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Social Critique in the Major Novels of John Wyndham: Civilization's Secrets and Nature's Truths

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ABSTRACT

Social Critique in the Major Novels of John Wyndham: Civilization's Secrets and Nature's Truths

Mike Green

John Wyndham's four major novels: The Day of the Triffids, The Kraken Wakes, The Chrysalids, and The Midwich Cuckoos. Wyndham has been dismissed by many critics as a writer of "cosy catastrophes", a term coined by Brian Aldiss. This title is meant to suggest that Wyndham's works are critically insignificant, and that, as Nicholas Ruddick suggests, they do not repay serious critical attention. I would argue that not only do Wyndham's works repay critical attention, but that there is consistent social criticism inherent in these works. In the four novels in question, Wyndham seems preoccupied with a number of ideas. He attacks the power of Big Business, Government, and the Military, and what I would characterize as their "Cult of Secrecy". Wyndham also criticizes irrational faith in any ideology, particularly in nationalism, Scientism (or the power of science to solve humanity's problems), and religion. Finally, Wyndham seems specifically concerned with the fate of humankind in light of Darwinian ideas of evolution and survival of the fittest.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris was born in Knowle, Warwickshire, England, on 10 July, 1903[1]. He used a variety of pseudonyms throughout his career (different variations of his real names), but he is best known by the name he published under starting in 1950 with "The Eternal Eve" (Amazing Stories) followed by The Day of the Triffids (1951)--John Wyndham. It is by this name that I shall refer to Harris in the following pages. Wyndham started writing short stories while still in school[2] and began to write professionally (if unsuccessfully) in 1925. Unknown until recently, Wyndham published his first book, a detective novel entitled The Curse of the Burdens, in 1927, although he later suppressed this inferior work (See Ketterer, "Vivisection" 308-309). Wyndham finally succeeded in 1931 with the (to him) more acceptable "Worlds to Barter," in Wonder Stories, under the name of John Beynon Harris.

Wyndham continued to publish in the American pulps through the thirties under a variety of pseudonyms and, on 2 May 1935, published what we now know to be his second novel--The Secret People. This was followed the same year, on 18

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[1]Apparently, even the origins of the "invisible man of Science Fiction"(SF) are clouded in mystery. Wyndham's parents were living in Birmingham at the time of his birth. Why he was delivered at Knowle, some distance from Birmingham, is unknown.

[2]See Ketterer, "'Vivisection': Schoolboy `John Wyndham's' First Publication?"

November, by another detective novel--Foul Play Suspected. His fourth novel, Planet Plane--a story which presages the competing space programs of the 1960's and depicts a nightmarish Martian landscape of techno-cannibalism--followed a year later under the byline: John Beynon. It was republished as Stowaway To Mars in 1953. The early science fiction works owe a great deal to the writings of H.G. Wells, whom Wyndham described as "the writer who could make the marvelous seem commonplace, yet hold the reader enthralled by his plausible narratives, the reality of his characters." (Gillings, "The Writer..." 10)

From August of 1940 to November of 1943, Wyndham served the Ministry of Information as a postal/telegraph censor. In addition to his duties with the Ministry, he also worked as a fire-watcher with the Home Guard from 1942 until November of 1943. In 1943, Wyndham was transferred to the Royal Signal Corps with whom he served as a Lance Corporal cipher-operator attached to the Guards Armored Brigade from 11 June 1944 until 4 September 1945[3]. Wyndham's experiences and service in World War II provide a significant subtext to his post-war works. As a censor, he would have been exposed to the highest levels of paranoia and secrecy (along with much tedium and boredom); his experiences as a fire-watcher,

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[3]See Ketterer, "'Vivisection'" (Foundation version).

like those of his brother,[4] would provide horrifying images of London overwhelmed by disaster. Subsequently, in the Army, Wyndham would have experienced the military bureaucracy, something which he frequently portrayed in his later novels.

After the war, Wyndham found more substantial success with The Day of the Triffids (1951), The Kraken Wakes (1953), The Chrysalids (1955), and The Midwich Cuckoos (1957).[5] Wyndham continued to publish novels and collections of stories until his death in 1969, but it is the four novels of the fifties, which amount to a significant development of the Wellsian model of science fiction, that concern us here.

Wyndham achieved enormous success with those novels which are still in print. The Day of the Triffids, as noted on the cover of the Penguin paperback, has sold over a million copies. Both The Day of the Triffids and The Midwich Cuckoos have made the transition, with varying degrees of success, to the cinema screen. Strangely,

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[4]See Vivian Harris, "My Brother, John Wyndham" 23.

[5]For the alternative titles see "A Chronology of Books... by John Wyndham". For a fairly exhaustive bibliography, see Philip Stephensen-Payne, John Wyndham, Creator of the Cosy Catastophe: A Working Bibliography.

however, there has been a remarkable dearth of critical interest in his work over the years. Many of those critics who have taken an interest in his work dismiss it out of hand, or heap scorn on it. According to Nicholas Ruddick,

> The enormous popularity of Wyndham, especially for his first two post-war novels of disaster, contrasts strikingly with the paucity of critical material on him. The *Index* (1988) to the first forty issues of the British science-fiction review Foundation, since 1972 the most important forum for discussion of British science fiction, includes no direct reference to any of Wyndham's works. The evidence leads one to conclude that they simply do not repay serious critical analysis, and that if the Wyndham oeuvre is of significance, it is perhaps to sociologists interested in the nature of best-sellerdom rather than to literary critics. (Ruddick, 138)

Ruddick's conclusion here is, perhaps, a bit premature. In a field as notoriously fickle as literary criticism (and especially in so comparatively new a branch as SF criticism) a lack of criticism is not necessarily a sign of worthlessness. Fashions and agendas change, and previously overlooked or underappreciated works are re-examined. Perhaps some of Ruddick's hastiness may be attributed to his

reliance on the work of John Scarborough whom he twice cites (138, 140).

Scarborough, it seems, has only a passing acquaintance with Wyndham's work, and it shows in his criticism. For example, in Scarborough's reading of The Day of the Triffids, he neglects the hypothesis in the novel that the "comet shower" which causes wide-spread blindness is not, in fact, a natural phenomenon, but rather the result of a man-made orbital weapon gone awry. Furthermore, he suggests that the narrator, Bill, attempts to restore order to chaos and restore society, "as much to the way it was before as is possible,"(220) despite the fact that the ideal of redemption in the novel is to prevent future generations from repeating former mistakes. Scarborough's reading of The Kraken Wakes is equally inaccurate. He recalls

> a creature from the bottom of the sea. It owes its existence (again) to falling stars of a sort, "fireballs" that somehow mutate a somber animal into a magnificent threat to land dwellers and seagoing vessels. (Wyndham is not interested in the particulars of why such mutations occur, only that they do occur -- and that they cause disasters that disrupt his orderly picture of life.) (220-21)

Scarborough's (parenthetical) interjections might be more

useful were he surer of his material. The "xenobaths", as is made fairly clear in the novel, are not based on any terrestrial species but journey to Earth in the "Fireballs." Wyndham's style is far too subtle for him to state this explicitly, but it is clear enough that the xenobaths aren't mutants; they are most probably extraterrestrials who use a sort of previously unknown bio-technology (an idea of Wyndham's which, in SF, was far ahead of its time). Finally, the implication that Wyndham is interested primarily in the spectacle of senseless disaster is patently absurd when applied to The Kraken Wakes, which focuses largely on politics and the media rather than on senseless disaster. Unsurprisingly, Scarborough's readings of The Chrysalids and The Midwich Cuckoos are equally skewed. In the case of The Chrysalids, Scarborough suggests that the novel is set in New England, when it is expressly set in Labrador--a minor (if obvious) error. What is not so minor, however, is his misleading thematic interpretation of the novel: "those who are different must seek those like themselves, and must leave the company of 'the Norm'"(221). The only members of "the Norm" in the novel who are portrayed as sympathetic characters are those whose ideas are most inimical to it. The heroes of the novel (not merely a different kind of human, but a different species

altogether) leave human society in the knowledge (shared with the reader) that it is doomed to perish. Scarborough reads this as a crypto-endorsement of apartheid (222). Finally, the Other, in The Midwich Cuckoos, is not forced to leave so that "Midwich can go back to what it was before the intrusion took place: a small, calm, nondescript English village"(222). Rather, the alien children are blown up, leaving the knowledge that the human race can never again feel securely dominant on the planet Earth.

Nevertheless, Scarborough actually seems to like Wyndham's work, or at least have some measure of respect for it (while clearly not knowing it very well). Another critic, who seems, despite some rather dismissive criticism, to actually like Wyndham's work is Brian Aldiss. Aldiss comments particularly on Wyndham's first two post-war "disaster" novels, and on his readers, when he argues that, "Both novels were totally devoid of ideas but read smoothly, and thus reached a maximum audience, who enjoyed cosy disasters" (Billion Year Spree 294). Aldiss describes the main elements of the "cosy catastrophe," as follows: "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"(294). While The Day of the Triffids and The Kraken Wakes may, superficially, be described in these

terms, The Chrysalids and The Midwich Cuckoos do not really fall within this mould at all. To suggest that any of these four novels are "totally devoid of ideas" implies a very superficial reading of them. But, to reiterate, both Aldiss and Scarborough (who repeats Aldiss's claim that Wyndham's books are "totally devoid of ideas"[219]) seem to like Wyndham's work despite the shortcomings they perceive. Ruddick, on the other hand, sees nothing to admire and seems intent to show Wyndham at a disadvantage; this intent is, perhaps, pursued at the expense of close or accurate interpretations of the works in question. Ruddick argues that:

> The enormous popularity of Wyndham suggests that a large readership was prepared to collaborate with his desire to express the anxiety of supercession without feeling any responsibility to analyze the origin and nature of the anxiety. Wyndham's catastrophes embody anxiety in the form of a vague external threat, offer consolation for this anxiety and even the hope of recovery it--without ever requiring readers to confront its nature, to articulate what is offered as unspeakable. This is disaster fiction for those who "prefer not to think too closely." (140)

In this last sentence, Ruddick quotes Mike Watson (the

narrator of The Kraken Wakes 15) who is expressing his anxiety regarding the future possibility of another alien invasion. While Watson never explicitly states this fear, the inference is there for the reader to gather. This is a quintessential example of all that Ruddick finds wrong with Wyndham's work--Wyndham's literary subtlety seems to be, in Ruddick's eyes, his greatest flaw. This is criticism for those who prefer not to read too closely. To begin with, Wyndham's novels--at least the four major works from the fifties--are not about supercession, at least not on the level that Ruddick is talking about. Ruddick's approach is too general, too psychological, and he misses the trees, looking at the forest. In an attempt to psychoanalyze Wyndham, or because of the thwarted expectation that SF writers ought to psychoanalyze society, Ruddick ignores what Wyndham has to say.

On the other hand, several critics recently have examined Wyndham's work in a more favourable light. In the unfortunately titled "Skiffy Stuff", Maureen Speller argues that there is more than meets the eye in John Wyndham's "cosy catastrophes". She proposes that one reason a writer of Wyndham's stature has received comparatively little criticism is that most critics would have read his books in their youth and, as a result, remember only the most

superficial details of his work. L.J. Hurst, in two articles, compares Wyndham favourably to George Orwell in terms of technical sophistication while quoting Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove's assessment of literary style in the Sixties: "Growing stylistic awareness was, to a great extent, kept in check by economic necessity" (Trillion Year Spree Ch 12). Hurst adds, with reference to Orwell and Wyndham, that "the difference between those with style who chose the medium of their narrative to carry out part of the work and those without style was clear twenty years before"("Remembrance" 17). The underlying rationale of both Hurst and Speller's argument seems to be, as I have suggested, that Wyndham's poor critical reputation is largely due to critical neglect. Rowland Wymer, in a 1992 article, supports this view of the critical discourse and questions Aldiss's labelling of Wyndham as the master of the "cosy catastrophe":

> What is missing in all this is any attempt to articulate the consistent vision which runs through all his major work and which turns out to be far from "comfortable". Also absent is any close reading of a particular novel which would in practice uncover complexities more likely to stir up controversy than evade it. (26)

Wymer pays particular attention to The Chrysalids; in this thesis I intend to examine all four of Wyndham's major works from the 1950s: The Day of the Triffids, The Kraken Wakes, The Chrysalids, and The Midwich Cuckoos. Traditionally, these four novels are examined both chronologically and (in a shallow way) topically. The standard approach is to look at the two "monster"/disaster novels (The Day of the Triffids and The Kraken Wakes) and then the two novels about telepathic children (The Chrysalids and The Midwich Cuckoos).

While it is certainly significant that Wyndham published these novels in pairs (as it were), I would argue that grouping them in this fashion may cause some significant thematic issues to be obscured or ignored. Within these thematic issues, which compose what Wymer characterizes as Wyndham's "consistent vision", I would distinguish three interconnected categories. The first theme is "Human as Animal", subject to Darwinian ideas of evolution and (especially) competition, with "Humanity" as its own worst enemy. This is the theme most often discussed in serious criticism of Wyndham's work and the theme that Wymer examines with reference to The Chrysalids.

The second and third themes are more difficult to separate. Hegemony, or overwhelming authority of any sort,

seems to be a very serious concern of Wyndham. Whether it's the Military, Government, or Industry, Wyndham is extremely suspicious of any sort of hegemonic power, and especially of the control or subversion of truth (in the form of propaganda, censorship, or "brainwashing") which results from such power. The last issue is, perhaps mostly, just a manifestation of the third--blind faith--in anything, but particularly in science and in religion. As Wyndam sees it, this blind faith is encouraged by the ruling powers through propaganda or brainwashing. It is the greatest danger to the survival of the human race.

While all of these themes or issues are present to a greater or lesser extent in all four of Wyndham's major novels, I shall, in the following pages, break with convention--examining The Day of the Triffids along with The Midwich Cuckoos, and The Kraken Wakes with The Chrysalids--in the hopes of highlighting what Wymer describes as Wyndham's "consistent vision". My primary approach will be close comparative reading supplemented occasionally with historical and biographical details.

TRIFFIDS AND CUCKOOS: DARWINISM OR CHRISTIAN VALUES?

John Wyndham was, above all, a novelist, not a philosopher, and as such, he tied his philosophy--his critical ideas--to his stories. Wyndham was not, however, just a storyteller, not merely a creator of "cosy catastrophes." In even the most fantastic of his novels, there is, at least, the recognizable shadow of his own society, and implicit in that shadow, a critique of the status quo. So, just as Wyndham is subtle in his social and political criticism, so must we be in our reading of his work. An examination, then, of the social and political critique inherent in Wyndham's work is perhaps best approached somewhat obliquely.

In George Orwell's attack on H.G. Wells, he alludes to one of the main issues which would later come to preoccupy Wyndham.

> Hitler is all the war-lords and witch-doctors in history rolled into one. Therefore, argues Wells, he is an absurdity, a ghost from the past, a creature doomed to disappear almost immediately. But unfortunately the equation of science with common sense does not really hold good. The aeroplane, which was looked forward to as a civilizing influence but in practice has hardly been used except for dropping bombs, is the symbol of that fact. Modern Germany is far more scientific than England, and far more

> barbarous. Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age. Science is fighting on the side of superstition. (163-4)

The question in one form or another arises in Wyndham's major works--on the side of what ideas is science fighting now? Or, how do lingering Stone Age ideas hold science in thrall? It was not Hitler after all who dropped the first atomic bombs. How is it that, after the defeat of the Axis powers, military research intensified rather than waned in both the East and the West? Who did Hitler's scientists go to work for after the war? Wyndham is not anti-science, but certainly a healthy suspicion of science as a tool in the hands of industry or the military is apparent in his major works. Wyndham rarely, if ever, attacks either the individual scientist or the individual soldier--it is neither science, itself, nor the profession of soldiery which concern him but, rather, the closed and secret circle of government "planners", working for "the common good". At issue is the actual desirability of what they work for, and the ability of Humanity to assimilate responsibly the changes that science brings. Wyndham's wartime experiences

may very well be at the root of this preoccupation. As a censor, he himself would have been a small part of that closed circle and would have seen first-hand that the authorities were not sainted champions of the commonweal but merely men (rather than women) with agendas of their own. As a soldier in the Signals Corps, he would have experienced the hierarchical structure of the Military which necessitates a vast body of men being kept in the dark; their immediate superiors would have been only slightly more enlightened, and so on up the chain of command.

The horrors in The Day of the Triffids and The Midwich Cuckoos appear either directly or indirectly as a result of Military/Industrial interference with science. This occurs not only in some real or imagined dystopian dictatorship but also in the democratic west. In The Midwich Cuckoos, Dr. Willers observes that, "One has got used to the idea of military interference with science in a number of fields--a lot of it totally unnecessary..."(100). A true enough observation, but why is that? Why is there no general outcry or revolt despite the fact that, as another of Wyndham's characters recalls (after what amounts to Armageddon) in The Day of the Triffids:

> From 6 August 1945, the margin of survival has narrowed appallingly. Indeed, two days ago it was narrower than it is at this moment. If you needed to

> dramatize, you could well take for your material the years succeeding the year 1945 when the path of safety started to shrink to a tight-rope along which we had to walk with our eyes deliberately closed to the depths beneath us. (115)

Generally speaking, Wyndham, here, is alluding to the possibility of nuclear war after the examples of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but his character is referring not only to this but also to a host of other elements in the world of the novel. The "Triffids," for example, are mobile, dangerous, and seemingly sentient plants, "the outcome of a series of ingenious biological meddlings--and very likely accidental at that"(27). This last hypothesis (which makes The Day of the Triffids perhaps the first work of fiction to treat the now very contemporary topic of genetically engineered crops) is speculative, but it functions as a literary device; an omniscient, definite account of the origin of the triffids (who originate on Venus in one version) would certainly detract both from the air of menace surrounding them, and from the sense of verisimilitude in the novel. Later, Wyndham's narrator, who formerly made his living working with triffids, muses on the ethical/philosophical ramifications of the creation of them:

> I saw them now with a disgust that they had never

> roused in me before. Horrible alien things which some of us had somehow created and which the rest of us in our senseless greed had cultured all over the world. One could not even blame nature for them. Somehow they had been bred--just as we bred ourselves beautiful flowers, or grotesque parodies of dogs. (197)

As alien as they may seem, the triffids are no more so than a new breed of tulip or a French poodle--man-made creations all. It seems that the narrator's disgust is not with the triffids themselves but, rather, (in the triffids from Earth scenario) with the perverted instinct behind their creation.

The apocalypse in The Day of the Triffids is not merely a result of the creation of the triffids, however. It is instead, a sort of compound disaster; the triffids only gain free reign after another man-made horror--a satellite--goes awry. The narrator describes the advent of a sort of orbital missile (not utterly unlike an ICBM) developed in both the East and West carrying not only atomic weapons but also "such things as crop diseases, cattle diseases, radioactive dusts, viruses, and infections not only of familiar kinds, but brand-new sorts recently thought up in laboratories, all floating around up there" (28-9).

Why are such things developed? This question is

perhaps most succinctly answered in a passage from The Midwich Cuckoos explaining why Military Intelligence not only tolerated but actively encouraged and protected a population of changelings in Midwich as a bulwark against a similar population in Russia:

> The War Office view being that it did not know quite what we had here, or what the Russians had there. But if it should turn out that the Russians had a flock of potential geniuses, it would be useful for us to have a similar flock to put up against them? (190)

This subject is still very much alive in SF; if the word "monster" were substituted for the word "genius" in the passage cited above, one would have a fairly accurate summary of the movie Aliens[1] and its sequels. Why does this Cold War/Arms Race continue despite the obvious dangers involved? Wyndham, I think, sees it in terms similar to those outlined by C.S. Lewis:

> I am a democrat because I believe that no man or group of men is good enough to be trusted with uncontrolled power over others. And the higher the pretensions of such power, the more dangerous I think it both to the rulers and to the subjects. Hence Theocracy is the worst of all governments.... The inquisitor who

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[1]dir. James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 1986.

> mistakes his own cruelty and lust of power and fear for the voice of Heaven will torment us infinitely because he torments us with the approval of his own conscience and his better impulses appear to him as temptations. And since Theocracy is the worst, the nearer any government approaches to Theocracy, the worse it will be. A metaphysic, held by the rulers with the force of a religion, is a bad sign. It forbids them, like the inquisitor, to admit any grain of truth or good in their opponents, it abrogates the ordinary rules of morality, and it gives a seemingly high, super-personal sanction to all the very ordinary human passions by which, like other men, the rulers will frequently be actuated. In a word, it forbids wholesome doubt. ("A Reply..." 81)

While it is unlikely that Wyndham would have stated it in these terms, this seems nevertheless to be the dynamic he perceives in the Cold War (with the added proviso that not even the "democrat" is safe from the "theocratization" of government). Not only the post-revolutionary government of the Soviet Union, but also the governments of the democratic West see themselves as morally right in opposing the other. In the Machiavellian sense, anything is justified in order to thwart the "Godless communists" or the "Imperialistic

West." What Wyndham seems to suggest is that the Cold War, in Lewis's terms, "forbids wholesome doubt." If American scientists discover the secret of a weapon which could destroy the earth, they must produce it since, in all likelihood, the Soviets will. The average person's horror at the idea of producing a world-destroying weapon becomes irrelevant because: (1) successive scientific discoveries implemented hastily and thoughtlessly have weakened his/her resistance to further discoveries and, (2) because he/she does not even necessarily know about it--secrecy becomes paramount in an attempt to gain an advantage over the other side. This last point may have its roots in Wyndham's wartime service with the Ministry of Information. As a postal/telegraph censor, Wyndham would have been responsible for enforcing secrecy--censoring topics whose specific importance was often entirely obscure to him, but which appeared on "classified topics" lists.

Wyndham has a great deal to say about society's reaction to the galloping pace of scientific advances in the twentieth century, and little of it is uncritically laudatory. One of his more thoughtful, philosophical characters (Gordon Zellaby, in The Midwich Cuckoos) muses on the dilemma of social change keeping pace with scientific change:

> `it is a trifle demodé even to perceive the existence of the problem. The true fruit of this century has little interest in coming to living-terms with innovations; it just greedily grabs them all as they come along. Only when it encounters something really big does it become aware of a social problem at all, and then, rather than make concessions, it yammers for the impossibly easy way out, uninvention, suppression--as in the matter of The Bomb.'
>
> `...Luckily, we in the West still retain the skeleton of our ethics, but there are signs that the old bones are finding the weight of new knowledge difficult to carry with confidence, don't you think?' (19)

It is Zellaby's contemplative and conservative nature that determines the comparatively mild phrasing of this sentiment-- "there are signs that the old bones are finding the weight of new knowledge difficult to carry...". The 1950s in particular were a strange time in terms of science and society--families contemplated sitting through thirty years of nuclear winter in bomb shelters, children were taught to hide under desks in case of nuclear attack, and cars were designed to look like spaceships. In Religion, Philosophy, and Science (1957), a text popularizing scientific positivism published in the same year as The

Midwich Cuckoos, Burnham P. Peckworth proudly proclaimed that, "in advanced states, eugenic reform is the most promising of all scientific methods for making men healthier and happier." (216) The author proudly boasts that, "scientists can help both to breed and to train men who would want to do things which few or no living men now want to do." (217) The "old bones" of morality may well find the prospect of eugenic reform "difficult to carry." In a later novel, The Trouble With Lichen, Wyndham goes right to the point about society's increasing acceptance of scientific discoveries, describing it as:

> a feeling that the goings-on of science had got so far beyond ordinary human control, and any new discovery now came so nearly into the category of Act of God, that it was scarcely worth troubling oneself to try to do anything about them. (185)

This idea of perceiving scientific discoveries in the "Act of God" category ties in with Lewis's "Dangers of Theocracy" idea. If new scientific advances are seen in the same light as "Acts of God" then there's little one can do about them; there is no room, or impetus even, for consideration as to the desirability of the thing (or "wholesome doubt"). This is interesting, especially when one considers that Lewis is not speaking specifically about the Cold War when he refers

to the "dangers of Theocracy" but, rather, of the likelihood that, "Under modern conditions any effective invitation to Hell will certainly appear in the guise of scientific planning--as Hitler's regime in fact did" (80). If a government can take almost unlimited liberties with science when using it to counter either "the godless communists" or "the decadent warmongers of the West," how far might it not go? Wyndham seems to suggest that it would stop at almost nothing.

Of course the other side of the "Cold War" coin is secrecy. Certainly, Wyndham seems to suggest that the public can be made to swallow practically any discovery, since its resistance to such discoveries has been seemingly reduced to nil. What, on the other hand, if the public never hears about it in the first place? All four of Wyndham's major novels from the 1950s deal to a greater or lesser extent with the idea of propaganda, and with official and unofficial secrecy. Occasionally, this appears in the form of a critique of religious dogma. Wyndham was by no means what Lewis would have characterized as a "co-religionist", and enthusiastic followers of the Christian Church often receive extremely short shrift in his novels.[2]

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[2]While Wyndham and his wife Grace were to remain childless, Wyndham did unofficially "adopt" the children of his friend Biff Barker as his literary heirs. When one of

Despite this, the sympathetic Zellaby in The Midwich Cuckoos, remarking on "our ancestors," suggests that "they only had to suffer religious dogmatism, which was not so dogmatic as scientific dogmatism" (106). In fact, Wyndham saves most of his criticism not for religious propaganda, or dogmatism, but rather for official propaganda and secrecy.

In The Midwich Cuckoos, the "weight of new knowledge" seems to create an atmosphere of uneasiness and encourages an almost institutionalized conspiratorial secrecy. The government either do not want people to know, or think it better for them if they do not know, what is really going on, what the latest development is. Even among its own departments, the Government seems to maintain a thick cloud of secrecy, and uses the Ministry of Information and Military Intelligence to enforce it. But it is not only the Government/Military that practices secrecy--the people of Midwich become adept producers of disinformation with no trouble at all. In The Midwich Cuckoos, Wyndham shows us a society where secrecy, propaganda, and disinformation are the norm.

Perhaps one of the most insidious and least obvious examples of the acceptance of propaganda or disinformation in the novel occurs early when Midwich, which had "lived and

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these children--Marion Tess Barker--made clear her intention to become a cloistered nun, she was disinherited.

drowsed upon its good soil in Arcadian undistinction for a thousand years"(12), prepares for bed one night:

> Many cottage windows still threw yellow beams into the mild evening where they glistened in the dampness of an earlier shower. The occasional surges of voices and laughter which swept the place were not local; they originated with a well handled studio-audience miles away and several days ago.... (22)

What Wyndham seems to be describing here derives from television and radio, but the two most important elements of the passage are "not local" and "well-handled." This can be looked at as a sort of foreshadowing of the immanent invasion of Midwich, but more importantly, it signifies the extent to which the town and its inhabitants have accepted both the new medium and its "well-handled" contents. Midwich, while not exactly cut off from civilization, has existed in a certain degree of isolation, but it nevertheless has easily become integrated into the age of mass communications. This is more telling when set off, a few lines later, against the traditional mode of recreation and information exchange (the local pub)--"The Scythe and Stone" (whose very name hearkens back to a pre-industrial past). As Zellaby would have it, no one has "perceive[d] the existence of the problem"(19). The "problem," in this

case, is the supplanting of a traditional mode of communication (one which involved people speaking directly to people about matters of common importance and interest), with a new one which distances people from each other and disseminates carefully "handled," or purposefully adulterated, information. Some of the consequences of this become apparent when Zellaby explains the success of the cover-up of the Children to his son-in-law, Allan:

> They must have heard fairly fully I imagine, but they choose to believe that that is all a tale to cover up something more normal, but disgraceful.... That is unless it should get into print. On the word of a newspaper, of course, eighty or ninety percent would swing to the opposite extreme, and believe anything. (82)

The new emphasis on institutionalized dissemination of information--whether in newspapers, by radio, or on television--has replaced (or at least weakened) people's belief in the spoken word, and first-hand knowledge of the world. This emphasis on pre-treated news (propaganda) becomes an invaluable tool for preserving official secrecy.

An interesting example of the generally accepted atmosphere of secrecy is "The Grange." The traditional country manor has been transformed into the research

facility of some unknown government ministry[3]. Rather than becoming a focus of local gossip, or speculation, the inhabitants of Midwich accept the intrusion of "the Ministry" with little or no question. When Midwich's history is narrated, the reader learns that there has been no industrial or institutional presence in the village until "the Ministry intruded, and the reconditioning of the Grange had little effect upon the village life" (12). Slightly later in the novel, as Wyndham describes a perfectly normal evening in Midwich, there is another reference to The Grange:

> Lights still burnt in one or two of the new laboratories shouldered on to The Grange, but there was nothing unusual in that; it was common for one or two Researchers to conduct their mysterious pursuits late into the night. (16)

In this passage, the "Researchers" are viewed akin to young Victor Frankensteins. The villagers have no idea what is going on in the laboratories, and neither do they seem to care very much. All anyone seems to know about the Grange, is that "it is very hush" (49). When things become

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[3]This seems to be a recurring site of suspicion for Wyndham. In an earlier story, reminiscent of Wells' The Island of Doctor Moreau, a converted country manor is used as a laboratory for research into splicing humans and animals. See Ketterer, "'Vivisection'".

uncomfortable at the Grange it disappears:

> A fine bit of service organization: the researchers first heard about it on Monday, the vans arrived on Wednesday, and by the week-end the house and the expensive new laboratories stood blank-windowed and empty, leaving the villagers with the feeling that they had seen a bit of pantomime magic.... (116)

As apparently mysterious as the Grange is (in its own mundane fashion), it does provide a plausible excuse for another of the official bodies of state secrecy to intrude on Midwich after the Dayout (the twenty-four hour period at the beginning of the novel, wherein a mysterious force plunges all of Midwich into an unnatural sleep). Military Intelligence is the government's way of keeping things secret, and it appears in the form of Colonel Bernard Westcott, as soon as the situation at Midwich becomes known. The narrator, Richard Gayford, is acquainted with Westcott, and in the following conversation he attempts to discover MI's specific interest in Midwich:

> 'Yes. The Grange comes within my scope, and naturally anything untoward in its neighborhood interests us. This, one might call very untoward, don't you think?'
>
> 'Us' I had already gathered from his self-

> introduction before the conference, could be either Military Intelligence in general, or his particular department of it.
>
> 'I thought,' I said, 'that the Special Branch looked after that kind of thing.'
>
> 'There are various angles,' he said, vaguely, and changed the subject. (39)

In this exchange, Westcott is very vague indeed, and he gives practically nothing away. Nevertheless, the Grange seems a likely enough reason for MI's interest in Midwich. After the Dayout, both the Military and Military Intelligence conduct tests of the affected area. In the following passage the narrator, Gayford, describes the activities of the Military and the movements of his friend, Colonel Westcott.

> The visible focus of attention was close to the Abbey ruins where a guard was posted to protect a large dent in the ground which certainly looked as if something massive had rested there for a while. Engineers had measured this phenomenon, made sketches, and taken photographs of it. Technicians of various kinds had then tramped back and forth across it, carrying mine-detectors, geiger-counters, and other subtle gear. Then, abruptly, the Military lost all interest in it,

and withdrew.

> Investigations at the Grange went on a little longer, and among those occupied with them was Bernard Westcott. He dropped in to see us several times, but he told us nothing of what was going on.... (47-8)

While the Grange remains, its presence and MI's interest in it are enough to keep most evidence of the Dayout out of the press. A number of significant tacit acceptances occur here. To begin with, everyone in Midwich (or almost everyone--more on this later) figures that the presence of the Grange was the reason the Dayout occurred at Midwich; on top of this, everyone--MI, the Military in general, and the villagers--accepts that the Dayout should not be mentioned in the press. Why is this the case? In the first instance, everyone assumes the presence of the Grange is the root of the Dayout because, in Gayford's words, "What other reason could there be--in Midwich?"(50). The village, itself, is perceived by its inhabitants as essentially inconsequential--its only officially important aspect being the Grange and whatever goes on there. On the other hand, the reasons for keeping it out of the press are twofold. Zellaby explains:

> `But for your presence, and the consequent Security interest,' he said, `we should without doubt have suffered a visitation far worse than that of the

> Dayout. Our privacy would have been ravaged, our susceptibilities outraged by the three modern Furies, the awful sisterhood of the printed word, the recorded word, and the picture.' (52-3)

While many of the inhabitants of Midwich are perfectly comfortable watching television, almost none of them are comfortable with the idea of becoming fodder for it and the rest of the mass media. One might say that this particular innovation (the mass media) has developed faster than people can adapt to it. So between the Military, and their unquestioned "security angle"--that is to say the undesirability of publicity for whatever happens at the Grange--and the general disinclination to become fodder for the media, all can agree on the importance of disinforming and muzzling the press. The efficiency with which this takes place, warrants attention in itself.

During and after the Dayout, the Military and Military Intelligence take responsibility for keeping things secret. In one passage, Colonel Westcott reassures another officer that steps have already been taken to keep the press silent: "`That, at least, needn't worry you much,' Bernard told him. `There's been a Home Office advice on this already'" (35). During this period, that is really all it takes, and none of the official behaviour is seen as in any way peculiar.

When the general pregnancy is realized however, and especially after the Children are born, the practice of secrecy takes on a different character. Military Intelligence remains, for reasons no one can fathom, interested in the situation, and the village takes on the task of preserving secrecy with remarkable skill and alacrity. One phrase that is repeated again and again in the novel, in one form or another, is, to paraphrase, "What does all this have to do with Military Intelligence?" While the Grange remains in Midwich, the villagers more or less accept the presence (or at least interest) of the Military as normal. Once the laboratories are emptied, however, their continued interest becomes more difficult for the locals to accept. The village doctor voices this concern: "In the first place, I do not see why M.I. is concerned in this at all: in the second, that it should be, apparently, an exclusive concern of theirs is outrageous"(100). Dr. Willers further mentions that "One has got used to the idea of military interference with science in a number of fields...but this is really preposterous!"(100). Regardless of why M.I. is interested in the Children, they do go to great lengths to preserve their secrecy--or at least, this seems to be the case. M.I. remains characteristically terse on the subject, and we learn more from the other characters'

speculation than we learn from Westcott. At one point, Zellaby suggests that "the unperceived official machinations to keep all of this quiet must have been quite considerable"(111). At one point Westcott does go so far as to say of the Children, "my Department doesn't want them publicized"(130). This is, however, the most he ever says (until his final revelation of the other colonies of Children around the world).

There are numerous mentions in the novel of Westcott's professional reticence. Westcott takes Gayford along with him to investigate the Dayout but never actually reveals his reasons for doing so or his interest in the situation generally. Gayford describes the situation to his wife later by saying, "He seemed to have second thoughts and become more reserved altogether once we actually got close to it"(40). Westcott maintains a fairly steadfast silence on his interest in the Children throughout the novel, but even after he reveals the existence of the other colonies, he quickly reverts to official secrecy. When questioned on his, or his department's, plans for the Children, his reply is, "If I had any ideas I suppose they'd have to be official secrets"(192).

What is, perhaps, more remarkable than M.I.'s efforts to keep Midwich's Children a secret, is Midwich's own

efforts in that direction. Once Dr. Willers and Zellaby realize the pregnancy situation, they swiftly and effectively adopt a strategy of secrecy and propaganda to prevent the spread of this news. They call a general meeting of women in Midwich, and Mrs. Zellaby presents a warning speech:

> ...I warn you that if this should become generally known it will be argued in every club and pub, with a great many nasty insinuations--unless then, we want to be exposed to that, and then to the very real possibility that our babies will be taken away from us on one excuse or another by doctors and scientists, we must, every one of us, resolve not to mention, or even hint outside the village, at the present state of affairs....
>
> If people in Trayne, or elsewhere, are inquisitive, or strangers come here asking questions, we must, for our babies' sakes, and our own, tell them nothing. But we must not simply be silent and secretive, as if we were concealing something. We must make it seem that there is nothing unusual in Midwich at all. (71-2)

In this passage, we can see the fundamental dynamic of the novel taking place. The fear, or discomfort, with the idea

of becoming the target of the mass media couples with a fundamental distrust of the scientific establishment to form the will to secrecy. While the desire for privacy may be an archetypally English trait, the dispatch with which the villagers successfully mount a propaganda campaign would be grossly exaggerated if it were merely for the effect of verisimilitude.

Ironically enough, it would be far better for the villagers if the babies were taken away by scientists and doctors, and better for the human race if the newspapers did get wind of the story--it is the atmosphere of secrecy that allows the Children time to safely develop their powers. Late in the novel, some of the characters are discussing the confrontational situation that has arisen, and Zellaby makes the point that

> it has come earlier than the Children themselves would wish, too. They know they are not ready to face it. That is why they want to get away to some place where they can reach maturity unmolested. (207-8)

The only reason the Children have been able to develop thus far is because of the aura of secrecy surrounding them. Once that secrecy is removed--even partially--the Children realize that Midwich is no longer safe for them, and the need to move somewhere else (presumably somewhere secret)

becomes apparent.

Another instance of the danger of secrecy with regards to the Children appears when Westcott reveals the simultaneous arrival of other groups of Children:

> There may have been other places we didn't hear of. It's pretty certain it happened in some places in South America and in Africa, too, but it's difficult to check. The inhabitants tend to be secretive. It's even possible that an isolated village would miss a day and not know it -- in which case the babies would be even more of a puzzle. In most of the cases we do know of, the babies were regarded as freaks, and were killed, but we suspect that in some they may have been hidden away. (189-90)

This example is somewhat problematic, in that the aura of secrecy seems unrelated to anxiety regarding technology or the media, but can be resolved when one considers that what the babies were "hidden away" from was the scrutiny of Imperialistic powers (purveyors of anxiety-generating and culture-disrupting technology). Aside from this problem, however, the passage does suggest (1) that the Children stand the best chance of fully developing their powers when cloaked by secrecy, and (2) that what may seem--to Brian Aldiss at least--to be a "cosy disaster" (the appearance of

the Children in Midwich, and their tidy destruction), is substantially less cosy when one realizes that similar groups likely exist unchallenged, safely secreted away. The general atmosphere of secrecy, which has become accepted almost as the norm, very nearly spells (or may yet spell) the end of the human race.

This state of secrecy is described clearly by Colonel Latcher during the Dayout, and can be applied both to Military technology in general and to the Children in particular:

> Trouble is, for all we know it may be some little trick of our own gone wrong. So much damned secrecy nowadays that nobody knows anything. Don't know what the other chap has; don't even know what you may have to use yourself. All these scientist fellers in back rooms ruining the profession. Can't keep up with what you don't know. Soldiering'll soon be nothing but wizards and wires. (35)

Part of the problem outlined by the Colonel is not knowing "what the other chap has...." In this case, "the other chap" refers most likely to the Soviet Union, as another officer later mentions, "Never know what these Ivans are up to"(38). Essentially, the rationale runs like this--since we don't know what the Russians have (in terms of

technology), we had better not let anyone know what we have. In this kind of situation everything becomes secret--everything becomes strategically important. Near the end of the novel, Westcott reveals that the reason Midwich's Children are kept a secret is because the Russians apparently have a batch of their own:

> The War Office view being that it did not know quite what we had here, or what the Russians had there. But <u>if</u> it should turn out that the Russians had a flock of potential geniuses, it would be useful for us to have a similar flock to put up against them? (190)

Once the danger presented by the existence of the Children becomes generally known in Midwich, Military Intelligence (which heretofore had been sort of mysteriously helpful in keeping Midwich's secret), becomes villainized and is seen as responsible for the rise of the Children. As Mrs. Zellaby puts it, when arguing against going to try and stop the villagers from burning down the Grange:

> Colonel Westcott, you would do more harm than good.
>
> You are identified with the Children's interest. (160)

But the rise of the Children is not, strictly speaking, Military Intelligence's fault. This relates to the second point brought up by Colonel Latcher, essentially that, you "don't even know what you may have to use yourself"(35).

In a certain sense, what Latcher says applies directly to the way the authorities handle the Midwich problem. An excellent example of this occurs early in the novel, when "a desiccated-looking couple called Freeman"(116) arrive in Midwich to study the Children. The ironically named Freemans are portrayed as spies. They spend their time "lurking and peering" and, "insinuating themselves"(116). While they are apparently employed by "an unspecified official body"(116), Westcott and Military Intelligence seem to know almost nothing about them. When Gayford inquires after them, Westcott replies that "they were nothing to do with his department, but that their appointment was authentic"(117). This sort of atmosphere, where you "don't even know what you may have to use yourself," is reflected repeatedly in the novel. Above all, it generates (and is generated by) an anxiety about the role of science and technological innovation in society (undoubtedly a sentiment intensified in the atomic age), especially a society in which "One has got used to the idea of military interference with science in a number of fields"(100). Zellaby comments on the problems inherent in living in an age dominated by science, when discussing the phenomenon of the Children:

> But if the type is unknown, the phenomenon is not--our ancestors, who did not have Willer's blind faith

> in the articles of science--had a word for it: they called such beings changelings. None of this business would have seemed as strange to them as it does to us because they had only to suffer religious dogmatism, which was not so dogmatic as scientific dogmatism. (106)

Nevertheless, it is clear that this "scientific dogmatism" is the order of the day, and even though many may be suspicious of it, it is securely dominant. This attack on "scientific dogmatism," or "scientism" links Wyndham with C.S. Lewis who criticized Wells in this respect. One example of this criticism appears in Lewis's That Hideous Strength (1989), wherein he models the character Horace Jules on Wells:

> (since) any science he knew was that taught him at the University of London over fifty years ago, and any philosophy he knew had been acquired from writers like Haeckel and Joseph McCabe and Winwood Reade, it was not, in fact, possible to talk to him about most of the things the Institute was really doing. (The Cosmic Trilogy 704)

Lewis suggests that Jules' (and Wells') faith in science is just that, Faith--based on unreasoned ideas. In this same vein, Wyndham would argue that the Military's use of

technology or science is similarly unreasoned.

Colonel Latcher (an opponent of scientific dogmatism, insofar as it affects the profession of soldiering) exhibits this fear of science, when he suggests that the Dayout "may be some little trick of our own gone wrong"(35). In this atmosphere, not even the Military know what technology they have at their disposal, but they are suspicious enough of it to speculate on the possibility of something going wrong.

Westcott echoes this sentiment a few pages later, when arguing with Gayford about what may have happened during the Dayout.

> `No visible effect,' he repeated. `That means rather little nowadays, doesn't it? You can, for instance, have quite a serious dose of X-rays, gamma-rays, and others, without immediate visible effect.' (50)

"Nowadays," there seem to be all sorts of "scientific horrors" out there, perhaps to the extent that the arrival of the Children is nothing more than a manifestation of the developing trend. If it had not been the Children, could it not just as easily have been something else--the Atom Bomb, gamma-rays, genetically engineered viruses, or something we have yet to hear of?

How is it that normal people can go about the daily

business of living with the ever present threat of extinction hanging over their heads? In The Day of the Triffids, Wyndham's narrator, William Masen,[4] considers, at one point, the extent to which people are reconciled to their routine and are ignorant of the dangers that surround them:

> the amount we did not know and did not care to know about our daily lives is not only astonishing but somehow a bit shocking. I knew practically nothing, for instance, of such ordinary things as how my food reached me, where the fresh water came from, how the clothes I wore were woven and made, how the drainage of cities kept them healthy. Our life had become a complexity of specialists, all attending to their own jobs with more or less efficiency and expecting others to do the same. (16)

Even in the light of this "complexity of specialists",

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[4]It should be noted that the narrators of Wyndham's first two major works of the 1950s--The Day of the Triffids and The Kraken Wakes--William Masen and Mike Watson, have the same initials reversed; "W" and "M" are the first and last letters of the name John Harris assumed when he began to write "a modified form of what is unhappily known as science fiction." This sort of cryptic, or cryptographic, self-reference perhaps owes something to Wyndham's service in the Royal Corps of Signals during the war. Ketterer suggests that the "-on" suffix in the names of numerous Wyndham characters--Playton, Watson, Dixon, Weston, etc.--was Wyndham's way of showing affection for his friend (and later, wife), Grace Wilson, and of drawing attention to their bond via the names

however, Wyndham seems to argue that not everyone is entirely comfortable living in the technological age. Specifically, he seems to suggest a paradox--that humanity's "animal instincts" remain a part of us--submerged, perhaps, to a greater or lesser extent, but present nonetheless, despite our technological/scientific achievements and seeming removal from the realm of Darwinian struggle.

In The Day of the Triffids, Wyndham alludes repeatedly to the persistence of humanity's animal instincts, or to the ease with which we recover them. When Bill Masen, with eyes bandaged, awakes in the hospital to the realization that something is not right, these "elemental fears" return.

> A nasty, empty feeling began to crawl up inside me. It was the same sensation I used to have sometimes as a child when I got to fancying that horrors were lurking in the shadowy corners of the bedroom.... I had to fight down the feeling, just as I had had to when I was a kid in the dark. And it was no easier. It's surprising how much you don't grow out of when it comes to the test. The elemental fears were still marching along with me, waiting their chance, and pretty nearly getting it--just because my eyes were bandaged, and the traffic had stopped.... (9-10)

The childish fear of the dark, to which Wyndham alludes

Beynon and Wilson. See Vivian Beynon Harris 14.

here, is one that most people "grow out of" as they get older and more reasonable. As he suggests here, however, the veneer of reason that eventually covers this sort of fear may be very thin indeed. Masen is presented as a reasonable man, no more given over to morbid imaginings than the average person, yet it seems to take comparatively little encouragement for his "elemental fears" to resurface. This raises the question, to what extent is "reason" responsible for overcoming "elemental fears," and to what extent is "reason's" ability to do this predicated on circumstances? Masen's fears don't arise merely because of the darkness but, rather, because the accustomed sounds of civilization had ceased. Later in the novel, after "civilization" as such is only a memory, Masen again experiences a fear of the dark:

> The sun was low, and half the square was thrown into shadow. Soon I would have to go in. While there was light I could sustain myself; in the dark, things could steal quietly upon me. Already I was on my way back to the primitive. Before long, perhaps, I should be spending the hours of darkness in fear as my remote ancestors must have done, watching, ever distrustfully, the night outside their cave. (158)

In essence, Wyndham suggests here that it is not so much

reason as it is the trappings of civilization that free us from the fear of the dark. When Masen says, "things could steal quietly upon me", his terminology implies not a reasoned fear of triffids, bandits, or wild animals, but rather an irrational fear of unknown "things," and it is not reason which frees us of this fear, but electric lights--the fragile fruits of science.

The resurgence of passive emotions, such as fear, is not the only evidence of humanity's lingering animal instincts, however. There is ample evidence in The Day of the Triffids that more active behavior is affected as well, once the trappings of civilization begin to wear thin. When Masen leaves his hospital room to look into his situation, he notes that, "I stepped out cautiously--why cautiously? I don't know. There was something that induced it"(17). Again, this is not a reasonable measure--at least not a consciously reasoned one--but rather an instinctive behaviour. When he later encounters a mob of blind patients fighting to escape from the hospital, he notes that, "Fighting with my civilized urge to be of some help to these people was an instinct that told me to keep clear"(63). Finally, Masen finds himself fighting his instincts in order to stick to a carefully reasoned course of action. He states that his impulse is to

> sneak silently on foot, seeking safety in cunning, like a beast in the jungle. It needed all my will power to keep myself steady and hold to my plan. (152)

Clearly, the regression to animal instincts in the absence of civilization is not wholesale; Masen remains a thinking, reasoning creature, but this does nothing to undermine the fact that these instincts are present and have the power to assert themselves.

It is, perhaps, lucky for Masen that his animal instinct for caution remains because there are a number of examples of more aggressive "instinctive" behavior in the novel. One early and comparatively benign example of "animal instinct" appears when Masen encounters a number of blind people in the street startled by a scream:

> All along the street they stood still, turning their heads this way and that, apprehensively trying to guess what was happening. The alarm coming on top of their distress and nervous tension started a number of the women whimpering: the men's nerves weren't in any too good a state, either; they showed it mostly in short curses at being startled.(63)

The "whimpering" and "short curses" the people emit seem rather more like animal vocalizations than communication--variations on the fight/flight instinct. Instead of

following a reasonable course of action and listening for further information, the people resort to these vocalizations to release tension. Further, as the people turn "their heads this way and that, apprehensively trying to guess what was happening," they resemble nothing so much as triffids navigating by sound. Later, when attacked by a triffid, Masen himself reverts to a semi-savage state:

> One's mind can move like lightning at such a moment: nevertheless, it was more instinct than reason which sent me leaping at it before it had time to strike again. I collided with it, overturning it, and even as I went down with it my hands were on the upper part of its stem, trying to pull off the cup and the sting. Triffid stems do not snap--but they can be mangled. This one was mangled thoroughly before I stood up. (73-4)

As this passage shows, it is Masen's remaining animal instincts which help him survive once the shelter of civilization is removed. Another example of the advantage of animal or "primitive/savage" instincts appears in The Midwich Cuckoos when Westcott explains how various groups dealt with the appearance of the Children:

> `There was another Dayout at an Eskimo settlement on Victoria Island, north of Canada. The inhabitants

> are cagey about what happened there, but it is believed that they were so outraged, or perhaps alarmed, at the arrival of babies so unlike their own kind that they exposed them almost at once. At any rate, none survived.' (189)

While it may not be animal instinct, as such, the relative lack of what would be deemed "civilization" in more industrialized regions seems to be precisely what saves the "Eskimos" from being dominated by the Children as the people of Midwich are. Westcott goes on to describe how another "uncivilized" group deals with the appearance of a colony of the Children:

> `One of them was in the Irkutsk region, near the border of Outer Mongolia--a very grim affair. It was assumed that the women had been lying with devils, and they perished as well as the Children.' (189)

The Mongolians, like the "Eskimos," lack "civilization," yet while their method of dealing with the Children may be "a very grim affair," it is still less grim than the prospect of the extinction of the human race. Yet while John Scarborough, for one, accuses Wyndham of being anti-science, or anti-intellectual (mistakenly, as I would argue), a critic would be fairly hard-pressed to characterize him as anti-civilization. Wyndham's protagonists are not atavistic

thugs, Luddites bent on saving humanity from the decadence of civilization. They are reasonable people--intellectual to a greater or lesser extent and interested in redeeming the best of civilization. The Eskimos and Mongolians are saved not only by their "savagery" but also by the fact that they aren't circumscribed by a scientifically driven Military-Industrial complex which seizes any potential advantage to use against its enemies. Sigourney Weaver's character, "Ridley," manages to save herself from repeated alien menaces in the Aliens[5] films (1986+) through her own cunning and by fighting savagely, yet were it not for the avarice and deviousness of "the corporation" trying to capture aliens for use in its "biological-weapons division," she would hardly have been in danger at all. This theme or dynamic is played out repeatedly, not just in the Alien films but in a host of other SF films such as Leviathan (1989), Screamers (1995), and John Carpenter's The Village of the Damned (1995). The last of these is, in fact, the second film based on Wyndham's The Midwich Cuckoos, although as Daphne Kutzer notes, it differs from the original on several points[6].

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[5]Aliens, dir. James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 1986.

[6]As Kutzer points out, the Children in Carpenter's film, unlike those in Wyndham's novel, are not emotionless and coldly rational, but are rather, spiteful and smug. The action takes place in a town in Southern California that is

It is not, finally, a reversion to savagery which saves the protagonists of The Midwich Cuckoos or The Day of the Triffids, quite the opposite in fact. In The Midwich Cuckoos there are those who revert to savagery in attempts to strike at the Children, but these attempts invariably fail miserably. When the men of the village march on the Grange in a mob to burn the Children out, the results are horrifying:

> One woman and three men dead. Eight men and five women in hospital. Two of the men and one woman in a pretty bad way. (162)

Their gathering is not deliberately organized; it is not "a matter of reason, it's more primitive"(155). Similarly, when the Chief Constable of Winshire loses his temper and, instead of speaking rationally with one of the Children, begins to bully him, he winds up "lying slackly now, seemingly unconscious, drawing long, greedy breaths, shaken occasionally by a violent tremor"(184). In a similar

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anomalously homogenous (racially and socially)--unlike Wyndham's fairly representative English village, Carpenter's setting stands out. There are few if any citizens who are not white and middle-classed, which suggests that there are different tensions at play here than there are in the novel (or earlier film version). Finally, Kutzer suggests that Kirstie Alley's character (the evil and scheming government scientist) takes focus away from the original Darwinist focus of the novel and (I would add) provides an individual, rather than a systemic, villain--however Wyndham rarely (as I have mentioned before) attacks individual scientists or soldiers, but rather focuses his criticism on the Military-

display of the Children's telepathic power, when a local boy begins shooting at the Children in revenge for the slaying of his brother, he is forced to turn the gun on himself. This attempt at revenge is condemned by Zellaby, as not justice but as mere "feuding"(157).

Eventually it is Zellaby, himself, who destroys the Children in an act of self-sacrifice. One way to look at this would be to see Zellaby's act as the symbolic need to purge our humanity, our better (or civilized) instincts, in order to survive in a Darwinian world. Zellaby, perhaps more than any other character in The Midwich Cuckoos, represents civilization, liberal humanism, and intellectualism, and he must destroy himself in order to save, what amounts to, humanity. But it would be a mistake, I think, to perceive his act in these terms, despite the fact that Zellaby's self-written epitaph is an ironic revision of the Latin epigram, "Si fueris Romae, Romani vivito more," to "If you want to keep alive in the jungle, you must live as the jungle does..."(219). Earlier in the novel Zellaby remarks that it is "odd that I should have to live to my present age before appreciating the underlying soundness of fire-worship"(44). Nevertheless, he shows no signs of reverting to such atavistic practices. Zellaby's argument here is perhaps somewhat frivolous, but it does

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Industrial/Scientific community.

demonstrate the point that Zellaby is a great fancier of ideas, that he can appreciate ideas without necessarily having to change his life to suit them. One factor, which undermines the idea of Zellaby's sacrifice as a symbolic representation of the necessity to renounce "civilization", is the revelation that he is suffering from a serious heart condition. As he writes in a letter to his wife, "doctor will tell you, a matter of a few weeks, or months, at best. So no bitterness, my own love"(219).

In fact it is the Children, themselves, who reveal the reason for the necessity of Zellaby's sacrifice. In response to Westcott's observation that the Children "don't appear to think very highly of our institutions," the Children reply, "As a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourselves with abstractions"(199). It is not "humour and compassion," the "most important of human inventions"(200), which Zellaby represents, that make humanity vulnerable: it is our worse selves, as reflected in our institutions: avarice, suspicion, deviousness, and abject toadying; or what C.S. Lewis characterizes as "that passion for the inner ring which I think at least as corrupting as avarice" ("A Reply" 82). Zellaby explains that

`On the one hand, it is our duty to our race and

culture to liquidate the Children, for it is clear that if we do not we shall, at best, be completely dominated by them, and their culture, whatever it may turn out to be, will extinguish ours.

`On the other hand, it is our culture that gives us scruples about the ruthless liquidation of unarmed minorities, not to mention the practical obstacles to such a solution.

`...the Children ought to be eliminated at the least possible cost, with the least possible delay. I am sorry to arrive at that conclusion. In nine years I have grown rather fond of them....

`It is the right step,' he repeated. `But, of course, our authorities will not be able to bring themselves to take it--for which I am personally thankful because I can see no practical course open to them which would not involve the destruction of all of us in the village, as well.' (208-9)

In this light, Zellaby's final act of self-sacrifice is not an abnegation of civilization in favour of natural brutality; neither is it the "ruthless liquidation of" an "unarmed" minority. The Children are far from unarmed, and Zellaby destroys them with regret rather than with rancor. Rather, it is essentially the archetypal act of the Judeo-

Christian hero: the sacrifice of self for the benefit of the community. As I have maintained, Wyndham was no crypto-Christian, but these are the easiest terms for describing Zellaby's final selfless act. He gives his life (however little remaining) in order to redeem, not man's corrupt institutions but, rather, those values of humour and compassion--"the most important of human inventions"(200)--that he holds so dear.

At the end of The Day of the Triffids, something conceptually similar takes place. While it is the triffids (the twisted fruit of man's misguided scientific labour) which finally necessitate Bill and company's flight from Shirning, it is the encroachment of Humanity's baser nature which provides the direct catalyst for flight. When the ruthless Torrance and his militaristic band of thugs appear and offer Bill the title to "a kind of--feudal seigneury"(266), he is repulsed. Later Denis (the blind owner of the farm where Bill stays) makes the point that

> `what is surprising me now is that I'm suddenly feeling quite kindly towards the triffids. Without their intervention I suppose there would have been a whole lot more of this kind of thing by now. If they are the one factor that can stop serfdom coming back, then good luck to'em.' (269)

Yet Bill does not even take the expedient tactic of poisoning Torrance's band, or something like that. Instead he merely uses his wits to hoodwink and escape from them to a place where he and others can build a new world--one not based on the old ideas. Earlier in the novel there is a foreshadowing of Wyndham's opinion of Torrance and his ilk.

> It was at the end of the fourth year that I made my last trip, and found that there were now risks which I was not justified in taking. The first intimation of that was a thunderous crash behind me somewhere in the inner suburbs. I stopped the truck and looked back to see the dust rising from a heap of rubble which lay across the road. Evidently my rumbling passage had given the last shake to a tottering housefront. I brought no more buildings down that day, but I spent it in apprehension of a descending torrent of bricks and mortar. Thereafter I confined my attention to smaller towns, and usually went about them on foot.
>
> Brighton, which should have been our largest convenient source of supplies, I let alone. (Emphasis mine; 232)

The crumbling towns which become dangerous for Bill to scavenge are, in effect, symbols for the old ideologies and societal modes, which proved equally dangerous to people,

and which contained within them the seeds of their own destruction, and which remain a threat to those who would return to plunder them. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, "Brighton" is one such town which happens to be occupied by Torrance (or torrents, maybe?) and his gang. The dangers posed by returning to old ideas (feudalism, militarism, territoriality or nationalism) are reflected in the danger posed by the torrents of crumbling brick and mortar in the old city.

Are The Day of the Triffids and The Midwich Cuckoos "cosy disasters"? I would argue that Nicholas Ruddick's assertion that "they simply do not repay serious critical analysis"(138) is false. There are significant ideas which lie at the heart of these novels, recurring ideas that are deeply and deliberately explored. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dispersion of its military assets; since the advent of techno-terrorism and the successful realization of gene therapy and genetic manipulation that Wyndham predicted forty years ago, his novels seem less and less cosy every minute.

KRAKEN AND CHRYSALIDS: THE CULT OF SECRECY

In Timothy Findley's Headhunter, Olivia Price makes the point that

> the past, in fact, had been a dreadful time--when everyone was lied to--much as they were lied to now, but then, for different reasons. In the past, you were lied to for your own good. Now, you were lied to for the good of others. Whoever these others might be. (15)

John Wyndham makes a similar point in The Kraken Wakes: "There are always cliques and factions anxious to keep the public in the dark for its own good--a good that is seldom far from the interests of the faction advocating it"(97). How far back, one might wonder, is Olivia Price looking for the Golden Age when we were deceived for our own good? Forty years? Fifty? One of the dangers of yearning for the past, is that we forget that the inhabitants of that past were also yearning. In The Kraken Wakes and in The Chrysalids, as in many of his other novels and short stories, Wyndham seems obsessed with the nature of the truth--how it is hidden from us by Big Business and the Military (or government) through censorship, media manipulation, or the cult of secrecy, by means of mental conditioning (cultural, religious or otherwise). The truth, most importantly, includes the harder Darwinian truths to which we have been blinded. What is it in human nature that

permits (or demands) a "Cold War"? How has science "got so far beyond ordinary human control," that, "any new discovery now came so nearly into the category of Act of God, that it was scarcely worth troubling oneself to try to do anything about them?" (Wyndham, The Trouble With Lichen 185).

In The Kraken Wakes the reader is offered an inside look (or as "inside" as Wyndham ever offers) at how propaganda is created and at what forces mould its message. Curiously enough, despite the fact that Wyndham served in Britain's Ministry of Information as a censor and in the Royal Corps of Signals during World War Two, he allows us precious few glimpses through the veil of military secrecy[1]. The narrator and protagonist of The Kraken Wakes (and his wife) are radio journalists, but it is not through their official stories that the reader discovers the events of the novel--these turn out, more often than not, to be deliberately tailored towards some particular end. Instead, it is the "behind the scenes" actions and interactions of Mike and Phyllis Watson that tell the real story, and a multi-tentacled beast of a story it turns out to be. One of the main tentacles of the story is stated quite baldly by Phyllis near the end of the novel:

`at times I get sick of putting up with all the shams

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[1]One possible reason for this may be that Wyndham, as an employee of the Ministry of Information, and especially as a censor, was required to take an oath of secrecy.

> and the humbug, and pretending that the lies aren't lies, and the propaganda isn't propaganda, and the dirt isn't dirt.... Don't you sometimes wish you had been born into the Age of Reason, instead of into the Age of the Ostensible Reason?' (161)

This is from the mouth of a journalist who, at times, shows considerable pleasure and enthusiasm for her work. This passage spells out, in striking terms, one of the major themes of the novel: the media, far from being the objective voice of truth, or criticism, is rather the mouthpiece of business interests (sponsors), government, and the military. Even when these factors are discounted, economic concerns--selling papers, catching a bigger audience--determines what is news and what is not.

An early passage in the novel suggests it is the profit motive or imperative that determines what is newsworthy. After various countries begin to attack the fireballs that fall from the sky, there is a brief flare of interest, but little or no information is offered to the public:

> None of the newspapers ran it because, in editorial opinion, the whole thing was suspect in being too similar to the flying-saucer business, and their readers would prefer more novelty in their sensations. (19)

The first point raised by this passage is that "editorial opinion" is not really responding to public desires but rather determining them. The most basic element of censorship lies not in cutting or adding details, or "spin," to a particular story but in deciding what stories to publish or, more radically, what is a story. The second point ties in with this: because the "fireballs" are unknown, or novel, they are not "news" as such but rather "sensation". They are regarded as mere frivolity and treated lightly or ignored. Mike and Phyllis only become interested in them because they personally witness an instance of this phenomenon, and even their interest is initially a mere hobby.

Later in the novel, after the "fireballs" have transformed into the perceived threat of "the Deeps," there is another, broader example of economic concerns molding the "news." Phyllis obtains secret information from a Military contact; she explains to Mike why it has been kept secret:

> It's only because they don't want people unsettled that it's not been published in the newspapers--that, and the fact that the newspapers agree. The last hullabaloo sent the sales-graphs dipping everywhere, and the advertisers didn't like it. (58)

In this passage, the newspapers are not only picking the news on the basis of how many papers it will sell but also

seem to be in active collusion with Business in deciding what's "good" for the public. In fact what's "good" for the public seems to be what's good for Business. Obviously this opens a whole vein of poli-economic theory but boils down to whether people, or society as a whole, should be manipulated or advised/informed. This is a point on which Wyndham seems to have some specific ideas (to which I shall return later). In any case, Wyndham certainly suggests that people are being manipulated and that, more often than not, economics rather than objectivity determines media policy.

Perhaps the most telling allusion to the influence of Business on the media appears halfway through the novel when Mike is discussing with a friend the influence of the media on trade:

> `We've not been doing world-trade a lot of harm lately,' I told him. `We've not had the chance. I don't say we haven't got a few scripts up our sleeves against the day when truth shall be more important than world-trade, but for the last few months now not a word about those things down there has gone out from any of our transmitters; the sponsors don't like it--'
>
> `Good for them,' interrupted Harold.
>
> `--any more than the advertisers liked mention of Hitler when we were on the brink of World War II,' I concluded. (87)

What the sponsors don't like, the media suppress. Mike's allusion to Hitler is timely--the xenobaths (the alien menace of the Deeps), at this point in the novel, are enforcing a "naval blockade" of Britain (and every other country in the world with sea access) similar in kind to that threatened by U-boats in the Second World War. Wyndham seems to suggest that the media's silence on Hitler parallels the political policy of appeasement which gave Hitler the latitude he needed to bring the full force of his military to bear on Britain. The catch here is that while Hitler's motivations were megalomaniacal and psychotic, they were at least technically human. The motives of the xenobaths are not, and this changes the whole nature of the blockade--what might have been only a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind. The allusion to Hitler is also, perhaps, reminiscent of Orwell's critique of H.G. Wells's assessment of Hitler: just as Hitler was under estimated, so is the threat of the Deeps downplayed.

The Military, as an active force in creating propaganda, appears suspiciously low key as compared to the influence of Big Business and economics in The Kraken Wakes. Where Military and Government influence in the media become most readily apparent is the degree to which Mike and Phyllis (and journalists in general) have been co-opted, and the degree to which the existence of (if not the necessity

for) official secrecy is unquestioned. The a priori acceptance of official security is also reflected, not only in what Mike and Phyllis are not allowed to report but very often in how they learn the things they are not allowed to report.

One of Mike's first encounters with the Military in the novel is with an airforce pilot who contacts him unofficially to relate a personal experience with the "fireballs." Before telling his tale, however, the lieutenant (whose real name is never mentioned) qualifies his story:

> `It's a bit tricky, you see,' he said. `At the moment I am considered to have suffered some kind of hallucination, but if enough evidence turns up to show that it was not an hallucination, then they're almost certain to make it an official secret....'
>
> `Still,' he went on, `the thing worries me, and if you're collecting evidence, I'd like you to have it--though maybe not to make direct use of it. I mean, I don't want to find myself on the carpet. I don't suppose there's a regulation to stop a fellow discussing his hallucinations, but you can never be sure.' (17)

The Air Force, it seems, shares with the newspapers an attitude towards the unknown--a tendency to suppress or

ignore it. The implication of the lieutenant's fears, however, is that the military's blanket of official secrecy extends even to what it perceives (or officially classifies) as fantasy or hallucination: even though it never happened, keep it quiet... in case it did. The last sentence of this passage goes even further to suggest that even the rules of secrecy are secret, or at least very mysterious--"you can never be sure." The lieutenant doesn't even offer the information for publication but merely for Mike's "collection of evidence," whatever that means. This suggests that, finding no interest or encouragement from official sources, the lieutenant was forced to turn to a couple of journalists nominally outside the hegemony of the military. As to why he chose Mike, that question is best answered by the fact that he is interested (as well as his being outside official channels). The amorphous, invisible web of secrecy becomes even more inscrutable when the lieutenant, in response to Mike's surprise that he would have been on patrol in the south Pacific, says, "There are a number of things that don't get publicity, though they're not particularly secret"(17). Thus more threads appear in the web--official secrets, secrets which might be official, and unofficial secrets. All of this recalls Westcott's pronouncement in <u>The Midwich Cuckoos</u> that, "If I had any ideas I suppose they'd have to be official secrets"(192).

In The Kraken Wakes, however, this atmosphere of uncertainty, of official and merely quasi-official secrecy, evokes nothing so much as the xenobaths, themselves. The unknown force that depopulates the island of Saphira and April Island, in the night, leaving only scanty inscrutable traces--the sea tanks, "like military tanks"(130), and the "pseudo-coelenterata" which draw in their prey and then disappear. The main difficulty in countering the threat of the Deeps is a lack of information. Mike relates an analogy offered by one of the "boffins":

> One of them had remarked to me: `If you were going to make a ghost-trap, how would you set about it?--particularly if you had not even a small ghost to practice on.' (159)[2]

How do you fight, or even resist something, when you don't even really know what it is? Ultimately, no one ever discovers the nature of the xenobaths, and when the novel ends, they seem to be destroyed but not understood. This insidiousness which likens military secrecy to the xenobaths becomes more apparent as Mike is drawn further into the official web:

> It was a Captain Winters who welcomed me there, explaining that while what I should be shown was not exactly an official secret, it was preferred that I

[2]This seems to be another of Wyndham's repeated themes.

> should not make public use of it yet. When I had agreed to that, he started to bring out maps and charts. (23)

To begin with, Mike is not an astronomer, nor an oceanographer, nor a meteorologist, nor a scientist of any kind; nor is he connected with Military Intelligence or the Ministry of Information. Mike is a journalist, so why is he shown documents which are "not exactly an official secret" (notice the various shades and tints of secrecy again!), but are nevertheless not intended for public consumption? Perhaps, since he has shown an interest in a "not exactly secret" phenomenon, it is better for the military to bring him into the fold, than to try to shut him out. While no contracts are drawn up, and though Mike signs no papers, he nevertheless seems to enter into some sort of (again) "unofficial" pact with the Military. During the same meeting, Mike uses language that would sound either positively craven or rabidly defensive were it not phrased so matter-of-factly. After studying the "unofficially secret" maps, Mike asks the Captain, "Have you any idea at all what this means--or wouldn't you tell me if you had?"(24). Mike seems, perhaps out of professional journalistic savvy, perfectly comfortable with the rubric/decorum of Military reticence. After discussing the

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See John Beynon Harris, "Invisible Monster".

implications of the "not exactly" secret maps with the Captain, Mike asks, "Are you doing anything about it? Or shouldn't I ask?"(26). Again Mike proves that he is the perfect man to enter into an "unofficial" relationship with the Military, and is rewarded with a spot on an expedition which "Just at the moment is not considered to be a matter for a direct broadcast, or even for publication"(26). While the military never, at this stage, manifests as crude or overbearing, it remains almost omnipresent, more Brave New World than 1984. There are no scenes of printing presses being smashed, or of outspoken critics disappearing. The censorship is more casual, more of the wink and a handshake variety. Which is not to say that the threat of more savage tactics does not exist in The Kraken Wakes, as the outspoken scientist Bocker says: "In most countries I'd be under arrest by now"(199). On the other hand, such measures are largely unnecessary because of economic influences, or as Bocker also says, "No earthly good your coming here.... There isn't a sponsor that'd touch me with a forty-foot pole"(199).

While Mike and Phyllis may not be happy with the status quo of endemic secrecy, they seem to have adapted to it. When the need for secrecy is gone--the xenobaths have no actual spies, after all--Mike and Phyllis reflect on the degree to which the Military loosens security:

> `Even the Services use common sense sometimes,' she said pointedly, and then added, on second thought: `Though there are probably several things he didn't tell me."
>
> `Probably,' I agreed again. (58)

Despite the fact that the ostensible usual reason for secrecy--the danger of the ever present Russians--is gone, Mike and Phyllis naturally assume that the Military will be unable to break the compulsive habit of secrecy, and so act accordingly. Another example of their adaptation to the atmosphere of constant secrecy is evident in their methods of obtaining information--wheedling, trickery, and charm. Phyllis is especially adept in this department. After a private dinner with their military contact, Captain Winters, Phyllis reveals what she has been able to charm out of the Captain. Mike's congratulations spoof the language of spy novels and films when he says, "That's the stuff, darling. The real Mata Hari touch. Have you got the drawings?"(58). Phyllis upbraids Mike for being overly dramatic (goofy), but his assessment is not so far off the mark. In fact, earlier in the novel, Mike seems to suggest that Phyllis and he have a particular tactic for manipulating conversations to their benefit:

> I come off the sidelines just enough to show sociable, but not enough to interfere with her plan of campaign.

> The rest of the time I watch and admire. It is something like a combination of skilled juggling with expert chess, and her recoveries from an unexpected move are a delight to follow. She seldom loses. (44)

This revelation is occasioned by a dinner conversation between Mike, Phyllis, and two other journalists, not military or intelligence officers. The fact that Phyllis applies this manipulative approach to comparatively informal conversation suggests the degree to which the principle of secrecy and disinformation are entrenched in the world of The Kraken Wakes. What would Phyllis and Mike have to lose by being open and frank? What would the other two journalists have to lose? Later, we see how Phyllis recovers from an unexpected move, when one of the other journalists introduces the previously unknown name "Bocker" into the conversation.

> The introduction of this Bocker element set me all at sea, and Phyllis, too, though it would have been hard to guess it from the way she said:
>
> `Surely the Bocker line can't be altogether dismissed?' frowning a little as she spoke.
>
> It worked. In a little time we were adequately briefed on the Bocker view, and without either of them guessing that as far as we were concerned he had come into it for the first time. (45-6)

In an atmosphere where everything, sooner or later, becomes an official (or unofficial) secret (despite the fact that it is not especially the case that "loose lips sink ships"), table talk apparently turns into "psy-ops" interrogation and counter-intelligence action.

Eventually, despite all the secrecy and economic censorship, it becomes impossible to downplay the xenobath menace anymore. When the British cruise ship, Queen Anne, is lost at sea, the situation changes, and the media use their collective influence to spin the truth in a different direction. The language used by Mike's editor is significant when he tells Mike to "Make'em really believe there is something down there"(90). The fact of the matter is that there is something down there, whether anyone believes it or not; the reason for the sudden revelation of the "truth" is not for its own sake, but to counteract a merely political gaff. The following passage also illustrates some of the main forces involved in determining what is news, and how (and why) the truth is manipulated:

> `It's like this. There's a rumour running wild here that the Russians did it. Somebody launched that one off within a few minutes of the news coming through on the tape. Why the hell anybody'd think they would want to start anything that way, heaven knows, but you know how it is when people are emotionally worked up;

> they'll swallow anything for a bit. My own guess is that it is the let's-have-a-showdown-now school of thought seizing the opportunity, the damn fools. Anyway, it's got to be stopped. If it isn't, there might be enough pressure worked up to force the government out, or make it send an ultimatum, or something. So stopped it's damned well going to be. Metal-fatigue isn't good enough this time, so the line is to be your deep-sea menace. To-morrow's papers are using it, the Admirality is willing to play, we've got several big scientific names already.... So if you want to put in your own pennyworth towards stopping the atom bombs falling, get cracking right away....
>
> I suggest the line: Here is a menace more serious and more quickly developed than we had expected. A blow that has found us as unprepared as the Americans were at Pearl Harbour, but men of science are mobilizing already to give us the means to hit back, et cetera.' (90-1)

There are two especially interesting points in this passage (as it relates to news media), and a host of others. To begin with, there is the fact that Mike's editor doesn't even seem interested in whether the "deep-sea menace" is true or not. What is important is that it sounds like a more credible excuse than "metal-fatigue," and so (in

extremity) is more expedient. The question of "expediency" is curious because it both absolves and damns Mike's editor (and by extension, the media in general)--it absolves him of being the active tool of Big Business/the Military, since he does not seem primarily to be motivated by their interests, and yet neither does he seem interested (even remotely) in the truth. What does seem to interest him is using the media as a tool to form public opinion, to preserve the government, and to avert a nuclear showdown. The media, in The Kraken Wakes, is not a service provided to the public (in the normal sense) but, rather, a whip or goad to use on them. As Bill says in The Day of the Triffids, "You can't drive a flock of sheep to market in a dead straight line, but there are ways of getting them there"(179). The fact that not only the EBC (the English Broadcasting Corporation for which Mike works), but also the BBC, the newspapers, and "the big American networks," all follow the same line suggests not, perhaps, an active conspiracy, but rather that the forces that motivate Mike's editor are universal in the West. Unlike Orwell, in 1984, Wyndham isn't interested in showing how people can be forced to toe the party line; after all, you can drive a flock of sheep to market in a dead straight line if the straight line is more important than the lives of individual sheep. Neither does he follow Huxley's approach in Brave New World, wherein people are

drugged into submission and coerced before they're conceived. Rather, Wyndham looks at his own society as it is, with an even-handed, less elaborate satirical front.

Of course the two other subjects this passage raises are the Cold War and the prevalent, almost unquestioned, faith in Science as saviour. The two, Wyndham suggests (and I will argue) are connected in a number of different ways. The most obvious connection between the two is that both have immense power: not only influence over the media, but also in directly shaping the way people perceive reality.

The Cold War, of course, is the main or ostensible reason for the pervasiveness of secrecy in the world of the novel--and in Wyndham's real world too. Considering the significance of secrecy that we have observed, not only in The Kraken Wakes but also in Wyndham's other novels, this is no small thing. An interesting allusion to the Cold War in the novel occurs early--it is because of the political state of world affairs that the "fireballs" are first mentioned in the news:

> The reason that this particular flight [of "fireballs"] got on the front pages when others had been ignored was not simply that this time there had been a series of observations which plotted its track; it lay more in the implications of the line that had been drawn. However, in spite of innuendo and direct

> suggestion, there was silence to the east. Ever since their hurried and unconvincing explanation which followed the first atomic explosion in Russia, her leaders had found it convenient to feign at least temporary deafness to questions on such matters. (19)

The reasons that earlier flights of "fireballs" had not received media attention were economic--it was felt that "fireballs" were too much like UFOs to really be sensational enough to sell any papers. As soon as the "fireballs" seem to come from Russia, on the other hand, they rise in status from unsatisfactory "sensation" to hard news. People still have no idea what they are, but if they come from the east, they must have some sort of nefarious purpose. Not only do political considerations over-ride economic ones, they also change a mysterious phenomenon from fluff to hard news. Interesting, too, is the fact that because of the Cold War paranoia, Russia does not even deny allegations of responsibility, much less try to help figure out what the "fireballs" really are. Because of this silence on the part of Russia, the West is equally incurious as to the real nature of the "fireballs." Mike reports that, "For most people such a policy of masterly silence pointed only one way, and they began to regard the responsibility as good as proved"(21). Once the west believes the Soviets are responsible, they give up their efforts at investigation

(such as they are) and seem largely content merely to blow them up when they get the chance. Eventually investigations do recommence, but all through the novel, the Soviets, the British, and the Americans remain standoffish to varying degrees, even after a very real threat has been discovered.

This Cold War mentality is equally confusing when the Soviets do speak, since all their announcements must be de-constructed and analyzed. When the Kremlin finally announces that "its own weapons, recently developed by Russian scientists for the defense of Peace, had now destroyed more than twenty of these craft [fireballs] over Soviet territory"(21-2), many are confused:

> The non-Russian world was, by and large, divided sharply into two classes--those who believed every Russian pronouncement, and those who believed none. For the first class no question arose; their faith was firm. For the second, interpretation was less easy. Was one to deduce, for instance, that the whole thing was a lie? Or merely that, when the Russians claimed to have accounted for twenty fireballs, they had only, in fact, exploded five or so? (22)

As we have seen previously, Mike and Phyllis are accustomed to subjecting not only their own government's pronouncements, but even simple conversations, to a similar level of critical scrutiny. Of course the last place one

should look for unadulterated truth is in the communiques of one's enemy, but in The Kraken Wakes, one can't even expect it from one's own government (or even acquaintances).

One of the people who seems to believe that "the whole thing is a lie," is an acquaintance of Mike and Phyllis's--Tuny (or Petunia). Tuny is, or associates with people, perceptive enough to see through the "official" excuses and misinformation about the lost ships, but she refuses to believe in the very real threat of the xenobaths because of her Cold War paranoia:

> `The Government doesn't want to admit that it's the Russians, because then there would be a demand that they should take action, and they can't afford to do that with all the Red influence there is. But if they officially pretend to think it's these Bocker things, well, they'd have to pretend, too, that they were doing something about that, *and* that'd make them look pretty silly later when it is all exploded. So this is their way out, and as it's only a Japanese ship it's all right--for the moment. But it won't last long. We can't afford to have the Russians getting away with this kind of thing. People are starting to demand a strong line, and no more appeasement.' (85)

Tuny's hawk politics blind her just as surely as a shower of green radioactive comets. While this passage suggests the

degree to which Tuny is blinded to the world around her by Cold War paranoia, there is a brief glimpse of her later which is even more telling. Mike describes how Tuny reads the newspaper reports on "metal-fatigue" as the reason for the sinking of a Japanese ship, all the while displaying, "the smile of a cognoscenta"(86). What C.S. Lewis would characterize as "that passion for the inner ring" ("A Reply" 82), Wyndham attributes to Tuny and her "smile of a cognoscenta." The Cold War provides the ideal opportunity for those who, like Tuny, want to be "in the know." It is not ideological fervor which fuels her mistrust of the "Red influence[d]" government, but rather the desire to seem wiser and better connected than those around her. Tuny disbelieves the "metal-fatigue" gambit, not because she sees through it, but merely because she automatically disbelieves any official statement. She is, essentially, no different than the Soviets whose rhetoric argues that "any Soviet misadventure must be attributable in some way to capitalist jackals or reactionary fascist hyenas"(42). Neither the Soviets, nor Tuny (and her kind), can accept that the real danger isn't the other side, until it's too late. While Wyndham was scarcely a communist (communism, like any ideology, demands a sort of blind faith which was quite outside Wyndham's personality), he may, as a result of his wife's leftist leanings (and her personal experience of

visiting the Soviet Union while reading English at Oxford University) have been less susceptible to the demonizing Cold War rhetoric of the time.

Despite the fact that Tuny sees through the scientific mumbo-jumbo of the "metal-fatigue" excuse, she still seems constrained by the belief in the inexorable power of science since she provides her own counter in claiming "these new midget submarines"(85) are responsible for the sunk ships. After the first bomb is dropped into the deeps, one of the journalists with whom Mike and Phyllis dine poses the question, "suppose that some violently destructive agency were to descend from space upon one of our cities. What should we do?" His answer to this, though aimed at predicting the response from the deeps for the bombing, goes a long way to describing the real-world reactions of the participants in the Second World War:

> `We could turn the backroom boys on to it. And if it happened a few times more, we should soon be giving the backroom boys full priorities.' (50)

The "backroom boys" mentioned here are, in effect, scientists--scientists who devise weapons. At the beginning of World War II, bi-planes were still in use by the British airforce; before the end of the war jet planes were used, and rocket-propelled, guided missiles were common. After the war, however, the arms race intensified rather than

stopped. In The Kraken Wakes, as in Wyndham's other novels, the general belief in the powers of science to save humanity is examined and put to the test. While Wyndham does concede a point at the end of the novel by offering a scientific weapon which seems to destroy the xenobaths, we still know next to nothing about them. Indeed, people's faith in science is reinforced if anything. However, the ending seems to be a mere sop thrown to the reader, since throughout the rest of the novel, Wyndham casts a fairly critical eye on the role of science in his society. Moreover, an analysis of the ending of the novel becomes significantly more complex when one poses the question: which ending?

In the John Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool, there are manuscripts containing two different endings for The Kraken Wakes. One, which appears in a typescript of the novel, appears to have been the model for the ending of the American release of the novel under the title, Out of the Deeps. This ending is essentially the same as that published in England--the main difference being the level of optimism. Instead of a radio message from Bocker delivered second-hand, Bocker (in a Government helicopter) visits Mike and Phyllis in person. Despite the fact that, in this version, it is "the Japs," "A very

ingenious people"(376)[3], and not the English who devise the scientific wonder which saves the world, the general tone is almost sentimentally optimistic. At one point in the typescript, Bocker actually says:

> This isn't Noah's world, you know. The twentieth century isn't a thing to be pushed over quite as easily as all that. The patient is still in a grave condition, he's been very, very sick indeed, and he has lost a tragic lot of blood--but he's going to recover. Oh, yes, he's going to recover all right, you'll see. (362)

This is not the Bocker the reader is familiar with through the British version of the published text. Both the faith in the twentieth century and the gloating optimism regarding the survival of humanity ring an extremely dissonant note. I suspect that Wyndham's editors at Ballantine felt that a more uplifting ending would better suit an American audience. Wyndham apparently complied. The British edition is considerably less optimistic. Another version of the novel, which appears in holograph form in the Wyndham Archive, is far less optimistic. Mike and Phillis, the reader discovers, have seemingly been killed by a damaged sea-tank which has become stranded on shore. In this

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[3]John Wyndham, typescript of The Kraken Wakes, The John Wyndham Archive, Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool.

version, "xenobathetic activity" has ceased mysteriously for no obvious reason. Bocker (much more kindred in tone to his counterpart in the published British edition) muses on some of the possibilities:

> At the time of writing the cause of the decline in xenobathetic activity which was then setting in is still obscure. It is, however, significant that the failure of direction which stranded innumerable sea-tanks became in a few weeks world-wide, and that the dimunition of all other submarine activities associated with them took place over the same period. This may be due to failure to adapt, to breed, to resist disease, or any of the other causes to which it is popularly ascribed, and we may, in consequence be able to continue the work of reconstruction without further troubles from the Deeps. Nevertheless, there are dangers in easy optimism. It must be pointed out that we still know little or nothing of the natures of these xenobathetic entities, and it would be unwise to overlook the possibility that they may from time to time require periods of regeneration analogous with our own need for sleep, or that of other types of creatures for hibernation. This could well be such a period of quiescence. (293-4)[4]

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[4]John Wyndham, holograph manuscript of The Kraken Wakes,

In the British edition of The Kraken Wakes, the sense of menace lies in the fact that no one ever knows about the xenobaths--they were apparently destroyed with the help of science, but remained very much outside the reach of human understanding. In the holograph passage above, if one discounts the Wellsian/Darwinian allusion to the death of the xenobaths through stagnation, or "failure to resist disease," one is left with an intensified version of the same sense of menace--the xenobaths disappear for reasons that remain a mystery to humans (and science). Unless the Wyndham file kept by the publisher Michael Joseph supplies the answer, why Wyndham discarded this version is a mystery. Perhaps he felt that the deaths of the sympathetic Watsons would be too much for a mainstream audience; maybe he was unhappy with the Wellsian approach to the destruction of the xenobaths and wanted something more original. What Wyndham lost, when he opted for the moderate ending, was the irony of Bocker, the scientist, ultimately mystified.

One of the more casual allusions to the question of science appears at the opening of the novel as Mike prefaces what is to follow. He says that, "The specialists know more about their particular bits, of course, but, between us, we ought to be able to put together quite a picture"(7). While a certain amount of specialization is unavoidable in modern

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The John Wyndham Archive, University of Liverpool.

society, Mike's mention of the "specialists" here recalls The Day of the Triffids' "complexity of specialists"(16) and the dangers inherent in a situation in which no one knows what anyone else is doing. More specifically, Mike foreshadows the ascendency of the "boffins"(159), "backroom boys"(50), and "assorted `ographers'"(101) who appear as a sort of latter day priesthood in the rest of the novel. The term, "backroom boys," itself merits some examination in this respect. Why are they in the "backroom?" To begin with, very often in Wyndham's novels, whatever scientists are working on is either a Military or Business secret, and so is kept out of sight in the "backroom." On the other hand, even when their work is not particularly secret, scientists' ideas and terminology are often so abstruse as to be utterly inscrutable to even a reasonably educated person. Thus the scientist becomes a sort of custodian of the scientific holy of holies: science the new religion, and scientists the new priests. This is not to say that Wyndham yearns for the golden age of Catholic hegemony, but, as previously noted, he does go so far as to say in The Midwich Cuckoos that "religious dogma," was not so "dogmatic as scientific dogma"(106). The problem this leads to is that lay people come to revere or fear science as something mysterious and unapproachable, and that scientists are drawn into a closed circle, needing no popular sanction for their

activities.

An example of the popular reverence for science appears in the authorities' use of the "metal-fatigue" excuse to explain why the Japanese cruise ship, Yatsushiro, sinks. When Mike reads the newspaper stories on this, he comments on "the blinding light of science"(79). Because "metal-fatigue" sounds scientific, people by and large seem perfectly willing to believe it, or anything as long as it's "something that could be--if only just." The terminology used in the actual report is especially suggestive:

> Certain new alloys recently developed in Japanese laboratories had, it seemed, been used, for the first time on any considerable scale, in the construction of the Yatsushiro. Metallurgical experts conceded it as not impossible that some, or one, of these alloys might, if the ship's engines were to produce vibrations of a certain periodicity, become fatigued, and therefore brittle. A fracture of one member so affected would throw on others a sudden strain which, in their weakened state, they might be unable to take.... (79)

The presentation of ideas here, in an official news report, sounds like a reference to Wyndham's 1933 story "The Third Vibration" by "John Beynon Harris". The difference is that in the novel, this is meant to be taken much more

realistically. The extremely conditional phrasing of, for example, "conceded it as not impossible," if worded differently would amount to, "practically impossible." Nevertheless, the weight of authority behind news media and "experts" is such that most people accept this nonsense, at least initially. Tuny and her Red-baiting friends refuse to believe the "metal-fatigue" story, but as I have already mentioned, they simply come up with their own pseudo-scientific bogey--"these new midget submarines"(85). They are just as blinded by scientific mumbo-jumbo as anyone else.

When the "metal-fatigue" theory becomes untenable, the media simply turn to another scientific-sounding excuse (never mind that it also happens to be the truth), and prepare it the way they would any other piece of propaganda--using the authority of the Military and "several big scientific names"(90) to back it up. When hawk politics, or Cold War paranoia, explode public acceptance of the metal-fatigue excuse, the best way to quell fears is with another scientific sop. Mike's jaded editor suggests the line that "men of science are mobilizing already to give us the means to hit back"(91). Phyllis, herself, makes the point that people's faith in science is not an intellectual or reasonable one.[5] She suggests that the story "doesn't have

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[5]But neither is Cold War paranoia: as the editor says,

to be intellectual--in fact it mustn't"(91). If the popular belief in the power of science (which is essentially based on reason) is unreasoned, or emotional, it begins to approach religion/superstition. If religion/superstition can (and has) pushed people into wars and Inquisitions, what might science, accepted on the same basis (emotion), do with the power of the atom (and who knows what else?).

When Mike and Phyllis prepare the story, they approach it as just another piece of propaganda, despite the fact that they know it's the truth. Mike reiterates his editor's scientific line in order to allay public fears, hinting at "the brains of the world getting together and turning the full force of modern science and technique on the job of avenging the loss"(92). Phyllis expresses her confusion with this, saying, "you start off as if truth is going to be the first casualty, as usual, and then end up like that. It's kind of bewildering"(92). This is one of the problems that arises when science is used by the media as a sort of conceptual universal panacea. It suggests the dangers of any semantic or conceptual corruption. When the Ministry of Information is in charge of disinformation or, as in Orwell, when the Ministry of Peace is in charge of war, people's beliefs (and reality itself) become warped. By accepting and promoting the idea of science and technology as the

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"when people are emotionally worked up, they'll swallow

solution to any problem, Mike and Phyllis are as culpable as the media in general of this sort of warping.

The ideas both of the media as whip and of science as panacea appear again when Mike describes the work that he and his wife do over the next few days:

> Phyllis and I did our best during the next few days to play our part in putting across the idea of firm hands steady on the wheel, and of the backroom boys who had produced radar, asdic, and other marvels nodding confidently, and saying in effect:`Sure, Just give us a few days to think, and we'll knock together something that will settle this lot!' (105)

The language in this passage, while intending to be reassuring, is somewhat artificially so. Mike, Phyllis, and the media in general are above all concerned with preventing a general panic. There are several ways panic may show itself (at least in Wyndham's novels). Some of the more common ways are rioting and overthrowing the government, looting and pillaging, and a return to a savage "kill or be killed" society. The way these ideas tend to play themselves out in Wyndham's novels does not suggest an especially high opinion of human nature. In practice, the only thing that prevents societies under pressure from disintegrating is the resort to either the emotional power

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anything for a bit"(90).

of science as saviour, or something like Cold War paranoia, or both.

Later in the novel the scientist Bocker, describes the negative effects of the emotional belief in science:

> This is a scientific age--in the more educated strata. It will therefore almost fall over backwards in disregarding the abnormal, and it has developed a deep suspicion of its own senses. Vast quantities of evidence are required before a theory based on scanty knowledge can be dislodged. Very reluctantly the existence of something in the Deeps was belatedly conceded. There has been an equal reluctance to admit all the succeeding manifestations until they couldn't be dodged. And now here we are again, balking at the newest hurdle. (200-1)

In this passage, Bocker points to the blinding effects of science, to the fact that people have disregarded one of the key elements of science--empiricism--in favour of a belief in science which approaches blind faith, something that religion, not science, demands. It is passages like this (and characters like Bocker) that suggest that Wyndham isn't against science, per se, but rather against blind faith directed at any creed or ideology.

It is certainly blind faith which leads "the more classically-minded citizens" of Santander, Spain, to the

idea that,

> since the advancing objects were no known form of machine, their origin was likely diabolic, and they aroused their priests. The visitants were conjured in Latin to return to their Captain, the Father of Lies, in the Pit whence they had come. (169)

The Spaniards' faith is unavailing, and "The sea-tanks had continued their slow advance, driving the exorcising priests before them"(169). The response to the threat of the Deeps in the more industrialized "scientific" parts of the world is only nominally different--the new priests, scientists, are aroused and set to work "conjuring" the "visitants." Only belatedly do they achieve any sort of success.

It is this blind faith in science that has lead the peoples of the world blithely into the nuclear age. In the early pages of the novel, Mike alludes to the situation when he suggests that "Recognition and prevention don't necessarily go hand in hand. We recognized the potential dangers of atomic fission quickly enough--yet we could do little about them"(15). Obviously the dangers of nuclear fission were not realized quickly enough to prevent the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, something that Wyndham seems to allude to when he describes the xenobath's attacks on "Hokkaido and Honshu"(160). The Allies in World War II decided that science offered a better means of winning the

war in the Pacific than conventional warfare. Wyndham seems again to allude to this when he describes the sinking of the Yatsushiro and the horror involved: "ordinary, harmless men, women, and children peacefully asleep, ...wiped out in a few seconds"(80). The fact that the Yatsushiro is "bound from Nagasaki"(74), one of the cities targeted by the Allies with the atom bomb, may be a coincidence, but not likely. If one doubts Wyndham's attitude towards the A-bomb, one need only examine the language in Mike's description of the explosion of one. He describes the mushroom cloud as it "writhed and convolved upon itself in a fashion that was somehow obscene as it climbed monstrously up the sky"(44). "Obscene" and "monstrously" leave little doubt as to the nature of the thing and echo Bill's eventual disgust with the triffids--another of the twisted fruits of science (197).

Of course, in the world of The Kraken Wakes, the Atom bomb is taken somewhat for granted, seen as a necessary evil in the Cold War. The Cold War is, of course, one of the great blinders--as when the Soviets back out of an international conference because they cannot see through their own communist rhetoric even in the face of an obvious threat to Humanity. But equally, even the least rabid Cold War paranoiac remains caught up in the fear of science, as with Tuny and her "midget submarines."

The Cold War and science's role in it--including the

quasi-religious light in which science is regarded in the twentieth century--do not seem to be the problem, or at least not the root of the problem. The reporter Mallarby says of Bocker, "He has never grasped that the average mind when it encounters something new is scared, and says: `Better smash it or suppress it, quick'"(49). The preponderance of this sort of attitude, the "smash it" mentality, and the fact that societies in Wyndham's novels disintegrate at the drop of a hat, suggest something about his perception of human nature. When this is combined with the frequency of Darwinian themes in his work, as manifested by the triffids, the Children of Midwich, the xenobaths (and how many of these biological threats arise because of human folly), suggestions begin to solidify. What does Wyndham see as the essential nature of the human mind? Can science help man overcome his bestial/savage instincts, despite the evidence of, say, "The aeroplane, which was looked forward to as a civilizing influence but in practice has hardly been used except for dropping bombs?"(Orwell 163). The Chrysalids is an extremely interesting novel in this and in many other respects.

To begin with, The Chrysalids, unlike the other novels discussed in this thesis, takes place in a world unlike our own--in which the historical existence of our own world may only be inferred. Unlike the other novels under

consideration, the disaster in The Chrysalids seems to have taken place in the distant past, and there is a very material break with that past. However, Wyndham does foreshadow The Chrysalids in The Day of the Triffids when Bill speculates that "A tradition of a vanished golden age and ancestors who were magicians would be a most damning thing"(245).

In The Chrysalids, the threat which hangs over many of Wyndham's other novels--nuclear war, Armageddon--has already, in fact long ago, been carried out. The inhabitants of the world of the novel do not see it in these terms, however. To them it is the "Tribulation," the most recent in the line of God's punishments of Humanity. The survivors of this catastrophe, or their descendants, have built a religious sect out of the myth of the "Tribulation," a sort of hybrid of fundamentalist Christianity and post-apocalyptic myth. The mutations, human or otherwise, that result from the radioactive fallout are seen as warnings from God. The narrator, David Strorm, has an uncle who was formerly a sailor who describes some of the less favoured parts of the world he has seen:

> The whole seaboard is empty--black and harsh and empty. The land behind looks like a huge desert of charcoal. Where there are cliffs they are sharp-edged, with nothing to soften them. There are no fish in the

> sea there, no weeds either, not even slime, and when a ship has sailed there the barnacles and the fouling on her bottom drop off, and leave her hull clean. You don't see any birds. Nothing moves at all, except the waves breaking on the black beaches. (60)

Despite the fact that nuclear war is never explicitly referred to in the novel, the impression of a post-nuclear wasteland that this description conveys is all but complete, especially when David's uncle Axel goes further to quote the journals of another traveler, which tell how "some regions are known to glow dimly on a dark night"(61). The threat implicit in the Cold War paranoia of The Kraken Wakes or The Midwich Cuckoos, and the one narrowly averted by a different sort of disaster in The Day of the Triffids, has come to pass in The Chrysalids. Later in the novel, the woman from "Sealand" (New Zealand) gives her impression of the devastation when she describes "going over the rim of the world, into the outskirts of hell", and comments, "There was the power of gods in the hands of children, we know: but were they mad children, all of them quite mad?"(179). The subtext of The Crysalids is that Humanity was unable to curb its self-destructive tendencies and that science, rather than helping to civilize, has merely served to make that self-destruction more horrible.

The central problem of The Chrysalids, however, is not

that this nuclear holocaust has happened, but that the people of Waknuk (Wakuak?), in Labrador--the human society which the reader most readily identifies as "normal" human society--have not made good on the promise inherent in their ancestors' survival. In The Day of the Triffids, Josella muses on the horror of what has befallen them, and the necessity to build a better society after Bill suggests that the disaster has been largely a result of humanity's folly:

> I suppose in a way, that should be more horrible than the idea of nature striking blindly at us. And yet I don't think it is. It makes me feel less hopeless about things because it makes them at least comprehensible. If it was like that, then it is at least a thing that can be prevented from happening again--just one more of the mistakes our very great-grandchildren are going to have to avoid. And, oh dear, there were so many, many mistakes! But we can warn them. (248)

The hope that appears at the end of Triffids, or The Kraken Wakes, is that a new and better society can be built on the ruins of the old one--it is this hope that has perhaps lead Aldiss to label Wyndham as the writer of "cosy disasters."(Billion Year Spree 294). The people of Waknuk, however, so far from building a better society, have built a religious sect around the idea of rebuilding the old society

as exactly as possible.

When David describes the "Ethics" classes in which he and other children are enrolled, we see that they have nothing, really, to do with ethics at all, but are rather a form of indoctrination:

> According to Ethics, mankind--that was us, in civilized parts--was in the process of climbing back into grace; we were following a faint and difficult trail which lead up to the peaks from which we had fallen.... There was only one true trail, and by following it we should, with God's help and in His own good time, regain all that had been lost. But so faint was the trail, so set with traps and deceits, that every step must be taken with caution, and it was too dangerous for a man to rely on his own judgement. Only the authorities, ecclesiastical and lay, were in a position to judge whether the next step was a rediscovery, and so, safe to take; or whether it deviated from the true re-ascent, and so was sinful.
>
> The penance of Tribulation that had been put upon the world must be worked out, the long climb faithfully retraced, and, at last, if the temptations by the way were resisted, there would be the reward of forgiveness--the restoration of the Golden Age. (40)

The "Golden Age" that David's society aspires to is

essentially the society that apparently destroyed itself in a nuclear holocaust. Interesting, too, is the fact that the steps to rebuilding society must be "faithfully retraced," leaving no room for correction or rethinking. But perhaps most interesting of all is the emphasis on authority.

In Wyndham's other novels, we also see this emphasis, but it focuses on the authority of scientists rather than churchmen--in fact Wyndham tends to describe belief in science in religious terms. Here, however, society has fallen into a semi-barbaric state, and science (at least genetics) is the province of religion. In fact, Wyndham seems to have deliberately excised references to science in The Chrysalids. In the ur-text of the novel in the Wyndham Archive, there are several quasi-scientific references which do not appear in the published edition.[6] In an unpaginated holograph note, Wyndham refers to the "Mendelian Bureau"--a government office which determines who is allowed to have children. This reference, somewhat reminiscent of Huxley's "Malthusian Belts," is obviously an allusion to Gregor Mendel, one of the founders of the field of genetics. Another note refers to:

> Notice boards A (radio-active) mark off badlands far south. Further north little pop. so no notices.

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[6]John Wyndham, The Chrysalids. Unpublished, typescript draft and holograph notes. John Wyndham Archive, Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool.

> Travel is best when rain lays dust. Keep always to old growth for safety[.]

This note is interesting in two respects. To begin with, there is the reference to notice boards which warn of radio-activity. This suggests both a far more organized and scientific society than that which appears in the published text; furthermore, this note suggests that the novel is set in "the south." Later in the holograph manuscript, at the beginning of chapter two, there are references to "Charleston (capital)," and "Chesapeake Bay." This, in combination with the other references I have noted, paints a very different picture of society in The Chrysalids than the one Wyndham eventually published. The nuclear devastation was likely less complete in the ur-text (which is set as far south as Charleston, rather than in Labrador), and the people are far more scientifically minded. These dramatic changes suggest that Wyndham took pains to ensure that the final text was specifically concerned with blind adherence to religion, rather than to science, and that he wanted to offer a more imposing view of the effects of nuclear war. What this difference amounts to, is the suggestion that, generally speaking, Wyndham is not reflecting on either Religion or science, but on blind, unthinking devotion to any system of belief, for that matter. In this novel, Wyndham contradicts the later statement in The Midwich

Cuckoos that "religious dogmatism" is "not so dogmatic as scientific dogmatism"(106), and the emphasis seems to be on the corrupting effects of religious dogma.

The basic tenets of the "Right Wing Church Party" are stated in terms far more absolute than any scientific theory. David has been brainwashed by the sayings from Nicholson's Repentances (a sort of post-nuclear book of Apocrypha): "ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN," "KEEP PURE THE STOCK OF THE LORD," "THE NORM IS THE WILL OF GOD," and "THE DEVIL IS THE FATHER OF DEVIATION"(18). David notes that "Frequent references to these texts had made me familiar with the words long before I was able to read.... I knew them by heart"(18). Later, there is further evidence of how rigorously this dogma is upheld. When David, having trouble with tying a bandage, says, "I could have managed it all right by myself if I'd had another hand," he is forced to pray for forgiveness (for "calling upon the Devil to give [him] another hand") and is beaten as punishment(26). How absolute must the dogma be, if to say if, to merely hypothetically speculate on an alternative, is subject to corporal punishment?

The irony of this, is that the people of Labrador are so ignorant and circumscribed by their religion that they cannot distinguish between monkeys and "a race of Deviations that had dwindled to two feet high, grown fur and a tail,

and taken to living in trees," and they perceive the black inhabitants of the West Indies as "men and women [who] would be passed as true images if it weren't that some strange deviation had turned them all completely black"(62). Stories like these sound like traveler's tales from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Wyndham seems to suggest that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. Perhaps the most interesting example of human chauvinism is described by David's uncle Axel when he talks about the various races of "deviations" encountered:

> They all have pretty much the same legends of the Old People as we have--how they could fly, how they used to build cities that floated on the sea, how any one of them could speak to any other, even hundreds of miles away, and so on. But what's more worrying is that most of them--whether they have seven fingers, or four arms, or hair all over, or six breasts, or whatever is wrong with them--think that their type is the true pattern of the Old People, and that anything different is a Deviation. (62-3)

This passage suggests that the chauvinism of the people of Labrador, or at least of the "Right Wing Church Party," is universal among human societies. While the various other types may not practice the same sort of genetic purification techniques, they nevertheless have both the idea of a "true

image," and the belief that they are it. Of course, even in Waknuk, the purity laws get bent on occasion. Both the weight of authority and the power of vested interests that we have seen in Wyndham's other novels are present here too. When David's Uncle Angus brings a pair of unnaturally large "great horses" (which also figure in the holograph chapters) back to Waknuk, there is some controversy. David's father argues that, "God never made horses the size of these. The Government can't have approved them"(36). The enormous horses are officially approved, however, suggesting that the "purity laws" are somewhat flexible where there is a profit to be had. One of the "fringes people" (the mutant outcasts who live on the borders of "civilized" society) who captures David, comments on the horses while ranting about the futility of the "purity laws":

> `They're pig-headedly determined to keep to the Old People's standards--but do they? Can they? How do they know that their crops and their fruit and their vegetables are just the same? Aren't there disputes? And doesn't it nearly always turn out that the breed with the higher yield is accepted in the end? Aren't cattle cross-bred to get hardiness, or milk-yield, or meat? Sure, they can wipe out the obvious deviations, but are you sure that the Old People would recognize any of the present breeds at all? I'm not, by any

> means. You can't stop it, you see. You can be obstructive and destructive, and you can slow it all up and distort it for your own ends, but somehow it keeps on happening. Just look at those horses. (154)

One would expect the "fringes people"--disenfranchized as they are--to point out any possible hypocrisy in the beliefs and practices of their oppressors, but they are not the only ones to question or bend the party line out of disaffection or avarice. David's uncle Axel offers some extremely subversive ideas (though he lives within "civilized" society) when he suggests that emulation of the Old People may not be such a noble goal, after all:

> even if the Old People were the same kind as I am and they are, what of it? Oh, I know people tell tales about how wonderful they were and how wonderful their world was, and how one day we'll get back again all the things they had. There's a lot of nonsense mixed up in what they say about them, but even if there's a lot of truth, too, what's the good of trying so hard to keep in their tracks? Where are they and their wonderful world now? (78)

Axel, here, gets to the heart of what the contemporary reader already believes--that it was no "Tribulation," sent by an angry God, that destroyed civilization, but rather nuclear war. The danger in following in the footsteps of

the Old People is the danger of following too closely and having the same catastrophe repeat itself. In The Day of the Triffids, Wyndham had already suggested this possibility, and he presents it again here. Maybe the very idea of a "Golden Age" is a dangerous thing.

Uncle Axel, however, has ideas far more radical than this. He goes further, to suggest that the Right Wing Church Party's "IN PURITY OUR SALVATION"(18), is essentially flawed, and that there is no real evidence as to what the "true image" is. He argues that "the Bible doesn't say anything to contradict the people of that time being like us, but on the other hand it doesn't give any definition of man either"(63). Axel also suggests that the Right Wing Church Party's merely physical description of Man--"each leg shall be jointed twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail" and that "any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus is not human"(13)--is inaccurate or incomplete. The quality that Axel sees the orthodox description lacking, is mind:

> `what makes man man is mind; it's not a thing, it's a quality, and minds aren't all the same value; they're better or worse, and the better they are, the more they mean....'
>
> `Man got his physical shape--the true image, they call

> it--before he even knew he was man at all. It's what happened inside, after that, that made him human. He discovered he had what nothing else had, mind. That put him on a different level. Like a lot of the animals he was physically pretty nearly as good as he needed to be; but he had this new quality, mind, which was only in its early stages, and he developed that. That was the only thing he could usefully develop; it's the only way open to him--to develop new qualities of mind.' (79-80)

However, the implications that Axel draws from this idea are, understandably, perhaps a bit flawed. He seems to suggest--indeed he does suggest--that David and Rosalind and the rest of the empaths are merely the next phase of humanity. The problem is, the quality of mind which sets David and the rest apart is so different in degree, that it has become a different kind: they have become a different kind. According to Axel's definition, the "fringes people," who are reviled because of their merely physical abnormalities, are far more "human" than David.

The fact that, according to any standard definition, David (the character the reader sympathizes most with in the novel) and the rest are not, strictly speaking, human, is one of Wyndham's most challenging ideas[7]. Obviously, David

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[7]Coincidentally [?], a similar quandry is presented in

and Rosalind are substantially more human than the Children of The Midwich Cuckoos. They possess "humour and compassion"--those most important human qualities (Midwich 200) the Cuckoo Children lack. Further, they feel no biological imperative to destroy, or dominate the regular humans. Nevertheless, there are very serious Darwinian issues at stake. At the end of the novel, a party of telepaths from New Zealand casually exterminates dozens of "normal humans" and Fringes People in an effort to extricate David and his friends.

In response to David's shock at the callousness of the New Zealanders towards the "normals," the leader of the New Zealanders replies as follows:

> `In loyalty to their kind, they cannot tolerate our rise; in loyalty to our kind, we cannot tolerate their obstruction.'
>
> `If the process shocks you, it is because you have not been able to stand off and, knowing what you are, see what a difference in kind must mean. Your minds are confused by your ties and your upbringing: you are still half-thinking of them as the same kind as yourselves. That is why you are shocked. And that is why they have you at a disadvantage, for they are not confused. They are alert, corporately aware of danger

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William Golding's The Inheritors, published in 1955--the same

> to their species. They can see quite well that if it is to survive they have not only to preserve it from deterioration, but they must protect it from the even more serious threat of the superior variant.' (196)

The process shocks us too. As in William Golding's The Inheritors, the characters we have been cheering on are the other, and their oppressors are us. Wyndham does not go so far as to suggest that this new variant is what the human race ought to aspire to. His criticism of religious belief in science, of the Cold War, of secrecy, is not intended to lead us to forsake the idea of science as salvation in favour of the idea of evolution as salvation. The "Sealand" woman admits that the empaths are just another step on the evolutionary chain, and that what comes to replace them may not be even vaguely human. She likens her kind to the humans and "fringes people" of Waknuk, and imagines the arrival of the next superior variant: "We shall force it to prove itself, and when it does, we shall go; as, by the same process, these are going"(196).

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year as The Chrysalids.

CONCLUSION: THE GRIM TRUTH

What Wyndham warns us against is our atavistic, warlike tendencies which, unchecked, may destroy us prematurely. Certainly his faith in human nature is slim at best. When one considers the number of roving gangs of thugs, looters, and rioters encountered in Wyndham's novels--the blind mobs at the beginning of The Day of The Triffids, Torrance's gang (in the same novel), the various, isolated bands of survivalists at the end of The Kraken Wakes, the Fringes people in The Chrysalids, and the mob that sets out to destroy the Children in The Midwich Cuckoos--and the propensity of society to crumble at the drop of a hat, one would almost characterize him as a disciple of Thomas Hobbes rather than of H.G. Wells. For Wyndham, even life under the social contract proves, more often than not, to be nasty, brutish and short--or obscure, mysterious, and constrained. The sheeplike tendency to follow the flock seems to be one of the principal dangers he warns against--above all, the tendency to be lulled into false belief (or blind faith) in science, religion, or any other ideology which takes as its basic premise that Humans are the true, unchallenged inheritors of the earth.

Indeed, "cosy" ideas are the most dangerous in the

world of Wyndham's novels. It's a remarkably comforting idea to believe that science can be depended upon to cure all the problems of humanity, remarkably cosy to believe that the Government and the Military keep secrets from us for our own good. What Wyndham does, in four smooth-reading, well-written novels (and to varying degrees in the rest of his works), is systematically challenge these ideas and suggest that there are dangerous truths that we are ignoring. Nicholas Ruddick unfairly condemns Wyndham as "shrewd" for not marketing his works as science fiction(138), implying that this makes Wyndham some sort of traitor to the genre, a sellout. To coin a phrase, "A triffid, by any other name, would smell as sweet." But perhaps Wyndham's major flaw is related to the fact that his novels were deliberately not marketed as science fiction. That flaw may very well be the high quality of his writing, the fact that his books do "read smoothly, and thus achieve a maximum audience." A maximum audience is not the kind of audience to pick through a novel to look for the social and political message behind it. As Maureen Speller suggests, perhaps Wyndham's novels, eagerly devoured for their great stories and fantastic monsters, only yield their true meaning to deeper reading. Hopefully, this thesis will contribute to the growing body of criticism that encourages a deeper reading of the "invisible man of British science

fiction.

As a final note, I would like to mention that further research leading to such criticism is now possible thanks to money from the U.K's National Lottery Heritage Fund which enabled Liverpool University to acquire the John Wyndham Archive. Certain aspects of this thesis were it not for the availability of copies of primary resources from the Archive.

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