failure of human imagination – as just one more example of the (violent) egocentricity of our species. One is free to take that option and mount that protest. What our examination will show is that whether the fictional bombs fall at the beginning, at the end, or in the middle, the movies tend naturally -- pun intended -- to emphasise the human figures and human victims of the technological violence visualized. At the very least, the makers of these narrative films face a tremendous difficulty in representing scenarios of nuclear destruction that would both move us and inform us about what such an end of the world might look like or what effects it might have.

When I first took up the question of the advisability of thinking of the earth as a sacrificial victim, I thought it best to cut to the chase and ponder nuclear annihilation. I promptly went searching for representations of global nuclear annihilation, its figuration in literature and film. I learned very quickly the topic is huge. The field of information about and reflection on nuclear bombs includes studies that respond to the real bombs which devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent testing and deployment and management of nuclear weapons; the field includes fiction, poetry, and films which feature a nuclear bomb presence; it includes critical studies of such literature and film (Joyce Evans; John Martens; Toni Perrine; Jerome Shapiro). The field is immense. To limit things to a workable sample, I confine myself here to the medium of narrative film, feature-length films which, in most cases, do show the thing itself – that is, a nuclear bomb exploding as a critical part of the action.

To delimit a first category of such films in one stroke, we can affirm that the bomb can be dropped at the beginning of the movie or (to cheat a little) before the movie begins. The most celebrated American attempt at a realistic film drama taking this option is the classic On the Beach (1959), starring Gregory Peck and

Ava Gardner, directed by Stanley Kramer. On the Beach begins weeks after a full-scale nuclear war: the only survivors are those lucky enough to be living in Australia. Fully aware that a radioactive cloud is drifting toward the Australian continent and that the cloud's dust will kill them off as it has wiped out North America, Eurasia, Africa, a handful of characters in three intertwining storylines intersect. An American naval captain played by Gregory Peck has trouble absorbing the fact of the death of his wife and children; an unmarried woman played by Ava Gardner falls in love with him. A young sailor (played by Anthony Perkins) and his anxious wife, whose refusal to discuss recent events openly is metonymic of the film's refusal to engage in open discussion of the war, attempt to carry on living with their infant but end by committing suicide to avoid the gruesome symptoms of radiation sickness. Finally, a sailor played by Fred Astaire sees to it that he wins a competition in his racing car before his clock runs out. All these victims accept -- with what we must find troubling resignation, if not baffling passivity -- their status as an extended-life remnant awaiting only a slightly delayed membership among the extinct.

On the Beach does not represent the bomb directly, offers no pictures of explosions but only pictures of its effects. The scene in which those effects are most dramatically shown is that which presents Gregory Peck's submarine in San

Diego harbour. The vessel has come from Australia on a quest to track down the sender of an indecipherable telegram message that was traced to San Diego, but which seemed possibly human despite its indecipherability. Each sailor looks through the periscope and studies the streets of the city bordering the beach (before one sailor is sent into the city in a protective suit to track down the source of these unreadable morse code signals). One by one each sailor takes his turn at the periscope. Each sees that nobody is walking the streets; there is no sign of human life; as one skeptical critic complains in annoyance, there are not even any corpses (Evans 1998: 149). The audience participates in this ritual repetition: stare through the periscope, witness a deserted and emptied San Diego, give up the periscope, grimace, turn away, be silent. None of the sailors has a word to say. It is as if we have witnessed the end of the world, and the sum of our response is “No Comment.” The single sailor dressed in a heavy space suit to protect from radiation leaves the submarine, walks into the city and follows the telegraph signal to its source: a window in an office has been left open, a breeze has been brushing a curtain against the electronic clapper. So the source of the message which the survivors had hoped might come from a miraculous single survivor – a heroic displacement of the scapegoat – that source is just a breeze, random. This quietly digested figure of meaninglessness is the Holy Grail at the

end of the submarine's quest: no survivors, only a tapping that mirrors the seemingly "random" universe in which the whole human species now appears only an evolutionary aberration whose chances have been used up.

On the Beach has been both praised critics of nuclearism and psychic numbing, and despised by others such as the maverick Shapiro: "Not only does the film gloss over the genuine political issues that are likely to initiate a nuclear war, it also ignores the secrecy, deception, and lack of democratic control that surrounds nuclear weapons" (2000: 92). The movie's curious passivity, however, might be said to frustrate the viewers' appetite for discussion of nuclear destruction and ironically provoke the viewers into performing such discussion themselves. In its quiet way, the film does invite us to contemplate human extinction: although the characters avoid discussing their own coming deaths, the sailors at least face the extinction of humanity in the sign of the abandoned city and the meaningless telegram message. The image of the emptied city has an ingloriously sobering effect; its mute barrenness remains the wall against which the slipperiest viewer must stumble. San Diego lifeless is, however, from another position only one instance of recourse to the most popular, perennial film trope related to nuclear bombs dropping: the post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland. On the Beach deserves praise if for no other reason than that it does not walk into the

tiresomely limited trap in which most movies using the post-apocalyptic wasteland do fall.

That trap is the domain of the frankly science-fiction genre in which a brutalized and reluctant remnant of humanity survives to fight it out in the nuclear wasteland. The Mad Max movies belong to this genre, as does the cult classic A Boy and His Dog to which Max Max owes much, as does Luc Besson's notorious Le Dernier Combat, a 90-second post-apocalyptic dystopia, a film deservedly notorious because in it there is – get this – no dialogue -- unless one wants to elevate grunts, whimpers and semi-coughs meaningfully exchanged to the status of dialogue. If the generic conventions of On the Beach encourage, however indirectly, meditation on the real threats nuclear bombs present to the environment, the post-nuclear-apocalypse punk frontier provides the frame only for all-new tough guys, for brutal beginnings in mostly underthought defiance of sentimental or elegiac endings. The post-apocalyptic punk frontier enjoys telling the old, old story of the resentful hero of warrior violence defending his honour, his territory, his self-validating will to supreme recognition.

Most critics with an anti-nuclear stance despise such movies (Shapiro is a refreshing exception) because in their total disregard for the “facts” about how

nuclear war can be “survived,” the genre may well contribute to public delusions about the survivability of global thermonuclear warfare and thus to public complacency about nuclear danger. In films of this type, the planet earth is certainly not presented as the sacrificial victim of collective human violence. On the contrary, “nature” here provides an all-new testing ground for human conflict. The embittered, hardened members of the struggling remnant — overwhelmingly men — are certainly not prepared to mope and mourn the loss of the world that once was. The very notion of an “environmental” consciousness seems in these films an absurdity, in that the devastated environment is now (again) the “enemy.” These films open up instead a fantastic return to the primitive, their supposedly futuristic scenes only masking a primitive past of disabled technology, the hand-to-hand violence of a Bronze or Iron Age legitimated anew with a vengeance. We might not want to be censorious killjoys or puritanical pacifists, but using nuclear warfare as an initializing excuse for scenarios of unembarrassed violence seems the least ethically mature of approaches.

A second category of narrative film featuring images of the bomb dropping, what might be called the Pentagon-Kremlin countdown drama, gives us -- or threatens to give us -- the nuclear explosion at the end. Nuclear annihilation

is the end we wish to defer, the thing we wish not to happen, just as the characters in the stories themselves wish it not to happen. The most representative here may be Sidney Lumet's Fail Safe (1964), Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove (1964), and John Badham's Wargames (1983).<sup>9</sup> The nuclear countdown drama constitutes an oddly transparent enactment of Eric Gans' definition of human culture itself: that is, the deferral of violence through representation. The violence of the nuclear war ending is deferred, but it can be deferred only through representation of the threat and abstention from the threat. These movies emphasise political negotiation as the deferral of nuclear annihilation; they emphasise watching the bombers approach their targets, watching models creeping across radar screens or wall-sized maps of the world; they represent the pilots in the deadly planes flicking switches and checking secret codes and double-checking, triple-checking backup systems. They give us high procrastination, the action of doing anything other than the actual thing itself, the appropriation of the object itself -- in this case, the privilege of dropping the bomb first, before the other. Language

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<sup>9</sup> One might include as more recent if less interesting examples The Sum of All Fears (2000), which includes an explosion midway through the plot but remains preoccupied with the deterrence of full-scale nuclear war; and Terminator III: Rise of the Machines (2003), which ends with strangely detached and long-distance aerials views of the nuclear annihilation of American civilization, and a stupidly adolescent survivalist fantasy, with John Connor and his girlfriend having stumbled into safe underground space originally intended for the American President.

emerges at the origin, Gans hypothesises, as an abortive gesture of appropriation (it might be said the abortive gesture itself lets the “natural world” emerge as sign, not thing). One is tempted to suggest that it is wonderfully, anthropoetically appropriate that when human culture is required, as in these movies, to think about the end of the (natural) world, culture is self-stalled, confined to playing with the endless deferring of the absolute violence that would end the scene of culture. (When representation stops representing deferral of absolute violence, then such a movie must be done; representation must cease to represent.) It is anthropoetically appropriate that the abortive gesture of appropriation at the origin of human culture should be condemned to find its (non)fulfillment in the abortive gesture of non-annihilation at the end of human culture. These are dramas of deferral under the sign of nuclear deterrence, and it is deferral they necessarily thematize, not annihilation.

The Pentagon-Kremlin countdown thriller places human culture (figured forth in the governments of the Cold War rivals and their agents) face-to-face with that violence which threatens human survival in a curiously intimate way. In most cases, we witness the president of the United States on the telephone engaging in anxious dialogues with the leader of the Soviet Union in the Kremlin. Sidney

Lumet's Failsafe (1964) is an admirable exercise in the genre. In its horrifying conclusion, we learn that Henry Fonda as President has secretly decided to destroy New York City with a bomb dropped by an American plane which has been circling over the city secretly while the President has been negotiating with Russia. The President commits this act of terrible national self-injury, a political choice that violates every "patriotic" instinct, in order to prove unequivocally to the rival Russian president that the rogue American plane which has destroyed Moscow is in fact a rogue plane, not sent intentionally on a mission but lost accidentally because of failures of the fail-safe system. The dropping of the bomb on New York represents a sacrificial substitution of one great city for another, reciprocal violence at its most transparent. The images of the destruction of New York are not pictures of actual bombs dropping, but freeze frames of ordinary people on the street just before the moment of the explosion. Given that the terms of the movie suggest we can destroy two cities without destroying the whole planet, the film's grim restraint holds back from meditating on global nuclear annihilation. The natural world itself does not feature except as the globe cut up into maps of political territories marking out airspace zones, ranges of missile reach and the like.

Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying

and Love the Bomb, is surely the most famous example of the Pentagon-Kremlin countdown film, but at the same time the least reverent and most ironic treatment of such scenarios of high-level negotiation. The movie presents us with an insane General Ripper who sends his complete squadron of bombers to attack Russia because of a delusion that flouridation is a commie plot to rob him and all Americans of the purity of their natural body fluids. President Merkin Muffley, played by Peter Sellers, with help from Colonel Mandrake, the sane executive assistant to the insane warmongering General Ripper, manages to call back from Russian airspace all but one of the loose B-52s. In predictable sacrificial fashion, one plane emerges as the exception and gets away. Its pilot is one Major Kong (Slim Pickens), who overcomes all obstacles (Russian planes attempting to shoot him down, leaking fuel tanks), and manually opens the jammed drop doors on his B-52 to mount in phallic fashion one nuclear bomb, riding it with a cowboy's cries of yee-hah to orgasmically apocalyptic detonation over a Russian ICBM missile facility.

The bomb that Major Kong rides is only one bomb. However, the Russian establishment has secretly set in place a Doomsday machine which was originally intended to act as the superlative deterrent. The only problem: the Russians have foolishly delayed making public the existence of their Doomsday machine as the

ultimate deterrent. A deterrent not yet made public is no deterrent. Kong's single bomb sets the Doomsday machine in motion; the Doomsday machine responds by automatically releasing countless missiles, a full-scale attack that will destroy civilization and cover the world in a radioactive shield that will destroy surface life for at least one hundred years. The film's last dialogue shows President Muffley and Dr. Strangelove and others in the USA War Room calmly discussing the possibility of saving a remnant of humanity in mine-shaft civilizations thousands of yards underground, surviving with machines fuelled by nuclear power.

Kubrick's film is sardonic and concise, suspensefully paced and visually appealing. It is at once comical and distressing in its exposure of some of the seeming stupidities of faith in systems of deterrence. The final scene, however, in which we witness many consecutive nuclear bombs exploding in varying shapes and sizes and shades of black and white, has a disturbingly calming effect. The reason for this oddly calming effect is partly the vast distance from which we see the bombs: the aerial view, the view from above, not only here in Dr. Strangelove but in other nuclear bomb images, removes the viewer from the scene to such an extent that the explosion does little to horrify. In Dr. Strangelove, the prettiness is also enhanced by the careful choreographing and rapidity of the image sequence.

Furthermore, the contentless framework of the explosions is decisively on the side of anonymity and ironic detachment. We do not know where the bombs are falling, we do not see any human or animal or architectural victims, we are given no frame connecting a bomb to a place or a person. The bombs are falling on planet earth, but because no particular locations are named, the effect is not horror but mystified curiosity. Finally, the musical selection Kubrick plays in the background is Vera Lynn singing the World War II song of hopeful endurance, “We’ll Meet Again.” The disjunction between song and symbol is sarcastic in the extreme.

We might find our desire shifting uneasily between two incompatible positions. On the one hand, we admire Kubrick’s cleverness; witnessing the bombs as the self-condemning acts of psychotic warmongers whom he invites us to despise, one identifies with Kubrick in his ironic distance from the violent possibility toward which he is pointing. The images say we will not meet again; the song assures us we will meet again; in identifying with Kubrick, we share his awareness that – as so many nuclear critics have pointed out – nuclear war must by definition be utterly unlike World War II, for Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the end of containable warfare. On the other hand, we may resent Kubrick not because of his political impudence and disrespect of military officialdom, but

precisely because the disjunction between song and picture seems cruel to the bombs' fictive victims and dissatisfying to the viewer hungry for meaning. The irony teeters on the brink of an insulting absurdity by challenging any attachment to the earth as "sacred" with the rapidity and conciseness of the images. The brusque burlesque of *Dr. Strangelove* may seem ironically in league with the politics it seeks to undermine. His rivalry with the warmongers requires him ultimately to lose sight of the object in the very way Girard warns us rivalry does so: if he does not "really" care for the planet, why should we? Cleverness outweighs care.

The Pentagon-Kremlin countdown drama with the bomb at the end nevertheless remains ethically superior to the post-apocalyptic punk frontier fantasy where the bomb only conveniently furnishes a tough new beginning. By literally putting off the imagery of nuclear destruction, this genre celebrates the deferral of violence in the very process of enacting such deferral. In contemplating the possible end of the military-political world, these dramas enact the process that Gans places at the very origin of language and culture: the abortive gesture of appropriation is here transposed into the abortive gesture of non-annihilation.

A third group of nuclear movies locates full, powerful, sometimes frightening images of exploding nuclear bombs in the middle of the narrative action. We could, lacking a ready-made label, designate this genre the Drama of Nuclear Devastation. Although genuine examples are understandably rare -- the unpleasantly stark must impede commercial success -- the examples we do have visualize with different degrees of earnestness the “real” consequences of nuclear war. The most famous American version, excluding the now-unavailable but sensationally disseminated TV movie The Day After (1983), is Lynne Litman’s Testament (1983). Given the constraining influence of the American government and American political culture on Hollywood movies about nuclear bombs (see Evans), it should not surprise us that the most noteworthy dramas of nuclear devastation come from Great Britain. Peter Watkins’ 47-minute made-for-TV docudrama The War Game (1966) caused such scandal when it was ready for broadcast that the British Broadcasting Corporation, after spending the money to produce it, refused to broadcast it, fearful that it would cause real political panic among the shocked viewers. A much more impressive drama, in my opinion the best movie about nuclear war, is the BBC’s made-for-TV movie Threads (1984), written by Barry Hines, produced and directed by Mick Jackson. Testament and The War Game and Threads share several features. One is a “realistic” intention

in that the harm, ugliness, horror of nuclear bombing is confronted, dramatized, richly visualized. The nuclear explosion itself is neither a mere plot device or narrative presupposition (as in our first category), nor a concluding terminus either deferred or quickly simulated (as in our second category). The priority for representation is neither adventure on a largely desolate post-bomb scene nor suspense during the pre-conflict escalation. These films tell stories of undistinguished people: neither warrior-heroes nor political or military officials take up positions the leading dramatis personae. Instead, we witness the destruction of baffled and powerless families, and the special plight of mothers caring for children after nuclear devastation. Inasmuch as both the failure of deterrence and the horror of nuclear destruction appear without glamour or glorification, the attribution of a “realistic” aim seems fair. Perhaps as an unintended consequence of the realism and the thematization of victimization of ordinary households, the films are vulnerable to the accusation that a didactic intention damages esthetic detachment and effect. Jerome Shapiro, in his magisterial Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film (2000), dismisses Lynne Litman’s Testament, for example, as a pseudo-feminist weepie devoid of meaningful comment on the bomb. Wynne Wachhorst, in an otherwise brilliant explication of Testament, strangely dismisses Threads as a weak re-make

of the Watkins' The War Game. Now it must be said that even Threads, my favourite, I would not recommend to your viewing pleasure as "entertainment" or "art" (although I would call Testament dramatic "entertainment"). Threads works on the viewer with a peculiar power: one finds oneself horrified, fascinated, numbed, provoked, unsettled, made restless, and, it must be said, at times bored. Perhaps its peculiar power results from the fact that the oscillation between form and content essential to all esthetic experience is too heavily weighted toward the pole of content (in this case, a threat which feels at some level "real") rather than form, so that we are unable to relax and feel Threads is "just" a movie -- as we might feel, for example, Terminator II: Judgment Day (which contains the most powerful single image of a nuclear bomb in American cinema) is "just" a movie. "Entertainment" seems too light a label for the work performed in Threads. My local video rental house puts Threads in its "Cult" film section, even though I suspect Barry Hines might furrow his brow at his work having landed in the bin with the flotsam and jetsam of "cult" movies.

Threads is set in Sheffield, England, in the early 1980s. Three plot lines structure the narrative. Ruth Beckett is a twenty-something local girl of a well-to-

do family who gets pregnant unexpectedly by Jimmy Kemp, her boyfriend, in an opening scene where they flirt, fight a little, and kiss into lovemaking in their car parked atop a cliff overlooking Sheffield. The movie's second scene leaps two months ahead: Ruth announces her unplanned pregnancy to Jimmy. In desultory fashion, they decide to keep the baby and get married: thenceforth, we get to know two families. Ruth's family, the Becketts are well-to-do, quiet, upper middle-class, Ruth their only child; the Kemps are lower middle-class, louder, more vulgar, with a daughter Alison and son Michael, both younger than Jimmy. The storylines of the two families converge when the Kemps come to dinner chez the Becketts one evening, to mark their union as future in-laws. At the same time, news reports in the background of the dialogue are continuously reporting the escalation of tensions and hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union concerning missile deployments in Iran; therefore, accompanying this low-key story of an unexpected marriage, the first half of the movie gives the predictable approach of terrible war as announced by newspapers, radio announcers, television broadcasts. The citizens, in fact, fully expect the war to occur. People prepare with anxious resignation: supermarket shelves are emptied, the roadways jammed with families trying to flee to the countryside, cartoonish educational videos informing citizens about radiation and fallout shelters. When

the bombs drop, when the city of Sheffield is devastated, one storyline follows Ruth and her parents, the other follows the Kemp household (Jimmy, Michael, Alison are killed instantly). The third storyline involves a childless couple, Mr. Sutton and wife: Sutton is a municipal bureaucrat whose duties include those of the Designated Wartime Controller for Sheffield. His wife worries when he leaves her behind to take up his duties in an improvised basement office with other officials -- health systems managers, engineers, planning administrators and the like. Once the bombs fall, Sutton and his colleagues are utterly ineffectual through no fault of their own; the scale of the bomb's destruction renders futile their efforts at moving such things as tinned food and petrol supplies about. Indeed, the very basement office they occupy like caged rats is buried in so much rubble that they are cut off except by a single radio line, and they themselves -- those expected to be co-ordinating rescue activities -- starve to death in four weeks. We see a member of the work crew that breaks through to dig them out walk past the begrimed photograph of Sutton's wife on his dust-covered desk. Sutton has died, and we see his dustcovered body leaned over his desk in futile resignation, head on arms.

Threads would not make us think so much if we were not introduced to the

families and given scenes in which to get attached to the characters well before the bombs drop. The bombs fall about 50 minutes into the movie, at just about the halfway point. Now the moments of footage showing that devastation are, to my mind, without rival in the realm of nuclear movies. The bomb blast itself is – although we have been overprepared for it -- horrifying: windows smash, houses collapse, people fly in panic, terrible visions of animals, people, buildings obliterated by waves of heat and flame fill the screen. The utter helplessness and panic of the ordinary victims is the focus. The mushroom cloud is not seen from a great distance, not viewed from an airplane or simulated with silly cartoon graphics on the wall of a war room; nor is the explosion signified metonymically by a white flash, an uninterrupted siren, freeze frames of victims, or the like. Instead, we see the residents of Sheffield, including those whose stories we have learned to follow, watching the cloud rise above the street. Most powerfully, we see people inside their homes scrambling to build pathetic mattress lean-to shelters in preparation for the attack. The visual scale is close enough to be intimate; there is nothing adventurous or heroic here; one simply witnesses people enduring, hanging on, slowly dying. The suffering is presented in such a fashion as to be both unsentimental and respectful. We care for the people who die, but there is nothing even remotely beautiful about their dying. This fine balance

between the careworthy and the ugliness in nuclear death seems the thing missing from all the films in the other two categories I have delimited above.

One of the most well-calculated factors in Threads results from its rejection of the convention of the sudden-and-unexpected quality of nuclear war's outbreak (the convention that does depoliticize Testament, for example). It is crucial to the film's peculiar power that we experience a slow, inexorable escalation of hostilities represented via intrusive, persistent news broadcasts: Threads interlaces every character's movements with radio announcers in the backgrounds, television newscasts of the NATO-Soviet threats and counter-threats, images of folks reading the newspaper imperviously. It would be wrong to brush off this interference of this properly political narrative as a clumsy documentary overlay, as moralizing about the failure of the benighted masses to tremble with the proper fear at the doom they should have anticipated. Hines and Jackson are after something else: this technique with subtle insidiousness dissolves the boundary between public and private space in the same way that the bomb-as-threat might be felt to dissolve that boundary. The relentless presence of newscaster voices persists up until the nuclear attack, and only then, ironically, only when the public institutions of government and market have been reduced by nuclear devastation

to their skeletal remains, is something that might be called “private” space restored (except that what remains is really a new space where all the old state-citizen relationships have altered for the worse).

A second documentary technique used to powerful effect in Threads is the interruption of the human storylines with dark-screens upon which teletype rattles out bullet-form factual reports and information about the effects of the nuclear attack. Indeed, the chronological markers of the story itself are pounded out with these typed datelines, which blocks our sense that the human characters can help determine their own fates, and which sets those characters rigidly in a context of calendrical time indifferent to individual pursuits. When the air-raid signals sound off on the morning of May 26<sup>th</sup>, for example, crowds out shopping panic in the streets of Sheffield, and we read in this teletyped screen: “08:35: Single warhead explodes high above North Sea: Energy pulse burns out many electrical systems. Massive damage to communications across Britain and Northwest Europe.” Ten days after the attack, the teletype now spells out silently, without the rattling noise: “Sunday June 5<sup>th</sup>. Attack plus ten days. 3000 megaton exchange. Smoke produced: 10 million tons. Dust lifted into atmosphere: 500 million tons.” The voice of the reserved narrator, a voice which has now become familiar in its patient understated tutoring, then explains the basic facts about nuclear winter.

This voice of the narrator is a third “documentary” feature of the film.

If it cannot be said that Threads shows us the effects of nuclear war on the plane as a whole, it does show us, eventually, a devastated natural landscape. Once the Beckett and Kemp families, children and parents alike, die in the blasts or die of radiation sickness, coughing and shaking in their makeshift mattress shelters in their blown-out homes, and once poor Sutton and his Wartime Emergency Committee colleagues die in their basement shelter, we are left to follow the fate of Ruth Beckett, the mother-to-be. Things are bad in the city: food riots, summary executions, forced labour camps; people are shot on sight for looting tinned food from abandoned houses; the British state turns into a monstrous agent of totalitarian repression. With other maimed and shocked survivors, Ruth wanders to the countryside five weeks after the attack. Four months after the attack, she gives birth alone in a barn to a baby girl; ten months after the attack, with the baby six months old, we see her stealing grain and pounding it herself; one year after the attack, she buys dead rats from a pedlar for food. Three to eight years after the attack, she is working as an agricultural labourer, her daughter standing beside her, hoeing rows of struggling crops in the barren ground, a forlorn figure on an impoverished landscape. The image is simple, but powerful: the land has been devastated. The typescript screen

announces that the population of the United Kingdom has returned to medieval levels, between 4 and 11 million. Ruth dies unceremoniously on a straw bed in a barn, her eyes damaged by ultraviolet light; her daughter, clearly one born brain damaged by radiation, unmoved by her death. Ruth's nameless daughter is in turn raped and impregnated, and she gives birth to a stillborn "babby"... with which image the film ends.

There is no question that Threads comes closest to showing what a nuclear war might do to "the environment," even within its framework of a drama figuring human characters and even given that we sense this devastation of the landscape mostly because of the last ten minutes' scenes which show the utterly unheroic ending of Ruth and her daughter's carrying on. We are made to care for Ruth: she is one whose death is shown with a delicate compromise between the careworthy and the ugly. There are different kinds of caring, however, and we are not "involved" in the sense that we do not "identify" with Ruth as a tragic victim. Ruth herself does not have the stuff of struggle; she is inarticulate, silent, shocked; the actress herself has very few lines to speak after the bomb blast. The real human "figure" central to Threads is not Ruth herself, who ultimately counts only as synecdochic focus for her families and her city; the figure is the social fabric of

the city as such, as the opening epigraph implies.<sup>10</sup> It is the instantaneousness of the death of civilization, and particularly urban civilization, that horrifies us in this movie. In this best of movies about nuclear bombs dropping, a movie accurate and sensitive to what we could call the “environmental” effects of nuclear war, it is not primarily the destruction of “nature” that gets represented. What does get represented is the obliteration of social institutions. We are brought back to the sense that Nature can not itself occupy the center of the scene of representation because “Nature” is itself the scene, the only scene we the human species have. In Threads, we mourn the harm done nature by the nuclear attacks primarily because our own human lives do not feel worth living any longer on such a devastated scene. Nature has become alien to the human precisely because human culture has become unable to make a home in nature, to get a living from nature, to do anything other than die into it.

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<sup>10</sup> “In an urban society, everything connects. Each person’s needs are fed by the skills of many others. Our lives are woven together in a fabric. But the connections that make society strong also make it vulnerable....”



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### ***Filmography***

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