

Representing Catastrophe in the Museum

Although not an expert in 'Disaster Studies', the ideas of disaster and catastrophe are central to my research agenda. My doctoral research looked at the representation of the Holocaust in museums in Israel, the UK and Poland and argued that they suggest the Holocaust is more and more a prism through which other issues and histories are explored. The key concept in my work is that of mythology as conceived by Roland Barthes: a language *in which* something else is spoken. Central to this is the view of the Holocaust as a catastrophe: an event which, in the words of Alan Mintz, 'convulses or vitiates shared assumptions'¹: about the world and the place of people in it. Although Mintz's focus is (almost inevitably, post-1945) on the representation of *atrocities* (that is, catastrophe resulting from human action), he is careful to note that a catastrophe is, more generally, 'a destructive event whose horror derives from its bursting of the available paradigms of explanation.'² One aspect of this is the use of terms taken from environmental (or 'natural') disaster: an early anthology of Holocaust literature was called *Out of the Whirlwind* and proclaimed that 'A whirlwind cannot be taught; it must be experienced.'³

In the case of environmental or natural disasters, questions of causality have been more complex as those caught up in them have dealt with what Elmer Luke and David Karashima have termed 'this uncharted moment' when victims attempt to make sense of 'the double blow [...] sustained from both nature and man'.⁴ From a more traditional perspective, David Alexander has reframed what he terms 'the most widely accepted view of cause and effect in disaster' (that 'extreme geophysical events *act upon* human vulnerability and risk taking *to produce* casualties and damage')⁵ to take more account of the ways in which they are understood (so that, instead 'human culture and society *respond to the impact of* extreme geophysical events *and* the forces of socio-economic change *and together these three factors determine the toll of* casualties and damage').⁶

More radically, Henrik Svensen has pointed out that there is a difference between phenomena, their consequences and their narration. Svensen has explored responses to events from pre-Christian Europe up until the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Despite documenting the variety of responses, Svensen's agenda is implicitly to assert the irrationality of non-scientific responses. He refers to the enlistment of political and religious argument in 'the

¹ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY 1996 [1984], p. 2.

² *Ibid.* p. 21.

³ Albert H. Friedlander (ed.), *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York 1968, p. 11.

⁴ Elmer Luke and David Karashima (eds.), *March was made of Yarn: Writers respond to Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Meltdown*, Harvill Secker, London 2012, p. xvi.

⁵ David Alexander, *Confronting Catastrophe: New perspectives on natural disasters*, Terra Publishing, Harpenden 2000, p. 227.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 250.

fight to influence the understanding of reality⁷ as though reality were not itself something which shifts according to time and place: both Svensen and David Alexander narrate previous 'scientific' explanations with insufficient acknowledgement that, for those propounding them, they were 'reality', however absurd they may seem now.⁸ As a researcher into human responses to catastrophe, I believe that the mindset or set of beliefs with which a society engages with an event are of central importance and have to be respected as constituting reality for those expounding them. The Thomas theorem – that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences – cannot be underestimated in its importance for understanding social relations and reactions.⁹ In seeking to understand – as the holder of this post is intended to – 'the way in which cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, behaviours and practices of people cause them to respond differently [to natural disasters]' it is indispensable.

In terms of research I would like to pursue in this field, I would like to explore the representation of natural disaster in museums, in particular looking at how far they subscribe to the different models of disaster management and prevention outlined by David Alexander under the heading 'The DNA of disaster'.¹⁰ In this, I would bring my expertise in engaging with and interpreting museums in their broader cultural settings to a new and vitally important field.

Underlying this (and of particular relevance to the Faraday Institute) are questions of eschatology and theodicy. Whether he agrees with them or not, Svensen notes that 'perhaps as many as two billion people today include God in trying to explain natural disasters'¹¹ The fear the world was ending and/or that God was either absent or evil are key theological questions about the Holocaust¹² and have obvious bearing on the understanding of environmental or natural disasters. The extension of these questions to our relationship with the natural world is a field I would be excited (though cautious or even fearful) to explore as what David Alexander terms 'holistic phenomena' in which disciplinary boundaries are porous and mutually-enriching rather than exclusionary and limiting.

⁷ Henrik Svensen (trans. John Irons), *The End is Nigh: A History of Natural Disasters*, Reaktion Books, London 2012 [2009: Norwegian 2006], p. 190.

⁸ Nor, it seems to me, is the non-scientific entirely absent from (at least popular) science: the title of Bill McGuire, *Raging Planet: Earthquakes, volcanoes and the tectonic threat to life on earth*, Apple Press, Hove 2002 anthropomorphises the behaviour of the planet in a way that is as 'un-scientific' as anything described by Svensen or Alexander.

⁹ See, for example, Robert K. Merton, 'The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect', *Social Forces*, Vol. 74, No. 2, 1995, pp. 379-424.

¹⁰ David Alexander, *Confronting Catastrophe*, pp. 227-238. the two propositions cited above (Notes 5 and 6) are the beginning and end propositions, though he notes the existence of (at least) two other combinations of the same factors.

¹¹ Henrik Svensen, *The End is Nigh*, p. 195.

¹² See, for example, Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007 for an anthology of responses.