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William Hughes

Q1

Pandemics, Social Disruption, and Dark Skies: Apocalyptic Fictions and the end of Human Culture

Though comets have historically been regarded as portents of coming disaster in the sublunary world, darkened skies carry with them an arguably more pervasive and immanent apocalyptic mythology. Less singularly spectacular, but perhaps more ominous in its brooding, overwhelming immensity, the darkened sky embodies immediately a Christian vision of the end of the world and an impending – and, most likely, stern – judgement of wayward humanity. This is the darkness of the opening of the Sixth Seal of the Revelation of St John the Divine – appropriately, itself the final book in the New Testament – and its association with a darkened sun and terrestrial earthquakes.[1] It is the darkness, also, that is heralded by the seven trumpets successively sounded after the opening of the Seventh Seal, where fire is cast upon the earth, where trees and grass are consumed by conflagration and the waters become bitter and poisonous, where the stars and planets are obscured or dimmed, and smoke arises from a bottomless pit out of which come, also, the locusts not of famine but of woeful and ongoing torture – the 'plagues', as translator of the Authorised Version tellingly phrases it, that will beset and decimate unrepentant humanity in the End Times.[2] Darkened skies bring with them dark times – although for those with a vested interest in the Christian message, they carry a more specific vision of hope, a promise of death accompanied by a subsequent judgement in which the believer will be found worthy and taken to a place of perpetual light.

If hope is a reassuring accompaniment to those who, as believers, confidently anticipate the End Times as depicted in the New Testament, darkened skies bring significantly less comfort to secular modernity. Culturally, the secular world is as permeated with judgemental sternness as its theocratic forbear. Perpetual condemnation seemingly accompanies mere existence, let alone the consuming imperatives of

luxury or excess. The rhetoric of Green-inflected western liberalism characteristically chides those who depart from restrictive ecological orthodoxy in a seeming War on Pleasure: do not eat meat, for the sake of the rain forests in Latin America; do not fly, because it is detrimental to the upper atmosphere; do not drive, to preserve air quality at lower levels; do not buy fashionable clothing, as the associated carbon emissions are unsustainable. The Biblical Decalogue has become an incessant Catalogue that monotonously insists 'do not … do not … do not'. Ecology is the new global religion, and the prophets of climatic doom, with their infinitely extendable catalogue of prohibitions, walk the media streets preaching guilt and self-denial, condemning sinful humanity to biodegradable sackcloth and potassium-rich ashes. The secular Apocalypse is imminent, and with it – even before it, and during it also – comes the Judgement.

If the contemporary globe is perceptibly and ominously warming, though, its skies do not appear to be darkening. Indeed, the opposite is true, and for many observers the environment is comprehended as being slowly but surely changed, if not consumed, by a heated atmosphere in which increasingly ephemeral clouds fail to screen the earth from a merciless sun. If the relentlessly burning sun, the warming seas and the melting ice-caps appear to have attained priority in the public rhetoric of Green activism, the darkened sky and its apocalyptic associations still maintain a telling presence in the world of fiction. The heat-trapping polymer skies of J. G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964) are the exception, perhaps, which prove a rule that has entertained a specifically literary currency for almost 150 years. Notably, the disruption to the earthly cycles of evaporation and precipitation in Ballard's near-contemporary environment is caused by industrial pollution and effluvia, projected in the novel as a perversely transparent, rather than conventionally opaque, imposition upon the ostensible clarity of air and water alike.

The darkened sky, *pace* Ballard, has enjoyed an apocalyptic function in letters from at least the time of Lord Byron's 'Darkness' (1816), a work inspired by a natural disaster – the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 – which projects in turn a vision of culture, community and indeed conceptual humanity destroyed by famine, shortage and internecine strife under a perpetual twilight. Byron's nineteenth-century vision, though, is ecologically prescient. On the one hand, it contemplates the disruption of harvests and husbandry contingent upon an 'extinguish'd sun', as well as the consequent degeneration of the human diet into the desperate consumption of vermin and, ultimately, the flesh of its own species. On the other, it parallels the depletion of food stores

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with the progressive despoliation of those irreplaceable natural resources which can be burned to provide both heat to 'the icy earth' and illumination for 'the moonless air', noting that the combustion of these latter both adds to the darkness and prolongs the environmental crisis to the extent at which the earth becomes 'void', 'Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless – /A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay'.[3] Byron's poem is less Romantic than it is Gothic in tenor, and its association of darkening skies with human crisis is significant. The poet depicts no medical pandemic, but envisages a cultural one instead. The malaise, caused by the oppressive – if not depressive – antiluminescence of the atmosphere disrupts society, and indeed inhibits any possibility of a return to the world before disaster. Under darkened skies humanity turns in upon itself in mutually destructive competitiveness, the individualism of the survivor who, none the less, must ultimately realise that there is no possibility of change, no impending restoration of order, no return to the past.

Byron, unlike Mary Shelley in her equally prescient Romantic novel *The Last Man* (1826), eschewed any direct allusion to the theme of medical pandemic in his vision of social collapse under darkened skies. Twentieth- and twenty-first century novelists, however, have notably embraced the power of retreating light in both its symbolic and ecological implications, configuring the changing sky as a symptom of sickness in the human mind and body and, indeed, in the expression of these in global (rather than local) culture. An early example of this is *Quatermass* (1979), a novelisation by Nigel Kneale of a Thames Television series released in the same year which chartered the final adventure of a fictional British rocket scientist more usually associated with the 1950s than the 1970s. In the novelisation, Professor Bernard Quatermass has retired to an isolated manse in rural Scotland. The sudden and unexplained departure of his granddaughter to London prompts his return to the capital, where he perceives a dystopian society run by rival street gangs, a failing government and a peripatetic youth cult, the Planet People, who blindly wander the countryside in search of an unknown something. The vibrant energy associated with mortal youth, it transpires, has been progressively tapped or possessed by an alien intelligence – a convention very much derived from the Professor's earlier science-fiction outings, most notably the live BBC TV serial *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958–9) and the later Hammer film of the same title (1967) – this causing behavioural anomalies ranging from anarchic violence to passive rootlessness. When the alien force attempts finally to 'harvest' the collective power of youth, which it causes to 'swarm' in spontaneous gatherings in megalithic locations – 'Anything from the

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huge Breton sites with thousands of the stones in rows … down to threes and fours in some remote place' – the skies above become yellow and opaque with the residue of the 'sick' humanity left behind once the 'pure' energy has been extracted. What is described as 'a sky like bile' thus reflects the condition of the population circulating below: a physical debilitation caused by a poor and erratic diet; a moral deterioration caused by an eclipse of self-control and empathy with other members of the species (most notably, the elderly, who are living separately under near subsistence conditions); and a collapse of any sense of leadership or centralised governance, exemplified by the imperfect imposition of quasi-colonial District Commissioners, equipped with official Land Rovers, upon the British regions, and backed by Apartheid-era police from white South Africa. In *Quatermass* the 'cure' is drastic. The elderly – who are immune to the alien influence which fosters anarchy and selfishness in the young – create a false trail for the apparent channel of energy through which the aliens extract the vitality of the young. Quatermass, reunited with his daughter, who has joined the Planet People, detonates a nuclear warhead which cauterises and permanently closes the vampiric alien conduit. With the crisis implicitly over, the process of healing may once again begin as the skies slowly lose their sickly opacity. The novel and the television series both conclude with a significant scene of children innocently playing, the sky above them endearingly blue and clear. The rhetoric of Kneale's short Epilogue clearly imbricates the recovery of culture with an improving ecology, for 'Gradually the sky and the land became clean', and England became 'a recovering land with its soft green fields and quiet towns'.[4]

Quatermass is, without doubt, an under-read fiction in ecocritical circles, even though it anticipates much of the contemporary counterculture often associated with secessionist New Age travellers as well as the putative conflict between science and idealism in understanding cultural and environmental change. If the pandemic situation in *Quatermass* takes the form of a collective delusion fostered virally from some intelligent external source, other pandemic narratives might be considered to embody a more conventional biomedical source for the pervasive disorder which, having infected humanity, causes humanity to infect the biosphere with its own organic emanations. The zombie apocalypse, a scenario which has become something of a preoccupation within Gothic fiction and cinema in recent years, again provides a corpus of texts which, while ostensibly speaking to ecocriticism, have seemingly never been embraced by its *savants*. This is somewhat strange, as academic ecocriticism appears often to have embraced science fiction where it has eschewed Gothic. It is, perhaps, as Greg Garrard notes,

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the opposition between the 'healthy' prefix, 'eco' and the 'queer and diseased' Gothic that compromises Gothic-inflected science fiction under the avowedly 'progressive' of ecocriticism.[5]

Be that as it may, Max Brooks's original *World War Z* (2006), in particular, provides in novelistic form a significant ecocritical script that is for the most part strikingly absent from the somewhat clichéd cinema adaptation of 2013. In Brooks's novel, the precise source of the zombie epidemic is unknown, though it is ostensibly traced back to the profitable but shady Asian spare-part surgery industry that links the liberal West with its demonised political Other, the Communist East. Zombies, of course, multiply virally and exponentially, and their rise is accompanied by misinformation, fake news, branded commercial cures more powerful in reputation than actual pharmaceutical application and the competing imperatives of isolation and herd resistance. The global spread of Brooks's significantly denominated 'Dark Years' of zombie ascendancy is facilitated by transport networks, the unwise association of the infected and uninfected, and frequent individual refusals to confess to harbouring fatal pathology.

As humanity is more than decimated, though, so too does the planet begin to suffer, and the rhetoric associated with what is as much an ecological as a cultural decline is striking in its difference to the optimism which on occasions permeates apocalyptic fiction. Any hopes that a reduced population, forced into semidependence against a common enemy, might somehow facilitate a new and better world – agrarian rather than industrial, co-operative rather than competitive – out of the residue of the old one are dashed in *World War Z*. Unregulated hunting, for example, rapidly depopulates the globe of both animals and fish; and farming at anything other than a subsistence level becomes little more than a memory for the ten years of active conflict against the zombie hordes. More significant though – and indeed, remarkably reminiscent of Byron's 1816 intervention in 'Darkness' – is the uncontrolled and extensive logging reported across the United States and Canada. This results not merely in a northern-hemisphere deforestation akin to the desolation hitherto associated with southern, Amazonian nations – a deforestation associated, after all, with the demands of the economically advanced world – but also fuels a billion campfires, 'tiny orange specks covering the Earth where electric lights had once been'. These fires, supplemented by a low-level nuclear exchange on the Indian subcontinent, the burning of middle-eastern oilfields, and the systematic cremation of the bodies of both the conventionally dead and dispatched zombies leads to a succession of what are termed 'gray' winters. In this discrete and (in the novel) ongoing ecological epoch, the global climate begins to alter as

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a direct and unequivocal consequence of human intervention, the darkening skies cooling summers and lengthening bitter winters, and further exacerbating human viability through declining crop yields and a consequently enhanced rate of mortality.

The all-encompassing nature of this crisis is perceived quite literally on a global scale by the inhabitants of the fragile and uninfected co-operative biosphere that is the International Space Station, the occupants of which knowingly face death through starvation with no hope of rescue. They are the passive and distant observers of the twinkling lights of campfires, the black smoke of burning oilfields, and the encroaching opacity, that ‘gray-brown shroud’, which covers the earth by day as well as night. The emblematic Last Man, as it were, stands viewing the extinction of his own kind from a place of safety and apparent immunity – and in the knowledge of his own awful uniqueness, his peculiar location out of earthly time as much as out of human culture or even conceptual nature. Under this darkening sky, as various commentators with the novel affirm, the winters characteristically begin later in the year but are ‘longer and colder’: in postapocalypse Colorado, indeed, ‘spring’s like winter used to be, nature letting us know the good life’s over for now’. Certainly, those nascent communities established upon the ruins, residues and cultural memories of departed civil society in all its global guises appear not to comprehend the mistakes made in a corporate, neoliberal past which is still a living memory – nor indeed do they envisage a future that wholly reassures the triumph of the collective and the sustaining over the individualistic and destructive.[6] As one post-zombie-war politician states, addressing those generations destined to succeed and those who are likewise freighted with the living memory of the recent past: ‘What kind of world would they rebuild? Would they rebuild at all?’ (267). Darkness of this magnitude, be it real or metaphorical, seemingly dispels but slowly.

Narratives of contagion and infection, be they mental or physical, are thus very often narratives of ecological disruption also. If culture may be glibly assumed to be the antithesis of nature, and its destructive counterpart, fictions such as these tend to advance the bleak possibility that the absence of culture and the atomisation of society will most likely lead to a further deterioration in both the social and natural environments. The Anthropocene is an enduring conceptuality. Even in residual or fractured form, it continues to wield a determining energy over the natural world, an influence extending far beyond the point at which civil culture is presumed to have entered into terminal decline. Popular fictions such as *Quatermass* and *World War Z* – and, indeed, others including Terry Nation’s *Survivors* (1976), a neglected novel of a plague spread

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globally by airline routes that was adapted for three successive television series by the BBC between 1975 and 1977, and the posttechnological BBC children's television series *The Changes* (1975), based on a trilogy of novels by Peter Dickinson published respectively in 1968, 1969, and 1970, demand further consideration from an ecocritical perspective. These narratives all feature a persistent motif associated with darkness, whether in the form of skies obscured by smoke or climatic change, or else the consequences of the sudden shutting-off of the technologies that provide illumination. The characteristic freighting of such works, further punctuated as they are by persistent motifs of ruined cultures, feral morality, an impending descent into cannibalism and the impact of hostile, uncanny environments locates them very much within the growing canon of what is rightly termed 'ecoGothic', and claims the attention, moreover, of the more mainstream approach that is ecocriticism.

Notes

1 Revelation 6:12–14 (Authorised Version).
2 Revelation 8:1–13; 9: 1–6; 9: 20 (Authorised Version).
3 George Gordon, Lord Byron, 'Darkness' in *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alice Levine (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 245–7: lines 2, 37, 46, 49, 4, 5, 69–72.
4 Nigel Kneale, *Quatermass* (London: Arrow, 1979), 164, 106, 107 (original ellipsis), 206, 271.
5 Greg Garrard, "Environment', in William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, eds, *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, 2 vols (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), vol. 1, 217–19 at 217.
6 Max Brooks, *World War Z* (London: Duckworth, 2010), 1, 125–6, 260, 129, 146, 141, 320.

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