Doctoral Thesis Summary

Nuclear Shakespeare: Apocalypse and Annihilation in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

In this thesis, I explore Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and their modern-day variants in the context of early modern apocalypticism and late modern discourses of annihilation. I focus on the theoretical issue of truth and meaning in artistic representation, problematised by the paradoxical place of representation in various conceptual oppositions such as absence and presence, idea and matter, and fiction and reality – concerns shared by both apocalyptic ideology and discourses of annihilation. To ask these questions, I use an updated form of Derridean "nuclear criticism" combined with a materialist feminist critique.

In **Chapter 1**, I explore realist and anti-realist responses to the difficulty of representing events of annihilation. First, I closely read Jonathan Schell's "The Fate of the Earth" and Jacques Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now," which both stress the importance of art and literature to understanding the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Jonathan Schell posits a continuum of annihilation from personal death to genocide to human extinction: extinction, unlike death, but like genocide, puts at risk the "common world" which gives meaning to human life. For Derrida, nuclear annihilation is a fiction or fable which illuminates the essence of literature.

Second, I examine the *ethical* problem of representing annihilation. I look at arguments that events of annihilation problematise language itself, unsettling the distinction between art and destruction, as well as the argument that post-apocalyptic fiction is pornographic. For Theodor Adorno and George Steiner, cultural criticism and literary studies problematise the distinction between culture and barbarism through their complicity with the Nazi genocide and capitalist annihilation, showing that literature is, at best, amoral or ambivalent. For Derrida, however, the irresponsibility of literature (to power) is also its great hope.

Third, I look at how victims of genocide and subaltern groups are silenced, such as through the destruction of historical documents. Jean-François Lyotard and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak both stress the importance of measuring silences and reading absences in historical texts. I then identify certain literary works which have been cited for its ability to represent annihilation, such as the works of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and Peter Weiss. Derrida cites the work of several modernist writers as exemplary texts of the nuclear age, since they show an awareness of their own

mortality.

In **Chapter 2**, I examine the hypothesis that a shift in temporal consciousness occurred in early modernity, a shift connected to apocalyptic debates about representation. Benedict Anderson identifies a shift from an *apocalyptic* consciousness of time to a modern one, the former based on a providential link between historical events. Erich Auerbach argues that the apocalyptic consciousness of time is underpinned by a "figural" view of history, linked to typological interpretation of the Bible. Divine Providence also problematises free will: while early modern humanists asserted the priority of free will, Reformation leaders generally emphasised predestination of all events by God.

Second, I look at the medieval and early modern debate between literal and spiritual readings of Revelation, centring around the debate about millenarianism. Auerbach argues that figural interpretation could only be sustained until the Middle Ages because of the Bible's "tyrannical" claim on absolute truth and strategies of concealment of meaning. Erasmus and Luther doubted the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, and Luther railed against its use of obscure symbols and figures, betraying a deep anxiety about authority and rhetoric in sacred representation.

Third, I argue that the apocalypse ultimately reveals no truth, only the annihilation of God's enemies as a demonstration of His sovereignty. Martin Procházka shows the apocalyptic roots of American millennialism, and Frank Kermode makes a connection between the apocalypse in *King Lear* and the apocalyptic fictions of the Nazis. Walter Benjamin stresses the importance of "Messianic time" to the Marxist view of history, and Guy Debord traces the millenarian roots of Marxist revolutionary movements. Ursula Le Guin identifies the masculinist faith in Human Reason of utopianism as leading to the danger of totalitarian terror and annihilation, a characteristic of utopia also criticised by Toni Morrison. Modern apocalyptic movements have a dual potential to lead to annihilation as well as provide hope for justice.

In **Chapter 3**, I trace a history of debates about representation from antiquity to the modern day. First, I look at Plato's condemnation, Aristotle's moderate defence, and the ancient Romans' passionate defence of rhetoric. The attitude of the Romans deeply influenced early modern writers, who saw rhetoric as a sword to be used for political action (action being preferred to contemplation). This also entailed a shift away from mimesis to didacticism, the purpose of art being the promotion of moral virtue rather than imitation of reality.

Second, I examine Derrida's critique of Platonic logocentrism and defence of rhetoric and writing against Plato's condemnation. Through an analysis of Plato's metaphors, Derrida shows that Plato's idea of truth depends upon patriarchal power and authority, which he invokes to violently suppress the "Other" of his system: rhetoric. Derrida argues that rhetoric constitutes a reserve of non-meaning upon which Platonic dialectic depends and that writing has a unique ability to generate meaning precisely because of its separation from its author. Third, I look at the validity of a realist critique of Derrida's theory of representation and articulate my own materialist, critical anti-realist viewpoint.

Fourth, I explore Reformation iconomachs' distrust for visual representation and logocentric faith in written representation, showing that their arguments against "idolatry" could be applied to all forms of representation. Shakespeare responded to the anti-theatrical context by drawing the audience's attention to the paradoxes of both visual and verbal representation. I argue that these concerns continue in late modern critiques of spectacle and simulation, and that the history of these debates show the distinction between representation and reality is complex and paradoxical rather than straightforward.

In **Chapter 4**, I examine four "nuclear" film adaptations of *King Lear*, as well as connections made by critics between *King Lear* and nuclear annihilation. Jan Kott's influential reading of *King Lear* emphasises its presentation of the "paradox of theatre" and mockery of all eschatological "absolutes." I look at the confluence of Kott's Beckettian and Brechtian inspirations, then consider Edward Bond's Marxist apocalypse in his rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I argue that the bleak ending of Bond's *Lear* works against its author's intentions, illustrating the danger of rationalist apocalyptic thought rather than promoting action.

Second, I compare the attitudes towards eschatology in three different film adaptations of *King Lear* which all deal with the implied theme of nuclear annihilation but present very different visions of the nuclear crisis. Peter Brook's film uses metacinematic techniques to present a brutal Beckettian wasteland with no moral commentary. Although Grigori Kozintsev uses fire as a synecdoche for nuclear annihilation and ponders on the place of art in a world marked by the brutality of fascism, his film ultimately presents a tragic humanist eschatology with Christian references. Akira Kurosawa uses stylised Noh-inspired techniques to present an ambiguous eschatology which questions Buddhist doctrine and locates the responsibility for annihilation in

humanity.

Third, I argue that Jean-Luc Godard's appropriation of *King Lear* is a form of Derridean nuclear criticism: using Chernobyl as a metonymy for nuclear annihilation, the film contemplates the relationship between "words and reality" and "art and fire," ultimately rejecting the value of mimetic representation in the nuclear age. Instead of an apocalyptic view of ultimate meaning given to art by a transcendental authority, Godard's theory of representation (particularly of cinema) resembles Derrida's: meaning is generated by difference, or the connections between images; its truth rests in the soul of the viewer. Godard's film demonstrates the ambivalence of appropriation: though his film opens up new perspectives on Shakespeare's play, its appropriation of feminist literature is less positive. Ultimately, it is the ambiguity of *King Lear*'s eschatological message that allows it to be used for such wildly differing presentations of the nuclear theme.

In **Chapter 5**, I read the two versions of *King Lear* alongside the Book of Revelation from the Geneva Bible in order to identify the characteristics of its "broken apocalypse." First, I consider the idea that *King Lear* may be the apocalyptic culmination of Shakespeare's histories, and then look at the textuality of the Book of Revelation: its images of writing, the importance of cosmic events as signs of God, and the fact that Revelation itself is a series of messages. Derrida emphasises this quality of *destinerrance* as the essence of the apocalypse and the condition of all writing. I examine references to astrology made by characters with an apocalyptic and a modern mentality in *King Lear*, then show how wayward messages lead to Gloucester's blinding and the ultimate catastrophe in the play.

Second, I look at the silences, absences, and strategies of concealment in the Book of Revelation: the meanings of some of its cryptic mysteries are explained, while John is command to "seal up" others. Revelation makes a connection between food and representation: while it is forbidden to eat meats sacrificed to idols, the secret text of God must be ingested and incorporated. *King Lear* parodies the apocalyptic attitude to revelation, mystery and cryptic prophecy with the fool's riddling meta-prophecy. With reference to Derrida, I argue that *King Lear*, being aware of its own status as an "idol," overturns the apocalyptic notion of the sacred book as the model of the world.

Third, I explore *King Lear*'s presentation of the paradoxes of "nothing" and sovereignty with reference to George Bataille's concepts of the restricted and general economy. The bawdy meaning of "nothing" as the female genitalia reflects not female reality, but male fear of the generative

capacity of the female body. The absence and silence of women also speak, Cordelia's "nothing" being particularly loud. Her speech of silence, Lear's speech of madness, and the fool's paradoxes exist within the logic of the general economy. Poor Tom reveals true independence to Lear, and Lear experiences a paradoxical gain rather than loss of sovereignty in his fall from power, becoming "every inch a king." *King Lear* ultimately presents the contradictions of the Apocalypse itself, which reveals nothing but annihilation.

In **Chapter 6,** I argue that *Hamlet* is a "nuclear text" due to the connections it makes between rhetoric and violence. First, Hamlet evinces an ambivalent attitude to visual and verbal representation both, questioning their ability to portray inner truth in a political context ruled by deception and hypocrisy. In his soliloquies, he identifies two paradoxes of representation: first, rhetoric is both a "nothing," an empty form which can contain any matter, as well as something immensely powerful; second, rhetoric exists in a liminal space between action and contemplation. Although Hamlet shows some awareness of the murderous power of rhetoric, he also underestimates its destructive potential.

Second, I look at the ninth chapter of *Ulysses*, where Stephen Dedalus interprets the last act of *Hamlet* as a "forecast of the concentration camp" used by the British in the Boer War and defended in imperialist propaganda poems. Joyce cites Mallarmé's prose-poem where he compares Hamlet and Fortinbras: although Fortinbras is a man of action, and Hamlet a man of thought, Mallarmé argues that it is precisely Hamlet's image of himself as a Thinker that leads to the violence he commits. Unlike Hamlet, who hates and fears passivity, Stephen is a man of words, seeing rhetoric as action, thought, and passivity all at once; he advocates the use of the weapon of rhetoric against war. Stephen imagines a reciprocal relationship between the weapon of speech and its wielder; art is ultimately a reflection of the artist and the creation of a new world rather than an imitation of the existing world.

Third, I look at Hamlet's fear of his mother's sexuality, which he sees as undermining sacred representation, along with his rhetorical attempts to reduce women to idols while investing men with spirit. Fourth, I consider the responses to Ophelia's speech of madness, arguing that the male characters make a connection between the reproductive capacity of the female body and female speech, both imagined as uncontrollably generative "nothings." Finally, I argue that Hamlet's transformation into a man of violence is driven by his hatred for the restricted economy of thrift and longing for the general economy of sacrifice.

In **Chapter 7**, I examine the attitude to apocalyptic justice in *Hamlet*. First, I look at the importance that Stephen Dedalus places on the ghost in *Hamlet*. Stephen reflects on the Aristotelian notion of the soul as the "form of forms" and makes a connection between the mystery of the ghost and the apocalypse, when (it is promised) all the dead shall be raised bodily from the grave to be judged for the last time by God. The paradox of the ghost is also the paradox of representation: both have a literal and a spiritual dimension that cannot be reconciled through reason.

Second, I explore the connection between the ghost, justice, and representation in Derrida's S*pecters of Marx.* Derrida shows that the figure of the spectre reappears frequently in Marx's works, coming from outside Marx's system, from theology and mysticism, but also enabling Marx's historical materialism despite his attempts to exorcise it. Derrida relates the question of the ghost to the question of representation, or the idol, and distinguishes between the violence of earthly law and the messianic promise of justice, a violence which overturns and founds the law. He proposes a "hauntology" to study spectral phenomena and uses the disjointed time of *Hamlet* to contemplate a "messianism without messianism" which may enable justice-to-come.

Third, I examine the references to doomsday in *Hamlet*, which are also concerns about the uncertain truth of representation. Despite several characters' longing for true justice, heavenly law can only be described in the language of earthly law. The priest who conducts Ophelia's funeral interprets heavenly law literally, while the gravedigger Clowns make a mockery of earthly law, heavenly justice, and Scriptural interpretation alike. Hamlet's attitude to death changes from a spiritual belief in the afterlife to a recognition of the material reality of death, which he sees as problematising language, especially legal fictions. However, there are some fictions which do not lose their value, such as mourning and justice. Towards the end, Hamlet accepts a Protestant notion of providence, which allows him to disclaim responsibility for his actions. Ultimately, *Hamlet* shows the impossibility of true justice, presenting only annihilation, the consequence of law based on revenge and retribution. Hamlet's last words, however, are an injunction to Horatio to keep his memory alive, confirming the worth of mourning and the reality of the link between generations.

Both *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are apocalyptic in so far as they present the contradictions of the Apocalypse itself – the impossibility of revelation and justice as well as the dangers of annihilation within apocalyptic ideology. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are also "nuclear" texts, which demonstrate the connection between violence and rhetoric, or representation and annihilation, rendering them highly

appropriable to speak about our predicament in an age of annihilation.