

‘A Very Primitive Matter’: John Wyndham on Catastrophe and Survival

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Contemporary environmental anxieties present the perfect chance to revisit British science-fiction writer John Wyndham’s Cold War-era stories of mutations, climate change, and nature revenging itself on humans via carnivorous plants. Wyndham himself would hardly have been surprised at his continued relevance. Indeed, his body of imaginative fiction — from his most famous work *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) to, as discussed below, 1953’s *The Kraken Wakes*, 1955’s *The Chrysalids*, and 1957’s *The Midwich Cuckoos* — argues that our reactions to disaster should be guided by the evolutionary truths imposed by nature itself, however obscured those truths have become by everyday life. At the height of his popularity in the 1950s, Wyndham’s speculations drew deeply from a tradition of British adventure literature and its accompanying preoccupation with the character traits of survival and dominance. At the same time, Wyndham wrote in the aftermath of a cataclysmic world war and in the context of a worsening threat of nuclear death and social collapse. He consciously placed this state of affairs in tension with the tranquil life of affluence that the post-war West had supposedly achieved. Thus, as an author concerned both with his own historical moment and with the ultimate survival of the human species, Wyndham offers works rich in symbolic potential.

In this article, I examine the fantastical creatures in Wyndham’s novels as beings that do more than present the negative of post-war life. Instead, through their symbolic multiplicity — their *lack* of a stable meaning — Wyndham’s creations fracture the certainty of that life. By arranging these encounters with beings that puncture the coherence of the social totality, Wyndham urges readers to see themselves not as members of a vast complex of institutions and organisations, but as lone individuals, rising and falling by their ability to survive. Wyndham advocates the power of the individual as an adaptive creature, stifled by the post-war edifice of the cradle-to-the-grave British welfare state. As he blends Cold-War politics and imaginative elements, Wyndham consistently reaches to images from natural

selection, in a bid to awaken in the reader the principles of survival, which have been momentarily usurped by a massified society that rewards weakness.

This essay therefore evaluates Wyndham's ideology of nature, as well as his status as a writer of gothic-inflected science fiction with an 'evolutionary' perspective. Specifically, Wyndham deploys the language of Darwinian struggle *as a reaction to* post-war society. That is, Wyndham utilises such language only to the extent that he opposes the mass organisation of people around the mid-century ideal of a comfortable, domesticated existence. His idea of humans' relationship to nature does not quite match that of the 'inextricable web of affinities' offered by Darwin, which emphasises species' interdependence.¹ Instead, for Wyndham, nature hands down an imperative that affects species *and* individuals: Wyndham first asserts that societies are compelled to follow nature's logic of survival, contrasting the single-minded 'survival instinct' governing wartime Britain (for example, in its mobilisation of women in masculine roles) against what he sees as a postwar society of leisure. Yet 'evolution' in Wyndham's sense also directs *individuals'* actions: the 'honesty' of following evolutionary precepts is repeatedly contrasted against the pretence of respectable society, its class divisions, and its sexual mores, as shown in examples below.

Really, Wyndham is interested in the possibilities that emerge when such social pillars have toppled. In his most significant novels, Wyndham expands upon the challenge posed by philosopher Hannah Arendt, in the wake of the Second World War. She writes, '[i]ntellectually [...], America and Europe are in the same situation: the thread of tradition is broken, and we must discover the past for ourselves.'² For Wyndham, however, truth resides in the primeval past, rather than in the lost wisdom of any forgotten civilisation. The perception of existence as an eternal struggle, as conceived of by Wyndham, frames Arendt's question in terms of how to live not only in the aftermath of a world-wide cataclysm, but also in the very real anticipation of the next. Even so, Arendt's characterisation of 'the true forerunner of modern mass man' as the *individual*, who finds themselves 'in open rebellion against society', aligns exactly with Wyndham's project of stripping away the assumption of permanence attached to mass society.³ In the aftermath of a systemic collapse, humans must ask themselves how best to align with the truths of survival. In his fiction, such acts take on the character of pioneers taming their surroundings, in a world returned to the wild.

¹ Quoted in Paul Crook, *Darwin's Coat-Tails: Essays on Social Darwinism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 5.

² Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance', in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 197–226 (p. 204).

³ Arendt, p. 199.

Such meditations are far more radical than Brian Aldiss's notable characterisation of Wyndham's works as 'cosy catastrophes'. The discussion below begins by examining the context in which Wyndham wrote, and what the mischaracterisation of the 'cosy catastrophe' fails to describe in his works. To recover Wyndham's radical perspective, I turn next to the monstrous beings that populate his fiction — aliens, mutations and 'triffids' — and explore how their presence breaks down the coherence of civilised life. Finally, I discuss how Wyndham calls, paradoxically, for readers to cultivate themselves as evolutionary individuals: lone survivors in a mass society. The discussion below centres largely upon Wyndham's most prominent novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, but my argument touches on Wyndham's novels of the 1950s generally. What emerges in an examination of the real danger underlying Wyndham's 'cosy' catastrophes is a deep opposition to polite society, and an appeal for readers to view the world through the perspective of survival and domination instead.

Re-Evaluating the 'Cosy Catastrophe'

Wyndham's first broadside against the mass society, *The Day of the Triffids*, is ironically the very source of his characterisation as a writer of respectability and convention. The novel depicts humankind's struggle against the 'triffids', seven-foot-tall poisonous plants that can walk by pulling up their roots and shuffling forward on three knobs protruding from a central bole at the base of their stems. They sting their victims with a lethally poisonous whip hidden in their flowers. After the victim's body has begun decomposing, triffids feed on the rotting flesh. In the novel, triffids appear worldwide, suddenly, dramatically, and without explanation, in an unspecified time after the Second World War. By the time the story begins, however, the man-eating plants have faded to the status of a mere curiosity, even a fixture of backyard gardens. In their blending of the domestic and the fantastic, triffids fit comfortably into a tradition of fiction about malignant children's toys and other tales of everyday things attacking people — the plot of Daphne du Maurier's 1952 novelette *The Birds*, for example, which appeared only a year after *The Day of the Triffids*, essentially follows the same trajectory as Wyndham's novel.

Triffids, however, combines the horror of an attack by an ordinary object with a second catastrophe: the appearance of a brilliant green comet over Earth that blinds all who look at it. Just to ensure that the parallel with the Cold War is understood, Wyndham's survivors discuss at the end of the novel whether the 'comet' was really a natural phenomenon, or a malfunctioning space-based weapon that inadvertently wiped out

civilisation. Thus, rather than solely exploring the hidden menace lurking in quotidian life, Wyndham sets up a struggle on an evolutionary scale: their meagre defences removed, humans face extinction at the hands of the triffids. *The Day of the Triffids* is emblematic, in fact, of two issues that run parallel in the main body of Wyndham's work: the dismantling of the sense of what is 'ordinary', and the recognition of existence as a universal struggle for domination. Wyndham is not interested in reconciling people to the workings of the organisations that produce the sense of the everyday (the novel notably begins in a hospital, a highly regimented institution that, following the blinding comet, has fallen into chaos). Instead he offers an argument for individual autonomy and the ruthless pursuit of survival.

The Day of the Triffids is narrated by Bill Masen, a biochemical engineer who extracts a valuable oil from the triffids. Masen, who is capable but not superhuman, is dropped into the middle of the book's double catastrophe. His eyes bandaged following a triffid attack, Masen inadvertently escapes the effects of the comet, which radio reports confirm is seen worldwide. The spectators of the comet — that is, most of the human population — wake the next morning to discover that they are all blind. We follow Bill as he escapes from a quickly disintegrating London, and through the English countryside as he searches for a community that has a chance at long-term survival; this is by no means easy, now that triffids roam free across the landscape. Indeed, Masen spends the latter half of the book speculating at length on the best way to adapt human communities to the triffid threat.

Triffids thus sets out the major features of Wyndham's post-war writing. His early career in pulp science fiction and detective stories fizzled with the onset of the Second World War and his recruitment into the Royal Signal Corps. He returned to writing after the war, this time finding commercial success. Nonetheless, he disliked the label of 'science fiction' being attached to his works. Wyndham preferred the term 'logical fantasies'⁴ — which, from a survey of his stories, could be said to consist of ordinary people in extraordinary situations that require them to reflect on their place in society, and what 'society' actually is. In this sense, the main project of *The Day of the Triffids* is to inject a sense of danger into what his work posits as the mundane existence of respectable post-war British society. The novel achieves this by a sustained act of inversion: early in the book, Masen, reflecting on the demise of modern civilisation, describes the whole industrial age — *our* age — as 'utopian':

Roads, railways, and shipping lines laced it, ready to carry one thousands of miles safely and in comfort. There was no need for anyone to take weapons or

⁴ Robin McKie, 'Don't Ignore the Invisible Man', *The Observer* (13 July 2003), 91 (p. 91).

even precautions in those days. You could go, just as you were, to wherever you wished, with nothing to hinder you. A world so tamed sounds utopian now.⁵

This presentation of modern life as utopian, and thus beyond the boundaries of what can be considered acceptably 'real', is consistent with Wyndham's project, to which he continually returns: the dismantling of petit-bourgeois, 'middle-class' sensibilities and the promotion of a different set of truths, founded in the natural world's competition for survival. Wyndham's formula follows a person with no extraordinary powers of their own, as they narrate their encounter with some supposedly alien (and sometimes malevolent) being. Established authority figures working within science, politics, and the law resist any adaptation to the new situation, while academics enter to explain why humanity should be willing to adapt itself as a matter of survival. Wyndham's works therefore repeatedly assert that life is an endless, violent struggle for dominance, a struggle which respectable society attempts to conceal.

Wyndham's focus on the experience of 'Middle England' has led the science-fiction critic and scholar Brian Aldiss to identify in Wyndham an overweening sympathy for its aspirations and anxieties. In truth, Wyndham's most characteristic approach is gentle and indulgent critique, or self-evident irony, rather than the apocalyptic bluster of, for instance, H. G. Wells, whose influence on Wyndham marks my analysis below. Aldiss notoriously labelled Wyndham's disaster stories like *The Day of the Triffids* as 'cosy catastrophes', what he saw as a strain of 'anxiety fantasies' in which the protagonists witness the end of civilisation without experiencing any real danger. As Aldiss puts it, '[t]he essence of cosy catastrophe is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off.'⁶

Aldiss's description does resonate with other depictions of the apocalypse that are contemporary with *Triffids*. The deserted cities that feature in Wyndham's *Triffids* or *The Kraken Wakes* display many parallels with the post-war apocalyptic imaginary, especially in cinema. Rudolph Maté's *When Worlds Collide* (1951), Val Guest's *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), and Byron Haskin's 1953 film adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* all linger over images of the world's metropolises left abandoned. While simultaneously calling audiences' minds back to the destruction caused by the Second World War (*The Day the*

⁵ John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 19. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁶ Brian Aldiss with David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 316.

Earth Caught Fire's opening sequence of desolated London obliquely references Herbert Mason's famous 1940 photograph of St Paul's Cathedral rising above the smoke and fire of the Blitz), the disjuncture of a city without people illustrates the disjunction between mass society and the individual — 'shoved hither and thither by forces and interests that I neither understood nor cared about', as Bill Masen describes himself (pp. 47–48). Yet while Aldiss interprets these scenes of deserted cities as the expression of a more prosaic desire — to indulge freely in the creature comforts produced by the affluent society — they are really illustrations of how that society alienates its members from each other. In Wyndham's comet-stricken London, this alienation is physically manifested in the population's blindness. Masen, from a high-rise apartment, listens as, below, one of the blinded breaks out in a 'freezing scream which seemed to revel horribly in its release from sanity' (p. 78) — someone reacting, that is, to their total isolation from other humans, even in the midst of a crowded city.

The depiction of disease and worldwide pandemics, such as in George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), which features a man's attempts to preserve civilisation in a plague-depopulated California, can also be linked into Wyndham's meditations on post-apocalyptic survival in *Triffids*, even if the very 'cosiness' of pandemic-survivor stories is dependent on survivors who are immune from or escape exposure to the sickness. The orthodox 'cosy catastrophe', if the label can indeed be used coherently, certainly has associations with less 'cosy' tales, as well: Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), and its several film adaptations in 1964, 1971, and 2007, finds a lone man struggling to maintain sanity amidst the ceaseless night-time assaults of the undead. In all the above cases, any fleeting luxury pleasures enjoyed by the everyman protagonists are quickly set aside for the more serious business of survival: sports cars must give way to tank-tread all-terrain vehicles.

The description of *The Day of the Triffids* as 'cosy' is thus only accurate up to a point. It is true that Wyndham's conceit leaves the world largely intact, a considerable advantage over, say, a nuclear confrontation. As one survivor says,

From August 6, 1945, the margin of survival has narrowed appallingly. [...] In any single moment of the years since then the fatal slip might have been made. [...] But sooner or later that slip must have occurred. [...] How bad it could have been — well, there might have been no survivors; there might possibly have been no planet. (pp. 96–97)

In *The Day of the Triffids*, everything from the old world is left to crumble, and humankind must start over again. Yet the label of 'cosy catastrophe' suggests that a book like *The Day of*

the Triffids is not to be taken too seriously, even as a critique of that crumbling world. Aldiss sized up Wyndham's novels as 'totally devoid of ideas' but which 'read smoothly, and thus reached a maximum audience, who enjoyed cosy disasters'.⁷ Similarly, a reviewer in 1951 declared *Triffids* 'a good run-of-the-mill affair [...] you will find some pleasant reading in this book, provided you aren't out hunting science fiction masterpieces'.⁸ Such comments could explain Wyndham's resistance to the label of 'science fiction'. For Aldiss to dismiss *Triffids* as 'devoid of ideas' is to suggest that 'science fiction' should be judged by an author's novelty productions (which, in the last analysis, is the creation of new commodities for sale), rather than according to how such works reflect and are reflected in social processes. Such criteria mean that novels such as Wyndham's, which exploit the uncertainties of an established order by introducing an antagonist that confounds that order, will be left undervalued.

Wyndham's 'ideas' do not seek to engage the reader through their novelty, but rather in their avowedly primeval truth. That is, Wyndham utilises the principles of evolutionary biology not just as a metaphor in his works, but as a motive force in the narrative. In this aspect he owes a great deal, in both the character of his stories and the lessons they impart, to H. G. Wells. Wells's influence on Wyndham is stamped all over the latter's writing, including their mutual willingness to destroy London repeatedly in their stories, as well as the veneer of scientific fact stretched over the imaginative fantasy of societal collapse, and above all the indefatigable conviction that the strongest shall survive. *The Day of the Triffids*, in fact, makes several references to Wells. Wyndham's malevolent 'comet' has the opposite effect to Wells's celestial visitor in 1906's *In the Days of the Comet*, which magically enlightens all those who look on it. In addition, Bill Masen briefly discusses Wells's 1904 short story 'The Country of the Blind', which features an explorer in the Andes mountains who discovers a lost tribe of sightless people. While the explorer Nuñez initially believes he will be able to overpower and dominate the tribe quite easily, the tribe is so well adapted to their environment that they end up overpowering him.⁹ Finally and most significantly, the first half of *The Day of the Triffids* more or less faithfully re-enacts Wells's tale of Martian invasion, *The War of the Worlds*, from 1898. The purpose of Masen's wanderings through a deserted London in *Triffids* is identical to that of the narrator's in *The War of the Worlds*, scenes which function as demonstrations that the very heart of modern civilisation has

⁷ Aldiss with Wingrove, p. 315.

⁸ Groff Conklin, 'Galaxy's Five Star Shelf', *Galaxy Science Fiction*, 2 (August 1951), 99 (p. 99).

⁹ H. G. Wells, 'The Country of the Blind', in *The Complete Short Stories of H. G. Wells*, ed. by John Hammond (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 629–49.

stopped beating. There is also much foreshadowing of Wyndham in Wells's assaults against middle-class complacency, and his intoning of the evolutionary imperative as supreme law. 'We think', wrote Wells in 1894,

because things have been easy for mankind as a whole for a generation or so, we are going on to perfect comfort and security in the future. We think that we shall always go to work at ten and leave off at four, and have dinner at seven for ever and ever. [...] Even now, for all we can tell, the coming terror may be crouching for its spring and the fall of humanity be at hand.¹⁰

From Wyndham, Masen's similarly sobering conclusion, '[i]t must be, I thought, one of the race's most persistent and comforting hallucinations to trust that "it can't happen here" — that one's own little time and place is beyond cataclysms' (pp. 70–71), takes on an even greater significance in the aftermath of the Battle of Britain and in the context of a gradually escalating nuclear threat.

Importantly, Wyndham uses moments such as Bill Masen's reflections on disaster to give weight to his arguments about adaptation, and to establish the pedigree of his writing (through, for example, his references to Wells). Wyndham's greater purpose, however, lies in showing how disaster reveals an unresolvable lacuna in the total organisation society. Into this gap step the monsters that haunt Wyndham's fiction — always present, yet strangely inscrutable.

Consider the Triffid

Any analysis of Wyndham's monsters should start with his single most famous creation: the triffid. The novelty of Wyndham's leafy literary antagonist is its resistance to a stable symbolic meaning. The triffid, as a manifestation of a range of personal anxieties (of the pressures of conformity, of sexual conflict) or as the marker of any number of insurgent post-war social movements (communism, anti-imperialism, or the generation gap) is able to escape any unified or definitive meaning by refusing to 'speak': triffids, along with Wyndham's other monsters, are menacing for their refusal to communicate their intentions. It is necessary to explore the different symbolic dimensions of Wyndham's creation, then, not to arrive at a single interpretation or an exhaustive taxonomy of the triffid, but to demonstrate why it is *not* satisfactory as a symbol of any one thing. In other words, we must explain why triffids are not simply the negative image of civilisation, and thus why they are not part of a

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, 'The Extinction of Man', in *Certain Personal Matters: A Collection of Material, Mainly Autobiographical* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1898), pp. 178–79.

lament for that civilisation, in the style of Aldiss's 'cosy catastrophes'. By examining how the triffid functions in the novel's conceptualisation of evolution and survival, what Wyndham proposes in place of the false solidity of technological society will become clear.

As outlined above, the triffid can be read as a threatening rupture in the world of the everyday. A great part of this threat derives from their very fertility: triffids can grow anywhere on earth with ease, and furthermore, like Wells's Martians, they are 'absolutely without sex, and therefore without any of the tumultuous emotions that arise from that difference among men'.¹¹ The triffid is a threatening, asexual, self-pollinating, monstrous presence, quietly flourishing amidst humans whose gender relations amount to 'a mess of myth and affectation', as one character puts it (p. 149). Thus, in the face of the menacing fecundity of the triffids, we must ask in what kind of human sexual politics *The Day of the Triffids* is invested, since Wyndham has presented sexuality itself as a potential stumbling block to humanity's survival.

In fact, the novel considers sex only in the context of reproduction. As the fictional sociologist Dr E. H. Vorless argues while addressing a group of survivors in the University of London, procreation is not strictly the province of the nuclear family. 'The laws we knew have been abolished by circumstances', he says of the comet catastrophe. 'It now falls to us to make laws suitable to the conditions, and to enforce them if necessary' (p. 101). Vorless thus outlines his group's decisions. First, the majority of the blinded populace are beyond help, and should be left to die. Only blind women will be accepted into his group's community, since they can still bear sighted children. Vorless proposes that the survivors adjust themselves to the business of repopulating the Earth: specifically, to maintain relationships of about three women to one man, in order to boost their population. He says,

In the time now ahead of us a great many of these prejudices we have been given will have to go, or be radically altered. We can accept and retain only one primary prejudice, and that is that *the race is worth preserving*. To that consideration all else will, for a time at least, be subordinate. (pp. 99–100, emphasis in original)

That said, the arrival of Josella Playton — a young socialite who misses the blindness-inducing comet because of a bad hangover, and who becomes Masen's love interest — allows the novel to temper somewhat its assertions about the changeable status of sex in society. In fact, Josella's relationship with Masen betrays the extent to which the novel in fact

¹¹ H. G. Wells, *A Critical Edition of The War of the Worlds: H. G. Wells's Scientific Romance*, ed. by David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 150.

assents to the bourgeois values it otherwise rails against. Bill initially rescues Josella from a blind man who has tethered her to his arm. Bill's attraction to Josella is based equally on her beauty and her 'practicality' (p. 80), while his attempts to rescue her from various dangers (rape, kidnapping, imprisonment) follow the contours of a solid romance-novel courtship. However, the 'taming' of Josella, of bringing her into the service of Masen's needs, is not simply the reassertion of the breadwinner-housewife relationship. The book is dismissive of other survivors' attempts to maintain pre-disaster gender politics at any cost; a male survivor bemoans that 'there has been much too great a vested interest in dependence for women to dream of dropping it' (p. 149). Instead, Josella is offered to Masen as a means by which rationality will remake the world.

Masen and Josella both acknowledge that it is much more important to consider sex in terms of its socially useful role, with sexuality subordinate to the primary concerns of survival. When confronted with Vorless's plan for polygamy, the two reconcile themselves quickly to accepting other women into their relationship for the sake of maximising the group's reproductive potential. 'Josella [...] Er — those babies. I'd — er — I'd be sort of terribly proud and happy if they could be mine as well as yours', says Bill (p 103). Josella replies, '[y]ou won't need to worry at all, my dear. I shall choose two nice, sensible girls' (p. 105). However, the two are never actually confronted with the necessity of abandoning their monogamous pair bond, as they are separated from each other before they can sign up to Vorless's commune. The novel contrives the course of events to ensure that it is never forced to act on its depreciation of romantic love as a luxury afforded to decadent, comfortable societies at the height of their delusions. Wyndham manages to assert that human sexual practices are mutable, without having to depict that change actually happening.

Sexual strife is not the only domain of conflict against which triffids appear to hold a significant advantage: the triffids' sudden worldwide appearance transcends humanity's messy and overlapping geopolitical conflicts. Considering the status of the triffid as an exotic imported species, it is possible to look beyond the bedroom for its conceptual origins: to Africa, Asia, and the islands of the Pacific, or in other words to the British and European colonies. Despite their probable Soviet origin,¹² triffids are originally associated with tropical areas, because of their faster rate of growth there than in the temperate zones. Masen, explaining to the reader, makes an implicit connection between triffids and the strange beasts

¹² Masen speculates that the Soviets created the triffids through the bioengineering work of Trofim Lysenko, the Ukrainian geneticist who claimed to have developed a new agricultural science along Marxist-Leninist principles. The triffids' spread worldwide is supposedly due to a failed attempt to smuggle their seeds out of Russia.

found in those European colonies that were either seeking or had sought independence when Wyndham was writing:

Triffids were, admittedly, a bit weird — but that was, after all, just because they were a novelty. People had felt the same about novelties of other days: about kangaroos, giant lizards, black swans. And when you came to think of it, were triffids all that much queerer than mudfish, ostriches, polliwogs, and a hundred other things? (pp. 31–32)

Reading *The Day of the Triffids* in colonial terms allows us to link Wyndham's book into earlier 'reverse invasion' stories, a literary tradition that dates back to George Tomkyns Chesney's 1871 work *The Battle of Dorking*, and which features London besieged by colonial competitors (such as Saki's 1913 novel *When William Came*), or by the conquered peoples of the British Empire (such as P. Anderson Graham's 1923 novel *The Collapse of Homo Sapiens*).¹³ The reverse invasion scenario was given a significant imaginative overhaul by Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), which converted human invaders to Martian conquerors. Both Wyndham's and Wells's novels establish a strong parallel between the realm of natural selection and the realm of geopolitics, implying that the same rules govern each. As Masen declares simply, '[i]t's an unnatural thought that one type of creature should dominate perpetually' (p. 93). Here Masen comes close to concluding that, if triffids are indeed better adapted than humans, then the world belongs to them.

If the triffids themselves inspire unease and even dread, the most pressing danger in Wyndham's novel comes from other human beings, and more specifically members of the working class. There are, importantly, *two* shambling masses in *Triffids*: the walking plants, and the blind, who grope their way *en masse* through London's streets in search of aid. The hordes of blind are essentially just as dangerous as the triffids; they simply overwhelm the remaining sighted persons. Class divisions are immediately apparent in the blind's sheer numbers, as well as their demands for help. As one such blind man says to Bill, '[s]o you can see, can you! [...] Why the hell should you be able to see when I can't — nor anyone else?' (p. 54, emphasis in original). Without exception, the blind people who antagonise or distract Bill and Josella from escaping London speak in working-class accents. Meanwhile, more

¹³ I. F. Clarke, 'Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 24.1 (March 1997), 33–46. A more general survey of the late Victorian wave of 'reverse invasion' literature is available in I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763–3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), or Stephen D. Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization', *Victorian Studies*, 33.4 (Summer 1990), 621–45. For a discussion of reverse invasion in science fiction over the twentieth century, see Rob Latham, 'Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37.2, *Science Fiction* (2007), 103–19.

refined victims of the blinding comet meekly submit to their fate: the novel sharply contrasts a young woman in Kensington playing ‘We’ll Go No More A-Roving’ on a piano while softly sobbing, with a mob of drunk young men bellowing ‘Beer, Glorious Beer’ in Piccadilly Circus (pp. 42, 45). The only redemptive power the blind have in *Triffids* is to realise the futility of their situation and submit to death. One of the novel’s most striking images is the sight of the cars along the English country roads that have pulled off to the shoulder as their drivers went blind. ‘[T]he blindness seemed to have come upon the drivers swiftly’, says Masen, ‘but not too suddenly for them to keep control’ (p. 135). These drivers, considerably, have moved aside to let the rest of humanity pass.

In contrast to these members of the virtuous blind, it is significant that Masen repeatedly depicts crowds of people as just as monstrous as the triffids. He describes a group of blind people trapped in a stairwell: ‘The place looked — well, maybe you’ll have seen some of Doré’s pictures of sinners in hell. But Doré couldn’t include the sounds: the sobbing, the murmurous moaning, and occasionally a forlorn cry’ (p. 13). Such a description contributes to the attitude that the blind in *The Day of the Triffids* are being punished somehow for their sins, for indulging in the big, vulgar, ‘free’ entertainment of the comet’s light show the previous evening. However, if the suspicions that Masen raises at the end of the book are correct, then the comet was not ‘free’ at all, but rather a taxpayer-funded military exercise gone wrong, a space-based weapon that went off accidentally. In that case, the blind are being punished for looking to get something for nothing: free entertainment from the biggest air-show in history.

When considering the novel’s bias against the masses, it is important to remember that *Triffids* was written in the context of the establishment of a sweeping welfare state in Britain. The post-war Labour government had, in 1946, introduced payments for child benefit, unemployment allowance, and large increases in old-age pensions. Two years later came the establishment of the National Health Service. Amidst these reforms, there is a pervasive distaste for the emergent welfare state on display in *The Day of the Triffids*. Masen himself, resistant to offering aid to the blinded populace, asks, ‘[d]o we help those who have survived the catastrophe to rebuild some kind of life? — or do we make a moral gesture which, on the face of it, can scarcely be more than a gesture?’ (p. 85). Indeed, to make this gesture identifies one as a dreamer or ideologue: a considerable portion of the novel is taken up with the efforts of a working-class intellectual, Coker, to force sighted survivors like Bill to care for groups of the blind. Masen himself is handcuffed to a group and sent out to find

food. After the group begins dying of disease, he escapes; Coker eventually recants his plan as a sentimental dream. Evidently, the individual's survival means that others must perish.

The challenge, then, of critically analysing the triffid is its manifold symbolic potential, both within the world of the text and the novel's historical backdrop. It is this very lack of certainty, however, that is most terrifying about the triffid. In terms of the critical approach to monsters, the triffid is not, for example, a Freudian projection of a collective fear that is already present — such an explanation would spring from the assumption that the world is essentially knowable, even if the deeper truths about us lay concealed. As critic Steven Schneider explains,

Freud's hypothesis, that a sufficient condition of uncanny experiences is the return to consciousness of repressed infantile complexes, has been famously, albeit rather loosely, adopted/adapted by film theorist Robin Wood: 'One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is all that our civilisation represses or oppresses.'¹⁴

Monsters, in this view, are our own fears returning to us; ultimately monsters are versions of ourselves.¹⁵ Instead, I would argue, the triffid does not embody any human understanding of the world. The triffid is not simply the negative image of what bourgeois post-war life values: it does not merely connote collectivity rather than identity, or evolutionary shift rather than stability. Instead, the triffid cancels the order upon which those values are built. In appearing as a force that nullifies individual agency (triffids do not seek personal enrichment; triffids will swarm the weak point of a fence until it breaks open), the triffids undermine the arrogance of bourgeois rationality, the conviction that nothing can exist beyond itself, and that its logic encapsulates all possible earthly motivations. Such a challenge explains the vehemence with which characters, including Bill Masen, deny that triffids can 'think' or 'talk'. As Masen and a colleague say of the possibility, "But it's absurd. Plants talking!" "So much more absurd than plants walking?" (p. 36). If triffids do think or talk, it is not in a way that humans can understand.

The confrontation with this incompatible way of life is not an agreeable experience. The arrival of the triffids separates those who can adapt themselves from those who increase

¹⁴ Steven Schneider, 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror', *Other Voices*, 1.3 (January 1999), n.pag., <<http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/sschneider/monsters.php>> [accessed 1 April 2015].

¹⁵ As expressed, for example, by Jeffrey Cohen: 'The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy [...]. The monstrous body is pure culture'. 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25 (p. 4).

their efforts to contain the unbearable indeterminacy that the triffids represent (in sex, politics, and class, as outlined above). The metaphor of 'blindness' in *The Day of the Triffids* is thus much less complicated than it may appear. Society is divided between the people who can see the truth, and those whose vision is obscured by their own fantasies of respectability, or sexual politics, or the Cold War dependency on Americans as a global protector. Superior humans possess a character that is not tempered by politics, but is instead located in the strength and agency of the adaptive individual. The arrival of the comet is therefore a chance for these superior humans to rise above the masses. As a friend of Masen's says, '[w]e aren't out to reconstruct — we want to build something new and better' (p. 220).

The Chosen Few

What sort of society, built on what values, does Wyndham imagine these superior humans would construct? In fact, Wyndham would develop the survivalist views put forth in *The Day of the Triffids* with his later novels. *The Chrysalids* (1955) reverses the withdrawal of a power in *Triffids* (sight), with the addition of a new power (telepathy). *The Chrysalids*, like Wyndham's short story 'The Wheel', takes place in a nondescript village in Labrador, thrown back into a pre-modern lifestyle after a worldwide cataclysm. This tiny community hunts out and kills children with mutations and deformities, the lingering result of nuclear fallout. Eventually, some children secretly learn that they can communicate with each other using only their minds. They attempt to escape from their puritanical community and are eventually rescued by the emissaries of Sealand, a society that has advanced considerably with the aid of its citizens' own telepathic abilities. Hesitant to leave his home, the narrator David asks an emissary from Sealand what will happen to his father, the village's religious leader and an unforgiving enforcer of the laws against mutations. 'Let him be', is the emissary's reply. 'Your work is to survive.' She continues,

The living form defies evolution at its peril; if it does not adapt, it will be broken. The idea of completed man is the supreme vanity: the finished image is a sacrilegious myth. [...] Your father and his kind [...] have become history without being aware of it. [...] [S]oon they will attain the stability they strive for, in the only form it is granted — a place among the fossils...¹⁶

Wyndham would revisit the idea of an awakening superior generation in 1957's *The Midwich Cuckoos*, filmed in 1960 by Wolf Rilla as *Village of the Damned*. *The Midwich Cuckoos*

¹⁶ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 184.

features another group of children with superpowers, the result of the mysterious visitation in an English village of a silver spaceship, which renders all inhabitants unconscious for a full day and leaves all fertile women pregnant. Here, Wyndham is again inflicting otherworldly intruders on an ordinary setting. As before, any ‘cosiness’ here exists only to be overturned; if *Triffids* charts the violent end of a decadent metropolis, then *Midwich* asserts that neither can any country idyll shelter humans from the struggle to survive.

In *Midwich*, the children born from the visitation mature unnaturally fast, are identical in appearance, and are all telepathically linked. Eventually they abandon the homes of their adoptive parents for a school run by the Ministry of Defence. For the most part, the children, like the triffids, remain silent about their motivations and their goals. However, a series of increasingly violent encounters with the villagers, in which the children telepathically force their attackers to turn their weapons on themselves, precipitates a final confrontation. The novel reveals the existence of other villages with similar children; the Soviet Union has preemptively destroyed its own brood when it became apparent that the children’s powers were too much for it to control. The Midwich children state quite plainly that the divide between them and humanity must ultimately grow into a full-blown war for survival. The children are a vulnerable minority now, but they declare with confidence that the weaknesses of liberal democracy will ensure their safety until they can mature.

The children claim that, unlike with the Soviets, the Western survival instinct has been ‘deeply submerged by convention’, as countries such as Britain labour under ‘the inconvenience [...] of the idea that the State exists to serve the individuals who compose it’.¹⁷ One of the children states plainly, ‘[a]s a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourselves with abstractions.’¹⁸ Here is an even less generous conception of Western society than the shuffling hordes of carnivorous triffids: the establishment of democracy is analogous to the overdeveloped antlers of the Irish Elk, an evolutionary embellishment that sentences its owners to extinction when conditions change. The democratic citizen is simply declared an *unnatural* being. As one of the Midwich children says,

This is not a civilized matter [...] it is a very primitive matter. If we exist, we shall dominate you — that is clear and inevitable. Will you agree to be superseded, and start on the way to extinction without a struggle? I do not think you are decadent enough for that. And then, politically, the question is:

¹⁷ John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 198.

¹⁸ Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 199.

Can *any* State, however tolerant, afford to harbour an increasingly powerful minority which it has no power to control? Obviously the answer is again, no.¹⁹

As antagonists, the children occupy the same space as the triffids, an adversary that the mass society cannot conceptualise. The children, like the triffids, turn from inscrutable to hostile when it becomes apparent that their survival interest mutually opposes humankind's. The essential dilemma of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, like Wyndham's other works, is whether the characters will become conscious that society's values and beliefs have been mooted by 'an elemental struggle [...] grim, primeval danger'.²⁰ When this realisation comes, the solution becomes obvious. The children's schoolteacher takes it upon himself to address the threat to humankind without sacrificing any villagers — he visits the children under the pretence of showing them a film, and blows up the school with a concealed bomb. If this is an act of heroism, it is also a final capitulation to the children's logic.

The Midwich Cuckoos thus outlines in explicit terms a very real presage of conflict that runs throughout Wyndham's works. *Midwich* was released in 1957, on the eve of a decade of powerful social change across Europe and America. Wyndham, predicting the end of a prevailing postwar social rigidity, introduces a group of enormously powerful telepathic children, who share a knowledge or 'culture' among themselves that is inaccessible to the adults, who look and act much older than their biological age, and who can brush aside any discipline that their adults attempt to impose. In a context of parents rearing children who had never known war, hunger, or compromise, and who were better educated, healthier, and more confident than the previous generation, *The Midwich Cuckoos* frames the coming decade of struggles and liberation movements as a generation gap, in which parents have developed a terror of their children. In addition, the depiction of a violent struggle against these children also foreshadows the brutality and the nihilism of the 1960s; the assassinations of political leaders; the wars and civil wars of newly-independent colonies; the measures taken by governments to retain their power and silence dissent; all of the factors of the competition for social domination. Wyndham's conclusion that the strongest will survive unfolds here in the framing of the violence and upheaval of the immediate future as the kernel of truth within the fantasy of peace and stability sought by the survivors of the Second World War.

At such an historical moment, Wyndham claims that chaos and violence offer a chance for humanity to regroup and to reassert its strongest elements. The lack of sympathy

¹⁹ Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, pp. 198–99.

²⁰ Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 212.

for the death of the weak renders Wyndham's work highly resistant to the accusation that it narrates vague laments for law and order, as implied by the 'cosy catastrophe' label. Yet 'strength' here takes the form of an adaptive grace, rather than any superior force or technical mastery. That is, real power consists of the ability to adjust to sudden and dramatic changes in circumstances; Wyndham's stories fit the profile of cosy catastrophe only in that their protagonists are *naturally gifted*. When his characters warn against being 'blunted by rationality', Wyndham is arguing that humans' civilising force also closes the mind to the full possibilities of existence.²¹ The narrator of *The Midwich Cuckoos* tells himself,

[Y]ou cannot protest or argue these Children and their qualities out of existence. And since they do exist, there must be some explanation of that existence. None of your accepted views explain it. Therefore, that explanation is going to be found, however uncomfortable it may be for you, in views that you do not at present accept.²²

The unfailing target in these novels, then, is not so much the rationalist conviction that humanity possesses a method for submitting the universe to its will. Instead the focus of Wyndham's attack is the unconscious acceptance that this method has already been applied, that its work has already been done, and that the universe is not just knowable but is already *known*. Wyndham's target is not so much hubris as it is complacency. His vision is a direct challenge to the invitations of organisation society, what the cultural critic Lewis Mumford described as the 'magnificent bribe' of a life of material comforts in exchange for a 'homogenized and equalized' existence.²³ Nowhere does Wyndham advocate a return to nature as such; in fact, he ridicules such primitivism in his short story 'The Wheel', for example.²⁴ Instead he argues for the recognition of what is inescapably 'natural' in humankind: that is, the will to survive.

Conclusion

Wyndham offers a vision of civilisational assurances unravelling, and of individuals flourishing among the ruins of a carefully constructed hierarchy, as an invitation for readers to distance themselves from organisational thinking altogether. When Bill Masen attributes humanity's success not to the brain but to the eyes — '[h]is civilisation, all that he had

²¹ Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 143.

²² Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, p. 153.

²³ Lewis Mumford, 'Authoritarian and Democratic Technics', in *Controlling Technology: Contemporary Issues*, ed. by William B. Thompson (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1991), pp. 371–78 (p. 376).

²⁴ John Wyndham, 'The Wheel', in *Beyond Armageddon*, ed. by Walter M. Miller, Jr. and Martin Greenberg (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), pp. 108–15.

achieved or might achieve, hung upon his ability to perceive that range of vibrations from red to violet. Without that, he was lost. I saw for a moment the true tenuousness of his hold on his power' (p. 94) — Masen is also speaking, in miniature, of the entire human condition. Instead of what could be called the 'organisation' view of humankind, in which the co-operation of the body's constituent parts leads to an overall achievement, Masen places this success on one part, the 'visionary', working all the time. The danger inherent in the construction of this success, the 'true tenuousness' of it, means that no entity can claim dominance except in relation to its ability to adapt, a process that changes the entity from within.

Wyndham's discomfort with the strictures of science fiction, as well as his dismissal by critics who misread his books as 'cosy catastrophes', suggest that he was unable to prevail upon a time enamoured with ideas that differed so significantly from his own. The characteristic post-war persona was firmly embedded in organisations and hierarchies, and was far from the figure of the evolutionary survivalist. Here too Wyndham follows in the path forged by his great influence Wells, who loudly complained in his lifetime of being ignored as a social thinker, and who threatened that his epitaph would 'manifestly have to be: "I told you so. You *damned* fools"' (emphasis in original).²⁵ Even so, Wyndham's books have a predictive power all their own: not only in the anticipation of a violent social conflict just upon the horizon, but also in the reconceptualisation of the future as a place not of new things but of changed perceptions.

²⁵ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 279.