

Mimetic Theory and the Representation of Nuclear Apocalypse

This paper aims to open up discussion around a certain question of representation: what is possible and valuable, what impossible and deceptive, in cultural (literary, filmic, environmentalist-discursive) representations of nuclear Armageddon, apocalypse, or world-ending nuclear disaster? More specifically, I will try to approach one of the Conference Program's leading questions in revised form: what do cultural representations of the total destruction of the natural world under the sign "nuclear apocalypse" actually do when they attempt to represent that (imagined) global destruction? I will refer to the work of Jonathan Schell and Helen Caldecott in my analysis, offer analyses of tropes in certain feature films (the Terminator movies, *The Sum of All Fears*), and consider literary representations of the August 1945 Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings. I will necessarily, too, attempt an honest survey of the most directly relevant remarks of Rene Girard and Eric Gans. This topic is a good one, I think, because it opens onto two bigger questions. If the minimal difference of the human and human culture (that which separates "us" from "the natural world" as such) is, following Gans, "the deferral of violence through representation," then surely certain intractable obstacles will follow when we attempt representing the absolute violence by which humans could destroy their natural world. What are those obstacles? This leads to a second question: following Girard, the unrepresentable of the sacrificial crisis is by definition a crisis of absolute indifferenciation, which thus far has been theorized only as intraspecific human-versus-human indifferenciation. Is it not possible then that the special horrors of nuclear apocalypse derive from its threat to render extinct the minimal difference of the human –

Gans' notion above -- and to leave the earth as space uninhabited by human? I will (probably) argue that our species-egocentricity, as it were, must compel us to be honest about the fact that in representations of nuclear-wastelands we are compelled primarily to see the human species as a victim of itself, and only by anthropomorphic projection to see the earth as a victim of the species. In short, the "natural world" can not – except figuratively -- be a scapegoat because the scapegoat must take (literally) the form of the human. We would mourn the empty planet not because the planet is beautiful in itself, but because it is the home to which the self-destroyed species could never return after nuclear apocalypse.