1. Apocalypse Now and Again

Electronic reference
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Since this partial answer to his prayer, Hannibal Lecter had not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how his own modest predations paled beside those of God, who is in irony matchless, and in wanton malice beyond measure.

*Thomas Harris*

Therefore, thus says the Lord God: [...] Your covenant with death shall be cancelled and your pact with the nether world shall not stand. When the overwhelming scourge passes, you shall be trampled down by it. Whenever it passes, it shall take you; morning after morning it shall pass, By day and by night; terror alone shall convey the message. For the bed shall be too short to stretch out in, and the cover too narrow to wrap in. For the Lord shall rise up as on Mount Perazim, bestir himself as in the Valley of Gibeon, To carry out his work, his singular work, to perform his deed, his strange deed. Now, be arrogant no more lest your bonds be tightened, For I have heard from the Lord, the God of hosts, the destruction decreed for the whole earth.

*Isaiah 28: 16-22*

Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; [...] I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision: [...] and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone […] By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm.

*Revelation 9: 16-19*

In at least seven film and television re-makes, *King Kong*, the eponymous hero, is entrapped thanks to the frailty of elemental desire for the helpless blonde heroine, and is taken prisoner to America, the land of the free, which, being also the land of opportunity, makes the gigantic ape a profitable commodity in the capitalist market place. Any number of old and renewed
preoccupations are played out here: nature versus civilization, innocence pitted against corruption, race/species confronted with its other, in the battle ground of assorted ideologies.

The story of King Kong is among other things an unedifying translation of the long-standing Western fear that nature’s representatives of unbridled, elemental forces (apes, savages, black men) desire white flesh (a blonde woman) and, if allowed, will violate it to commit the ultimate desecration: forcible penetration of the white man’s property, leading to miscegenation (the latter being translatable as the destruction of the principle of racial purity upon which rests a certain understanding of civilization-as-we-know-it). Kong’s difference and proclaimed (in)(sub)-humanity, like that of any typical colonizable other, represents the thrill, the threat, the motivation and the pretext for that other’s exploitability.

In the Beginning

Kong originates from far away Skull Island in the Indian Ocean, ie. as far from civilization (Europe, the United States) as it is possible to be – the skull, appropriately, being the brute, serviceable structure which anatomically encloses and protects but is not the real powerhouse of the human body (the brain). The other inhabitants of the island, with a fine disregard for prehistoric accuracy and evolutionary timelines, include plesiosaurs, pterosaurs and dinosaurs, as well as primitive humans. The nod to prehistoricity, nonsensical though it is, since it brings together dinosaurs and humans in chronological synchronicity, satisfies standard science fiction requirements: namely the blanket belief that although ‘back then’ in the mists of primeval time was where all that was wild and unformed was to be found, it was also from that mystical long-long-ago that innocence unblemished by the moral patina of civilization (the noble savage, the awe-ful, awe-inspiring ape) might be recoverable. If inside the skull lies the ultimate object of quest (the truth, enclosed in the knowing brain), that truth, it turns out, may lie not at the end of any road but in its primeval beginnings. In J.G. Ballard’s haunting novel, *The Drowned World* (Ballard, 2008), astronomical phenomena are melting the polar ice and simultaneously warming and flooding the world to destruction. The effects are cosmic but also individual and neuropsychic. As the planet’s climate warms up and moistens, a regressive trajectory back to polymorphous origins becomes apparent: from solid Earth to primeval soup, from contemporary animal
life to Triassic fauna and flora, from civilized communal behaviour to primitive savagery, from human *compos mentis* consciousness to nonverbal, psychotic, infantile, uterine dependency. In this new old world, all notions of organized ethics make way for a return to instinctual rule, and the revelations that accompany this chronological reversal result, in the context of an un-nuanced world, in an amoral (uncivilized, un-evolved) behavioural palette in black and white. At another level, the implied corollary is of course the fear that inside modern human beings there lurks always the primitive ancestral precursor. In *The Drowned World*, the process of regression leads to a recapitulation of evolutionary history in reverse, at both an environmental and a psycho-individual level. Contemporary animal and plant forms die out and older ones re-appear in a planet itself now fast reverting to an earlier geological state. At the same time, the remnants of humanity left in habitats which are now both hot and watery, *en route* back to their primeval beginnings, undergo a form of psychosis which is described as a waking unconsciousness in some ways imaginable as the foetal experience in the womb:

In response to the rises in temperature, humidity and radiation levels the flora and fauna of this planet are beginning to assume once again the forms they displayed the last time such conditions were present – roughly speaking the Triassic period. [...] Everywhere there’s been the same avalanche backwards into the past. [...] Is it only the external landscape which is altering? How often, recently, most of us have had the feeling of déjà vu, of having seen all this before, in fact of remembering these swamps and lagoons all too well. [...] *These are the oldest memories on Earth, the time-codes carried in every chromosome and gene.* Every step we’ve taken in our evolution is a milestone inscribed with organic memories. [...] Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the traumatic material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past [...]. As we move back through geophysical time so we re-enter the amniotic corridor and move back through spinal and archaeophysic time, recollecting in our minds the landscapes of each epoch. (Ballard, 2008: 42-44, italics added)

Similarly, in Kevin Reynolds’s *Waterworld* (Reynolds, 1995), the central character, known only as the Mariner, a pilgrim-type nomad forever on the move along a flooded planet’s ubiquitous waterways, apparently in search of an unspecified answer to an undisclosed question, is exposed as a regressive mutant, a mammal with webbed feet, presumably on a reverse evolutionary trajectory to the form of the amphibians that ventured onto dry land.
Figure 3. René Magritte, *Collective Invention*

Figure 4. William Blake, *Nebuchadnezzar*
In Philip K. Dick’s *The Simulacra* (Dick, 2004), too, in the aftermath of widespread radioactive contamination, Neanderthal-like humans begin to be born in northern California, itself now returned to an immensity of primeval forests, while in William Blake’s *Nebuchadnezzar*, the Biblical character from the Book of Daniel is punished by God for boasting of his achievements and erecting an idol. The punishment sees him losing his reason and reverting to animal status.

And in Magritte’s enigmatic *The Wonders of Nature* (1953), life appears to regress to a pre-animate geological state, against the background image of a ship resembling those in which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese and the Spanish began to de-mythify the mysteries of the unknown world.

**What We Are Now**

King Kong, the ape from a geographically, chronologically and evolutionarily remote island (which includes the standard period marker of dinosaurs), not only stands as the atavistic progenitor of
civilized humanity’s self-assuredness (‘look how far we have come’), but, paradoxically, also casts an unexpected light on the ways in which contemporary, scientific and urban statuses quo compare unfavourably with the untarnished wholesomeness of the wild (‘look how badly we have turned out’). It is Kong, the wild beast, for example, rather than his human
captors, who paradoxically offers an exemplary demonstration of all that, in civilized society, is least instinctual and most culturally refined: namely, the act of dying in the name of love.

The idea of King Kong’s giant phallus penetrating the fairy tale princess’s untouchable virginity – supposedly reserved for the seed of future patriarchal lineages – impugns the invincibility of all kinds of trusted demarcations: those which define and demarcate species and races but also deeds of territory, property and general ownership (including the ownership of female flesh and of its issue). In Western iconography, the blonde is both the reliquary of untarnished femininity and the bait to temptation. Gentlemen and beasts both prefer blondes: in Western Garden-of-Eden iconography Eve is definitely a svelte blonde, or she was so, at least, until she partook of the forbidden fruit, at which point her brunette roots started showing through and she became a dark temptress.

The blonde is the time-honoured trope of fantasy. She may be the theory, however, but she is not necessarily the praxis, and in this game of courtly love, the big ape is no exception to the masculine rule, with the added bonus that, species-difference notwithstanding, its/his love for the girl, evinced through an improbable semblance of flirtatiousness, is real. In a moving

Figure 7. John Guillermin *King Kong* (1976)
scene in John Guillermin’s 1976 film, Kong snatches the girl; not only, however, does he not eat her but, as in the traditional, largely performative scenarios of courtship between man-girl down the ages, his scrutiny of his catch culminates in the tenderest and most reverent of caresses. Kong, it transpires, is just another Adam/Lancelot, led to perdition by a beloved female.

Where to from Here?
In scenarios such as the one outlined above, of course, beginning with Genesis, behind every usable female there lies a darker force and an annihilating project, namely the destruction of God’s Eden, in the first book of the Pentateuch, leading to the Fall, in what must be one of the earliest narratives of apocalypse. In the aftermath of talking snakes bearing gifts of apples, things will never be the same again, although apocalypse (in the original meaning of the term), usually tends to be not an absolute wipe-out, merely a clearing of the decks in the anticipation of a new beginning.

In what follows it will be argued that in narratives of apocalypse, whether in text, film or image, the end of the world is never quite that. Almost without exception, from the Ancient Greeks and the Bible to contemporary science fiction, in the aftermath of Armageddon, following near-global destruction (whether brought about by divine wrath or by dangerous scientific advancement – eg. nuclear power), there is usually enough left over to permit a new beginning: as suggested before, at the very least one man, one woman, some representative animal and plant species and enough resources to sustain them and ensure continuity.

There is also, however, as we shall see, and that will be one of the central points to be developed, enough left of the old mindset to justify the fear that, once survival is consolidated, the factors which led to near-miss destruction in the first place will also be reinstated. Reinstituted again and again and again, but seldom with any likelihood that (leaving aside God who in any case also never actually seems to mean what he threatens) one day the real thing might indeed happen and a point of no return be in fact crossed. Or at least that was the case until the dawn of the nuclear age, inaugurated on 6 August 1945 in Hiroshima.

Until then, historically, the idea of actual global wipe-out had been almost unimaginable, which might explain why it had been and still is so
seldom imagined. With extreme rarity (Nevil Shute’s popular, twice-filmed novel, *On the Beach* (1974) and Kevin Brockmeier’s *The Brief History of the Dead* (2006) being exceptions), whether in fiction, film or art, the end usually is not really the end. This general principle applies in popular science fiction with happy endings and uplifting morals (in films such as *Deep Impact*, Leder, 1998; *The Day After Tomorrow*, Emmerich, 2004; *Independence Day*, Emmerich, 1996, all examples of modern techno-Westerns in which the cavalry, usually in the form of can-do American military science, ultimately saves the day); but it applies also even in the darkest, most uncompromising post-apocalyptic narratives (J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, 2008, Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road*, 2007, Philip K. Dick’s *The Penultimate Truth*, 2005, Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things*, 2005).

**Back to What?**

Back in the jungle, meanwhile, or rather, snatched out of it and plunged into the glare of grim modernity in downtown Manhattan, King Kong escapes from the clutches of the profit-making free-market forces that had intended to exhibit him as a circus freak. In John Guillermin’s 1976 re-make, Kong, on the loose in New York, and in possession of his hostage/princess (the latter now trapped in an emotional no-woman’s land of fear of the monster mingled with pity bordering on complicity), finds refuge on top of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre which he straddles like a modern day colossus.

If the metaphor in 1976 was not particularly subtle (Kong is the booty of neocolonial trading rapaciousness, torn like the erstwhile black cargo of slavery out of his natural habitat, in the name of Western entrepreneurship), in real life, events have conspired to ensure that the problem he represented endures and continues to disturb. As is the case with many modern sci-fi narratives, at the heart of the moral conclusion urged upon the more or less knowing consumer are basic archetypal plots traceable back to Western foundation narratives beginning with the Old and New Testaments. In this twentieth-century film rendition, the elemental forces represented by King Kong are brought down (literally) on the roof of the World Trade Centre’s twin towers, the phallic icons of capitalist greed. Twenty-five years later, on 11 September 2001 the same symbols were razed to the ground by the forces of an elemental religious fundamentalism which the West no longer commanded the vocabulary to understand. History is sometimes
translated into art and then back again, tying a final loop to events. In the event now known as 9/11, the twin towers were reduced to ashes by agents of the would-be wrath of one particular God (Allah) unleashed against the symbols of another (Mammon). Whatever interpretation one gives to this event, one thing is certain: this particular small-scale apocalypse was not
the end of anything, merely the re-visiting of a not even-particularly new or original, although undeniably vicious circle. With any luck, in the long term, 9/11 will prove to be not the first stage of a definitive climax, not an actual Ground Zero following which there is nothing, but merely another bloody episode (not the final one) of a very old story.

In *King Kong* the eponymous hero, trapped on top of two buildings whose very name gestures to the forces (trade, profit, greed) that brought him to his present plight, chooses suicide. He releases the girl, who, while clutched in his gigantic hand, had acted as the human shield against the gunfire of circling aircraft. Willingly donning the mantle of sacrificial lamb to the slaughter, he is shot down, but leaves in his wake moral uncertainty (in the shape of himself, transfigured from representative of primitive savagery into martyr to sacrificial love) and loss (in the shape of his erstwhile hostage, herself now transfigured from sexual prey into *a mater dolorosa* / lover/daughter reluctant to embrace freedom by abandoning the giant ape).

**The Unacceptability of Nothing**

The symbiosis of advanced technological possibilities and divine wrath enacted by the events of 9/11 has precedents in popular culture, such as *The Terminator*, James Cameron’s film of 1984, to be discussed. The dread of apocalypse (the end of the world, the end of civilization-as-we-know-it, our own individual deaths) is arguably the most universally shared phenomenon of the human psyche, and transposes boundaries of time and geography, to some extent erasing cultural difference. The idea of the cessation of being may be the only truly universal fear, and resistance to it explains a number of widely accepted prohibitions, such as for example murder or suicide.

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[T]he dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.
The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused – nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
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The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true. (Larkin, 1977)

Murder and suicide both prevail alongside other taboos (kin-slaying, incest) and share with them a fear of the end as well as concomitant imperatives regarding the preservation of life and the viability of the species against the threat of extinction. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dread of finitude, whether of the self (through death) or of the commonweal (through social anarchy, the collapse of the rule of law), or of the physical environment (through global destruction), should be a meta-narrative since our earliest cultural manifestations.

Palaeo-neurology has suggested that in mammals the integration of the five senses into a single anatomical structure (the neocortex) was an evolutionary occurrence of which language was an accidental off-shoot. Language’s desirability in terms of survival resided in an enhanced ability to make sense of the world through sensory speculation (‘if I fall off that cliff I might hurt myself and die’) rather than through empirical verification (‘I will jump off that cliff and see what happens’) (Dunbar, 1993; Bradshaw, 1993; 1995). Through the acquisition of language, the polymorphous linguistic and imagistic ways in which human beings articulate (make sense of) the world led, beyond the requirements of physical survival and self-perpetuation, to literature, philosophy, art and science as tools for engaging with and managing our environment. In human beings instinct but also reason are the *sine qua non* of survival and continuity. Humans are the only species known to engage in the production of something (culture, as a by-product of reason) which is not only superfluous to the requirements of survival, but expensive as regards the energy-time expenditure necessary to produce it. It may be argued, however, that cultural artefacts, which deal with phenomena as diverse as emotion, ethics and cognition, are in fact powerful species-unique tools, massively advantageous to the animal desideratum of understanding in order to survive. And what could be more urgent than the imperative of understanding the possibility of an end?

**Just Curious**

The fear of irreversible destruction, that which both individual and group instinct must grasp in order to avoid, goes hand in hand with a curiosity
for knowledge detectable in *homo sapiens* as far back as the hunting scenes of Paleolithic cave art, and as recently as current debates on the danger of planetary destruction through global warming, nuclear conflict or scientific experimentation. The CERN Large Hadron Collider had no obvious purpose other than the desire on the part of scientists to witness the original primal scene following which the universe began. The experiment of Wednesday 10 October 2008 aimed to reveal what happened in the first nanosecond after the Big Bang. It also carried a small possibility of unleashing destruction at an inter-galactic level: a rip in the fabric of the universe, orgasm no longer as *petit mort* but as all-encompassing death, the triumph of King Kong’s elemental phallus originating not in Skull Island but inside the human skull, in brains arguably much too clever for the good of us all. ‘Now I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds’ (Oppenheimer, 1945). Or alternatively, ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. Look upon my Works ye mighty and despair’ (Shelley, 1818). It is an old story, much repeated.

The fact that the above passages were originally written on Tuesday 9 October 2008, the day before the launch of the Hadron Collider, on the assumption that they *would* be read, confirms that whatever revelations emerged from Hadron, neither did the experiment rip the fabric of the universe nor did the writer of this really believe it would. Nonetheless, the fact that cosmic annihilation might have occurred but the trial was even so attempted, represents the repetition of a phenomenon inscribed in all our cultural narratives. Despite prior warnings, Pandora’s box *was* opened (in some versions of the story by her husband, not her, although she is usually blamed: *cherchez la femme*). In Greek mythology Pandora was the first woman, created by the Olympian Gods and given in marriage (together with the poisoned dowry of her dangerous box) to the leader of the Titans, in punishment for their theft of fire. Of course the treacherous deities knew the box would be opened. Who could resist it? But, more to the point, why had the Titans stolen fire in the first place? Because they could? Because they were curious? Because they wanted to know what it was?

As a species, we are inquisitive and sometimes greedy. Curiosity is desire, and we want our desires to be satisfied. The control of fire marks a key stage in human prehistory but hindsight being what it is, the first human to play with it did not know that if you play with fire you might get burnt. S/he simply did it for no reason, or perhaps only because it might be fun. Just like Hadron. In the myth of Pandora’s box, once all evils had been
released into the world the only thing left inside the box was hope, and even hope, like fire, turns out to be a mixed blessing. It is because of hope that we keep going when all seems lost, keep looking because something better might be just around the corner, keep attempting to fulfil desire because it might just be possible.

And it is also because we keep going, looking and trying, that things keep going wrong, cyclically, and with the perennial possibility that final satiation might coincide with final annihilation. Which of course by definition it would have to, because once you have attained all, only nothing can follow. Lot’s wife looked back even though the interdiction came from on-high. So did Psyche and Orpheus, even though they stood to lose what they most valued, and in Genesis Eve’s curiosity lost humanity paradise, thereby triggering the first apocalypse in the Judaeo-Christian imagination. On the other hand, Adam could have stopped her, or at least refrained from doing what she suggested, but did not. Why not? If he had, she could not really gainsay him: he was bigger and stronger and he did, after all, have free will. The truth is that like her and like all their descendants thereafter, he too was curious, and although even if we are curious we can stop ourselves if we wish, often we do not. We know it can be dangerous and we are afraid, but we go ahead even so. Owning fire and knowledge brings us closer to being Gods, and we are punished in the attempt. On the other hand, without fire we would sit in the dark, and if unpicked, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge would presumably stay on the branch until it rotted. Curiosity is desire (for Knowledge, carnal or otherwise) and in the end desire overcomes fear and propels the practices and narratives of disciplines as diverse as theoretical physics, theology and the humanities. Curiosity sometimes kills cats (and worlds), but as the word apocalypse in its semantic ramifications indicates, it also opens up new possibilities.

**Same Again, Please**

But the first verdict seemed the worst verdict
When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden,
Yet when the bitter gates clanged to
The sky beyond was just as blue.
For the next ocean is the first ocean
And the last ocean is the first ocean
And, however often the sun may rise,
A new thing dawns upon our eyes. (MacNeice, 2005: 36)
If history repeats itself and each ending leads to a new beginning, does the cycle mean that nothing new is ever possible? That all permutations of meaning have always already been exhausted and no new ones can occur? The Greek term *apokalupsus* or *apokalupsis* implies an unveiling either of future events or of the unseen realms of heaven and hell. It signifies laying bare, making naked; a disclosure of truth, instruction concerning things before unknown; events by means of which things or states or persons hitherto withdrawn from view are made visible to all manifestation; revelation; appearance. James Berger, identifies three meanings of the term apocalypse: first, *eschaton*, referring to the actual imagined end of the world as presented in the Book of Revelation, in millenarian movements and in visions of nuclear or environmental Armageddon; second, significant catastrophes or rupture points which mark the end of something within clear limits, such as for example the Holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11; and third, apocalypse as an uncovering or revelation regarding both the nature of was put an end to and the nature of the alternatives (Berger, 1999: 5).

In all the senses identified by Berger apocalypse evokes not only what was obliterated but also the reason for its destruction, that which made cataclysm deemed to be necessary or even desirable. It gestures, furthermore, to what follows. If apocalypse represents a moment of extreme cultural trauma (Berger, 1999: xvi), the aftermath of it must be a return to equilibrium defined as a state that differs significantly and momentously from what was erased. If what prevailed prior to apocalypse was unacceptable and led to near-wipeout, what follows must be completely different, and the destruction of what was undesirable becomes construable as the *sine qua non* of a new order, built on the remains of what survived. Jehovah flooded the Earth but preserved enough for a new beginning. The establishment of utopia, as discussed in chapter 5, almost without exception demands a prior radical purge.

If, however, in imagining what follows apocalypse, some of what preceded it is preserved and re-visited, the effect of the new (for good or evil) is compromised by the unavoidable influence of this archeological palimpsest on any future development. The concept of reverse evolution already discussed with reference to *The Drowned World* (Ballard, 2008, *Waterworld* (Reynolds, 1995) and *The Simulacra* (Dick, 2004) carries multiple implications on a spectrum which ranges from the biological, to the philosophical, to the metaphysical. Western thought, whether explicitly or implicitly, is structured by a presupposed dialectic of development
that preempts Hegel and dates back to Ancient Greece or possibly earlier. Darwin’s paradigm of ever more adaptive change is only one of many possible formulations of the same principle, and, as a whole, these underpin the fundamental paradigm of Western logic: namely that things, with occasional interruptions, change for the better (evolve). If they either moved backwards or changed for the worse, the conclusion must be eventual annihilation, and that would be equivalent to what is in effect a philosophical impossibility: arrival at a vanishing point, which, like crossing over the line of the horizon, is something that can be articulated in words but has no real meaning.

The imperative of what one might call constructive change explains the difficulty, debated in chapter 3, of linking any understanding of apocalypse to absolute finitude. Structurally, the human intellect may lack the hardware to process the concept of an absolute ending, which would by definition involve constructing the hypothesis of something which is nothing, and which we could not witness because we would not be there. Although we imagine the fear of it (horror vacui) we are not really afraid of it because, as a matter of fact, we cannot imagine it. Therefore, we do not.