

The following is an accepted manuscript version of the chapter prior to publisher copyediting and typesetting.

Please reference this chapter in the following way:

Daley, C., (2014) 'The Not so Cozy Catastrophe: Reimagining the British Disaster Novel in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* (1969).' In: Germana, M., and Mousoutzanis, A., (eds.) *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives of the End of the World*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 133-147.

LHP: DALEY

RHP: THE NOT SO COZY CATASTROPHE

9

The Not So Cozy Catastrophe: Reimagining the British Disaster Novel in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* (1969)

Christopher Daley

Emerging most prominently alongside the scientific romances of the late nineteenth century, British disaster fiction perpetually exposed the anxieties haunting the overt civility of Victorian, Edwardian, and interwar Britain. The early novels of H.G. Wells, which contained provocative explorations of the possible uses and abuses of evolutionary theory, would help to characterize a uniquely British style of science fiction (SF), one that articulated, as Brian Stableford points out, the “sense of precariousness” (64) felt by modern man as a consequence of industrial and scientific revolutions. Stableford cites Wells as “the first man to see the Darwinian struggle for existence as something which could extend across interplanetary space” (63), and whose *War of the Worlds* (1898) challenged the perceived dominance of industrialized society by expressing its continual vulnerability to renewed evolutionary struggle. Following the Second World War, the convergence of this British tradition with American pulp SF saw the demise of scientific romance as a distinctive genre. As Stableford notes, “in theme, in style and in the manner of its marketing most of the speculative fiction after 1950 was shaped in accordance with the rather different tradition of American science fiction” (321). And yet, the disaster

subgenre would remain suitably adaptive to the social and political climate of the Cold War. Throughout the 1950s, writers such as John Wyndham and John Christopher would continue the tradition of the Wellsian disaster through texts that, in Roger Luckhurst's terms, "set loose the delights of destruction Wells had entertained in *War of the Worlds*" (2005: 47) and, once again, opened up debates about the natural forces underlying human behavior.

Yet, Wyndham's fusion of pulp thriller with neo-Wellsian investigation in novels including *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) was not wholly endorsed, with Brian Aldiss declaring in his history of SF, *Trillion Year Spree*, that Wyndham was the "master of the cozy catastrophe" (315). The problem, for Aldiss, was located in the "smoothness" of Wyndham's fiction, which favored easy reading over detailed philosophical or political investigation and conjured a plot whereby "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" (316). Aldiss's criticism also hints at the narrow focus of Wyndham's work. Wyndham's characters are almost exclusively white, middle-class Englishmen who fearlessly tackle postapocalyptic terrors and attempt to rebuild society in their own image. As the Cold War escalated throughout the 1950s and early 1960s and as Britain's imperial power ebbed away, Wyndham's ostensibly quaint disasters appeared unsatisfactory to a younger generation of writers experiencing the "white heat" of social and technological change. The British New Wave of SF, which centered most famously around Michael Moorcock's editorship of *New Worlds* magazine between 1964 and 1970, represented, on the surface, a clean break from the

Wyndhamesque formula for disaster fiction. New Wave writers instead emphasized the importance of experimentation to reflect the social and political fragmentation of the 1960s. Nonetheless, the British disaster novel persisted, despite such stylistic transformation, and in this chapter I will focus on two recognizably New Wave texts, J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* (1969), to demonstrate their indebtedness to this long-established genre. In doing so, I will argue that while Ballard and Aldiss seek to disrupt the recognized conventions put in place by Wells and, later, Wyndham, their fiction nonetheless works within the confines of this tradition to supply a revitalized contemplation of apocalyptic discourse that appropriately accounts for the social and political shifts of the 1960s.

Alongside Moorcock, Ballard is invariably cast as the major force in the development of the British New Wave during the 1960s. Ballard's trilogy of surreal disaster narratives—*The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1965), and *The Crystal World* (1966)—are therefore key texts in identifying the aesthetic transformation taking place within British SF during this period. These works also represent Ballard's personal response to the disaster tradition and, rather than signaling a schism from past styles, they appear as intentional distortions of the seemingly “cozy” solutions offered by preceding catastrophe narratives. Indeed, his first published novel was *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962), a “pulpy” disaster thriller that largely served the purpose of ensuring Ballard would have enough money to start up as a full-time writer. Despite *The Wind from Nowhere*'s conventionality, the creation of the egomaniacal character Hardoon signals the trajectory of Ballard's subsequent fiction. Following the collapse of many major cities

as a consequence of incessant high winds, Hardoon constructs a temple to the impending apocalypse, yet as the structure collapses, Hardoon does not seek safety but instead embraces his own demise by choosing to stare “upward into the sky like some Wagnerian super-hero in a besieged Valhalla” (181). *The Wind from Nowhere* was, therefore, not merely a commercial venture, but also a valuable literary exercise in testing the compatibility of the disaster tradition with Ballard’s urge for what he described as “inner space” fiction, a term broadly outlined in his 1962 essay “Which Way to Inner Space?” as the application of “more psycho-literary ideas, more meta-biological and meta-chemical concepts, private time systems, synthetic psychologies and space-times” (198) into otherwise formally linear texts. By tracing the antecedence of Ballard’s apocalyptic narratives through *The Wind from Nowhere*, it becomes possible to read his work as a clever fusion of “conventional” British catastrophe writing with the emerging aesthetics of the New Wave. In this sense, Ballard’s disasters mimic, often for the purpose of satire, the formal “smoothness” of the Wyndhamesque disaster or the (pseudo) scientific explorations that dominate Wellsian texts, while simultaneously utilizing the postapocalyptic setting to begin his career-long fascination with the workings of “inner space.”

The Drowned World therefore provides the first explicit example of Ballard’s bold evolution of the genre as he makes use of the radical tropes exhibited fleetingly in *The Wind from Nowhere* and develops them into an entire narrative. The novel is set in a postapocalyptic world following the melting of the ice caps. London, the novel’s principal setting, is submerged under a dense lagoon, which is covered in tropical

vegetation as a result of a drastic shift in climate. *The Drowned World's* seemingly distant postdisaster setting is a notable disruption of the English catastrophe, which habitually opens during a preapocalyptic moment or as the disaster is just beginning to unfold. However, as Roger Luckhurst argues, Ballard's disaster narratives actually "take place *between catastrophes*, in the space after the initial catastrophe and the "'catastrophe' which follows: death" (1997: 38). This correlates partly with the trajectory of 1950s disaster fiction insofar as it is the elongated "struggle" in the postapocalyptic moment that paves the way for the hopeful dénouement. Yet Ballard's inversion of the form is found in his refusal to accept a cyclical return to steady human progress exemplified by contemporary texts such as Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), which charts the rebuilding of civilization following nuclear war and envisages a new Renaissance and Enlightenment that culminates in another nuclear conflict. Instead, Ballard conceives of the apocalypse as a transformative unleashing of unconscious urges that ultimately resolve themselves *through* death. In this way, his disaster fiction sits simultaneously inside and outside the genre, as his work exposes what Luckhurst describes as "the space *between* frames" (1997: xiii) and reveals "the hidden assumptions behind the secure categorizations of literature and literary judgement" (xiii). *The Drowned World* operates, to an extent, within the generic confines of British disaster fiction, yet simultaneously complicates the genre's narrative tendency toward postapocalyptic renewal through the willful retreat of the novel's characters away from societal reconstruction and into their own psychological responses to disaster.

Prominent examples of Ballard's distortion of the catastrophe format can be found in *The Drowned World's* relationship with the technocratic structures of the old world. Ballard's novel follows some of the patterns associated with Wyndham's work in order to exhibit his own discomfort regarding the legitimacy and adaptability of the supposedly rationalizing systems of modernity. For example, in the aftermath of the initial cataclysm in *The Day of the Triffids*, a former professor, Michael Beadley, articulates the path toward disaster that was forged by modernity, noting that the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had caused humanity's "margin of survival" to be "narrowed appallingly" (96). Similarly, Ballard's novel articulates the redundancy of old organizing forces. The scientific testing station that the protagonist, Kerans, willfully abandons is accordingly represented as a relic of a surpassed social and political order, although, as Andrzej Gasiorek argues, its crew still persist in propping up the pretenses of the preapocalyptic world:

The testing station combines two public functions: scientific and administrative. In its scientific capacity it endeavors to get to grips with the changing nature of the world in order to adapt to it; in its administrative role it polices the movement of individuals. (34)

Whereas the catastrophe narratives of Wyndham locate potential salvation in the form of new rationalized communities—a group of survivors escape to a commune on the Isle of Wight in *Triffids*—Ballard's novel disrupts this hopeful resolution, as the testing station becomes a symbol of futility. *The Drowned World* rejects the concept of supplanting an outmoded political system with another similar, but smaller-scale, structure, by instead

viewing the catastrophe as an absolute transformative event that temporarily reveals to his protagonist the latent content of the apocalyptic imagination prior to the personal apocalypse of death. Kerans's physical and psychological state deteriorates as he heads farther into the heat, which brings forth from the unconscious "the landscapes of each epoch" (44) to instigate "a total reorientation of the personality" (44). While the Wyndhamesque catastrophe "frees up" its protagonists from the overbearing presence of Cold War modernity before suppressing the psychological energies of disaster through a freshly constructed community, Ballard's novel leads to the complete breakdown of the surface realities of technocratic order and enters into what Mary Ann Caws notes in her analysis of surrealist artworks as "a *dialogue* with the other" (15)—in this case encapsulated by the emerging psychological territories experienced by Kerans as he explores the drowned landscape.

Ballard's postapocalyptic landscapes, which are comparable to the paintings of Max Ernst or Yves Tanguy, therefore offer a vital reworking of the apocalyptic discourse of preceding catastrophe narratives in Britain. Unlike earlier "cozy" narratives, which invariably incorporate some hope of social renewal, Ballard rejects the notion of bucolic redemption and instead uses the postapocalyptic setting to interrogate the psychological function of catastrophic imagining. Thus, as Kerans hallucinates in the overwhelming heat, he glimpses previous apocalyptic events: "Phantoms slid imperceptibly from nightmare to reality and back again, the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were now indistinguishable, as they had been at Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Golgotha and Gomorrah" (74). Rather than seeking political solutions to societal collapse, as seen in

the discourse of “conventional” British disaster fiction, Ballard is interested almost exclusively in the surreal juxtapositions and visualizations brought about by apocalyptic rupture and correspondingly explores the underlying logic of newly formed terrains, regardless of their hostility to any form of human habitation.

Indeed, this deliberate disturbance of the social and political message of the catastrophe genre is expanded further through *The Drowned World*’s challenge to the remnants of cultural identity within the postapocalyptic landscape. Colonel Riggs, the head of the scientific research team, is represented as a stoical middle-class moralist whose adherence to predisaster ideals is mocked by Kerans and Beatrice, with Beatrice deriding his inflexibility: “But, darling, he was insufferable. All that stiff upper lip stuff and dressing for dinner in the jungle—a total lack of adaptability” (80). Ballard’s work again converges partly here with the themes of previous catastrophe narratives, such as Wyndham’s enactment of a similar form of parody in *The Day of the Triffids* where he mockingly details Masen’s desire to leave “a fair price” (41) for a meal he acquires from an abandoned café. Yet, in *The Day of the Triffids* it is the preservation of “useful” aspects of middle-class culture that benefits the protagonist as Masen also refuses to accept the egomaniacal dictatorship of Torrence in favor of social conservation. Ballard assesses this outlook as ultimately fruitless within the landscape of *The Drowned World*, with the parodic figure of Riggs not only illustrating the obsolescence of conventional middle-class models of Englishness, but also representing, through his hopelessness, an inevitable disintegration of all societal conditions. Ballard thus unleashes an unsettling assertion that is akin to Sigmund Freud’s contemplations in *Civilization and Its*

Discontents on the notion that society produces necessary situations that repress the destructive and libidinal wishes of the unconscious. Freud states in the final part of the book: “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction” (92). The conclusion to the novel sees Kerans accept that the route to self-destruction has conquered civilizing “cultural development” and he therefore rejects the skeletal remains of a crumbling civilization and embraces his resultant journey into the otherwise repressed unconscious:

His time there had outlived itself, and the air-sealed suite with its constant temperature and humidity, its supplies of fuel and food, were nothing more than an encapsulated form of his previous environment, to which he had clung like a reluctant embryo to its yoke sac. The shattering of this shell, like the piercing doubts about his true unconscious motives set off by his near drowning in the planetarium, was the necessary spur to action, to his emergence into the brighter day of the interior, archaeopsychic sun. (146–47)

Here, *The Drowned World* goes beyond a straightforward parody of middle-class stiffness and conventionality in order to speculate on the possibility of a wholly reimagined personal identity, one that is offered unrestrained access to underlying psychological forces at the expense of the reestablishment of otherwise eroded social and political structures.

Whereas Wyndham was keen to apply the concerns of evolutionary theory to fiction set during the early stages of the Cold War, Ballard's catastrophe writing takes on more prominently the theories of psychoanalysis and the aesthetics of surrealism. However, as with the catastrophe fiction of the 1950s, it is also a product of its sociopolitical moment. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 represented a clear peak in Cold War hostilities and Ballard's novel of the same year explicitly postulates on the psychological and literary implications of living under the cloud of thermonuclear extinction. Reacting to the contexts of the novel, Nicholas Ruddick states that *The Drowned World* can therefore be seen as a recognizable response to the nuclear age in the same way as *The Time Machine* constituted Wells's reaction to the Darwinian era. Ruddick notes that whereas Darwin opened up "the immense vistas of geological time" (155) to writers like Wells, Ballard's novel correspondingly reacts to the shutting down of such an avenue in the age of thermonuclear weaponry:

The advent of the nuclear age, marked by the bombing of Hiroshima, was, as far as the human future was concerned, effectively a closing-down of these vistas. Geological time seemed irrelevant, given the deployment of a means of instant self-extinction by a species that was not in the habit of developing costly technologies that it did not subsequently use. (155)

This is a useful way of reading *The Drowned World*, and, more broadly, it demonstrates the burgeoning nuclear referent influencing British catastrophe fiction during the postwar era. Writing in the early 1960s, Ballard appears all too aware of the problem of representing disaster when the likelihood of survival appears limited should the nuclear

arms race reach its apocalyptic peak. Ballard therefore reacts to the ease and speed of thermonuclear destruction by slowing down time within the text. The all-powerful sun of *The Drowned World* is visualized as a “colossal fire-ball” (7) that not only has helped submerge nation-states, but, powered by nuclear fusion, also resembles a slow-motion nuclear blast, especially as the text describes survivors of the disaster who are “suffering from malnutrition and radiation sickness” (12). Kerans’s languid existence in the baking lagoon represents an important counterbalance to the frenetic world that previously existed beneath the swamp. Ballard’s postapocalyptic landscape is not a place that its inhabitants hurriedly rebuild, but an alternative time-system where the unconscious drives of modernity can be examined without restraint. The nuclear fireball that looms over the submerged world remains as a persistent symbol of humanity’s technological end game.

In this way, Ballard’s pseudoscientific concepts of “archaeopsychic time” (44) and “ancient organic memory” (74), which seek to open up the latent content of human biological and psychological history, illustrate the unattainable nature of far-future projections during the “hot” moments of the Cold War. In the aftermath of Hiroshima and the nuclear buildup that followed, *The Drowned World* enacts a retreat into the hidden histories of the human psyche as a method of uncovering the processes that have led to such a point in human development. “Archaeopsychic time” pulls Kerans away from speculations of a nonexistent future and forces him to step backward and dig for the geological clues of the past: “Guided by his dreams, he was moving backwards through the emergent past, through a succession of ever stranger landscapes, centered upon the

lagoon, each of which, as Bodkin had said, seemed to represent one of his own spinal levels” (83). This inverted speculation once more allows Ballard to adapt the British catastrophe novel, intentionally using some of its most prominent themes—in this instance its concern with humanity’s role in the disaster—before breaking up conventional assumptions surrounding degeneration or political and social folly by looking, instead, to the ancient processes of evolutionary and psychological development. Crucially, *The Drowned World* does not comfort a nervous Cold War readership by offering the “cozy” hope of postapocalyptic redemption, but conversely, as Ruddick argues, Ballard’s survivors are left to “stand on the terminal beach of the present, wondering about the nature of the time machine responsible for delivering them there” (155). Ballard therefore creates a catastrophe novel that is concurrently pre- and postapocalyptic. Individually, the protagonists are placed in a space after the initial disaster but before their own personal deaths, a visible “zone of transit” (35), yet at a broader contextual level this landscape also contemplates the follies of modernity, with the sun’s nuclear heat operating as a metaphorical reminder of modern man’s unconscious urge for apocalyptic violence.

While Ballard’s disaster narratives set in motion a drastic evolution in form, another writer associated with the New Wave, Brian Aldiss, also produced a similarly bold catastrophe novel at the end of the 1960s. *Barefoot in the Head: A European Fantasia* (1969) was originally published as a series of short stories in *New Worlds* entitled “The Acid-Head Wars” and provides a sweeping vision of European transformation following a war. *Barefoot in the Head* is a broad examination of 1960s

drug culture, the breakdown of Cold War states, and the troubling question of what to build in their place, the final two themes representing an overlapping concern for many disaster novels in the postwar period. What is also noticeable about Aldiss's postapocalyptic narrative is that whereas Ballard's disaster novels set out to distort the conventions of the Wyndhamesque catastrophe in order to uncover their latent dreamscapes, Aldiss looks to move even further in reforming the style of disaster narratives by fracturing language, inverting archetypal characterization, and incorporating different literary forms (in this case poetry) into the text.

Barefoot in the Head details the journey of the novel's protagonist, Colin Charteris, following a devastating war that had seen Kuwait launch a wave of chemical weapons containing psychedelic drugs upon Europe. As the novel develops and the effects of the hallucinogens intensify, the prose becomes increasingly fragmented. Indeed, Peter Nicholls suggests that the work adopts "a dense, punning style reminiscent of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*" (21). However, the novel does not entirely fall into such near-impenetrable formal complexity, but instead makes use of splintered prose to illustrate, above all, the uncontrolled nature of Charteris's journey and the growing incoherency of his troupe of followers who perceive him as a messianic savior.

The novel begins with Charteris in France, a country that had remained neutral during the "Acid-Head Wars" (10) and suffered very little from the chemical attacks. Yet, Charteris feels disillusioned by the sterility of life in Metz, where the prewar structures remained surprisingly unchanged despite the radical transformations taking place in the

rest of Europe: “He saw these people as victims of an unworkable capitalistic system dying on its feet. They were extinct in their clothes” (9). He quickly flees to what he assumes is a fundamentally altered Britain, having been the first victim of the psychedelic bombs, but initially discovers a suburban enclave seemingly untouched by the disaster:

This was a middle-class area, and unlike anywhere he had visited before. Roads of small neat houses and bungalows stretched away on all sides, crescents curved off and later rejoined the road, rebellion over. All were neatly labeled with sylvan names: Sherwood Forest Road, Dingley Dell Road, Herbivore Drive, Woodbine Walk, Placenta Place, Honeysuckle Avenue, Cowpat Avenue, Geranium Gardens, Clematis Close, Creosote Crescent, Laurustinus Lane. (33–34)

Charteris’s instant revulsion at the apparently staid existence of people in Metz and England sets up a familiar critique of suburbia, yet the parody of parochial Englishness serves a further purpose that resonates more specifically with the political context of the late 1960s. Charteris’s unnamed guide through this typically English suburbia quickly states that “this way of life is dead” (34) and that “the values on which this mini-civilization has been built have been swept away” (34). Accordingly, a schism is recorded whereby the solidity of tradition is overturned in the aftermath of an unprecedented chemically induced psychological upheaval. This correlates broadly with the clean break from conventionality advocated by the counterculture movements of the 1960s, whose aims Robert Hewison outlines (in terms that recall Ballard) as being “to ignore all boundaries and conventions, and as far as possible to escape the imposed definitions of material reality by exploring inner space” (86). But additionally, Aldiss’s mocking of suburbia also subtly comments on the instability of a way of life facilitated

by Cold War ideology. The residents of the sleepy vistas that Charteris is guided through have remained “dedicated [...] to mechanical thought and action, which keep the serpent sleeping” (35). Their nuclear families and modern homes have insulated them from the underlying fear of thermonuclear terror, yet the chemical bombs that are slowly transforming the consciousness of the populace soon begin to infiltrate suburban defenses against psychosocial transformation. Similarly to *The Drowned World*, where Ballard overcomes the problem of representing thermonuclear apocalypse by encoding it within the text through the ever-expanding nuclear furnace of the sun, Aldiss here replaces nuclear war with global chemical warfare, which facilitates a critique of suburban pretensions—by showing their slow disintegration—and allows for the mapping of new postapocalyptic identities.

Furthermore, Aldiss’s protagonist is alien to the rituals and attitudes of English suburbia; as Charteris originates from Serbia and notes that “we aren’t allowed this sort of private property in Yugoslavia” (34). While his ancestral heritage clearly illustrates a definable Cold War divide between communist and capitalist visions of property, it also represents a telling disruption of certain trends in contemporaneous disaster fiction. Honorable English suburbanites do not emerge heroically in Aldiss’s novel, but instead are parodied as obsolete curiosities in a rapidly altering landscape. Just as Ballard represents the conventional and repetitive actions of Riggs in *The Drowned World* as ineffectual in the postapocalyptic lagoon world, Aldiss quickly dismisses those who stand “neatly and attentively in their gardens” (35) and celebrates Charteris’s embrace—like Kerans’s in Ballard’s earlier novel—of the transformed postdisaster landscape. The

chapter ends by declaring that “there had been a war, a dislocation” (41), which signals the novel’s imminent movement away from the outmoded patterns of English suburban living and into the multidimensional pathways of hallucinogenic topography.

It is also worth noting, in this respect, an interesting parallel between the apocalyptic dislocation in Aldiss’s novel and that seen in Wyndham’s earlier texts. In examining Wyndham’s disasters, Fredric Jameson argues that the prospering of Wyndham’s survivors represents a form of “utopian wish-fulfillment” (199) whereby the protagonists find a “smaller and more livable collectivity after the end of modernity and capitalism” (199). While Wyndham’s fiction therefore achieves, in Jameson’s view, the desired destruction of the British postwar political consensus in favor of a definable middle-class community, Aldiss’s postapocalyptic novel also imagines the destruction of suburban conformity and the growth of chemically enhanced communes devoid of the trappings of bourgeois morality. Despite Aldiss’s intended political distance from the Wyndhamesque, the possibility for utopian restructuring in the postcatastrophe moment represents a notable convergence that permeates British catastrophe writing more generally.

While the “dislocation” in *Barefoot in the Head* exposes the apocalyptic utopianism of 1960s counterculture—which displays interesting links with the conservative utopias found in Wyndham’s catastrophe fiction—it also offers a formidable break at the level of form and style from the accessible postdisaster worlds of preceding works. As the chemical content of the atmosphere increases, linguistic meaning

multiplies and the linearity of Charteris's journey falls apart and increasingly becomes a voyage of psychological discovery:

The words stoned him. Since he had reached England, the psychedelic effect had gained on him daily in gusts. Cities had speaking patterns, worlds, rooms. He had ceased to think what he was saying; the result was he surprised himself; and this elation fed back into the system. Every thought multiplied into a thousand. Words, roads, all fossil tracks of thinking. (83)

Michael R. Collings argues that *Barefoot in the Head* continues Aldiss's general desire for topographical exploration, but suggests that the novel's psychedelic infusion extends this focus to examine how "topography exists within the human mind as well" (38). Here again, comparisons can be drawn between Aldiss's novel and the broader project of the British New Wave. Like Ballard's ecological disasters, which function to dismantle the technocratic order of the Cold War to facilitate a transportation to "inner space," Aldiss uses the biological contamination of the atmosphere as a tool for breaking up the contemporary landscape and delving into the underlying workings of the psyche. Just as Kerans dives into the landscape of "archaeopsychic time" in *The Drowned World*, Charteris also enters into revelatory liminal spaces as he hallucinates:

Geology. Strata of different man-times. Tempology. Each decade of the past still preserved in some gaunt monument. Even the motorway itself yielding clues to the enormous epochs of pre-psychedelic time [...] All art, assuaging. Pylons, endlessly, too ornate for the cumbersome land, assuaging. Multiplacation. (84)

The hallucinogens present Charteris with access to psychological spaces otherwise off-limits in the prewar world of regimented order. In doing so, Aldiss's characters—who travel in a motorcade through the drug-filled remnants of Europe—are supplied with almost endless access to the “inner space” so craved by New Wave writers and members of the counterculture alike. Again, Aldiss seeks to reconsider the political messages of the catastrophe novel. The Wyndhamesque narrative assumes that the likes of Masen, with their adherence to a particularly English brand of liberal humanism, will ultimately triumph in their quest to rebuild after societal cataclysm. Aldiss, however, imagines the disaster as a space to reconsider linguistic meaning and reconfigure ethical boundaries. He does not assume the dominance of a particularly English middle-class identity in the new order, but instead imagines the prospect of its displacement and the emergence of new, psychologically enriched communities.

While the postdisaster world offers a sense of liberation and psychological revelation, Charteris and his group of followers nonetheless possess little definable purpose as they travel across Europe. Charteris's wife, Angelina, who occasionally finds some lucidity even as the effect of the drugs intensify, begins to question the logic of their quest, explaining that the old order at least spared people widespread hardship: “Okay, I agree as everyone must that there were many greedy faults but put at its lowest wesciv maimtamed [*sic*] in reasonable comfort a high population which now must die badly by plague and starve off to its last wither” (167). But Boreas, a filmmaker and follower of Charteris, contests Angelina, asserting that the new conditions represent a glorious liberation:

No, no, no, *cherie*, concourse, my High Point Y is an insproachmen of the old technological odour, which was only built up by rebrunson and maintained by everyone's anxiety, or dummied into inhabitation. Okay, so it all go and no worries. (167)

Boreas attacks the trappings of Cold War social psychology. He equates the presence of destructive technology with the formation of a culture of repression and anxiety that forces people to retreat into the kind of suburban domesticity that Charteris found so abhorrent upon his arrival in England. Boreas's position can again be evaluated contextually alongside the general countercultural articulations of the late 1960s. Jeff Nuttall, in his contemporaneous analysis of the decade, *Bomb Culture* (1968), argued that the 1960s underground wished to exhibit its own "sickness" so the "squares could either recognize it in us and themselves and cure it" (144). Boreas, who indulges in the increasingly perverse activities of Charteris's troupe, advocates their contrapuntal behavior as a way of exposing the contradictions ingrained in the slowly crumbling old order. Once more, Aldiss's novel opens up alternative social and political solutions to the rebuilding of society after disaster. The consequence is an uneven terrain where "cozy" answers are increasingly unattainable.

As the novel progresses, there also emerges a general comment on the political impact of countercultural movements. Charteris's group slowly breaks apart, its purpose and meaning becomes increasingly diffuse, while famines are recorded in some parts of Europe. Angelina soon reasons that "they were all escaping from a state where the wrong

things had mattered; but they were now in a state where nothing matters to us” (163–64). Placed in context, *Barefoot in the Head* offers a skeptical examination of the social and political climate of the late 1960s, implicitly echoing what Robert Hewison characterizes as the practical challenges for alternative cultures:

As a system (or rather anti-system) of aesthetics, the counter-culture wished to destroy artistic categories altogether. [...] Noble as this project was in many ways, its consequences for the explorer could be heavy. The destruction of the categories of art could lead to the self-destruction of the artist, and the inner world would turn out to be purgatory rather than paradise. The risk of abandoning logic and language was that this could lead to nonsensical, catatonic silence. (86)

Indeed, just as Aldiss parodies the staleness of suburbia at the beginning of the novel, the actions of intoxicated groupies is equally ridiculed as they celebrate Boreas’s film despite it not being broadcast at all. Boreas promptly cries: “You stupid *godverdomme* acidheads and junkies all the same you live inside your crazy nuts and never see a thing beyond!” (183). There emerges a visible connection here between Wyndham, Ballard, and Aldiss, whereby doubt toward utopian outcomes is expressed within postapocalyptic communities. While the Isle of Wight is a rational, scientific, and middle-class refuge from the evolutionary struggle with the Triffids in Wyndham’s famous work, one also senses that it is a place of temporary respite before the bleakly interpreted Darwinian battle returns. Despite the relative safety of the Isle of Wight, Masen concludes the novel by declaring that the struggle with the Triffids will not diminish in the near future:

So we must regard the task ahead as ours alone. We think now that we can see the way, but there is still a lot of work and research to be done before the day when we, or our children, or their children, will cross the narrow straits on the crusade to drive the triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped. (233)

Similarly, the regenerated communities in *The Drowned World* and *Barefoot in the Head* ultimately fail as Kerans embarks on a solitary journey south, while Charteris sees his alternative culture fall apart. Despite the overt “coziness” of Wyndham’s fictional style, all three works entertain but ultimately temper utopian expectations.

This fracturing and dissipation of political will is also indicative of a wider skepticism in Aldiss’s novel. While the New Wave expressed a persistent interest in entropy, Colin Greenland argues that Aldiss offers a particularly unique account as he fuses these ideas with accompanying musings upon the nature of fragmentation:

Aldiss is as conscious as any other *NW* writer of fragmentation. Organized activities disintegrate in *Barefoot*: “All the known noon world loses its old staples and everything drops apart.” The fabric of space and time tears in *Frankenstein Unbound*, throwing mankind onto separate historical tracks. Many novels and stories concern the human race divided into tribes and factions, small and unco-ordinated groups who live by differing principles, each endeavoring to survive catastrophe according to its own responses. (79)

Barefoot in the Head assumes the breakdown of viable political models to challenge the defunct monolith of the Cold War state. Aldiss’s text consequently mirrors political

doubts emerging at the decade's end, for, as Nuttall concludes in his analysis of the political protests against the Vietnam War, "as it was they achieved little more constructive than the arrest of Norman Mailer and Doctor Spock" (69). The novel presumes, with an allusion to Yeats, that "things would fall apart this time from the dead center" (162), and, as a consequence, Aldiss's narrative offers an ultimately pessimistic assessment of any form of political alterity that coherently deviates from the omnipotent presence of the military-industrial complex.

To conclude, it is appropriate to return again to the "cozy" disasters of Wyndham. Aldiss is correct to allude to the way his fiction fails to evoke the terror or psychological transformation brought about by widespread social upheaval, but his additional criticism, whereby he labels Wyndham's work as "totally devoid of ideas" (315), overlooks his place within the tradition of British disaster writing. As David Ketterer points out in direct response to Aldiss:

It is surely odd to describe a 1951 novel which introduced the notion of genetically modified crops to SF and a 1953 novel which anticipates Stanislaw Lem's theme of the utter unknowability of an alien species as "totally devoid of ideas." Furthermore, virtually all of JBH's [Wyndham's] fiction explores the consequences of a Darwinian explanation of life. (376)

Indeed, similar themes underpin a variety of disaster narratives during the Cold War and both *The Drowned World* and *Barefoot in the Head* exhibit a related set of concerns to Wyndham, with *The Drowned World* visualizing ecological devastation, while *Barefoot*

in the Head investigates the consequences of chemical warfare. In *Triffids*, the near-universal blindness suffered by most of humanity at the novel's opening is suspected to be related to man-made satellite weapons that are said to contain "crop diseases, cattle diseases, radioactive dusts, viruses, and infections not only of familiar kinds, but brand-new sorts recently thought up in laboratories" (20). Ballard and Aldiss therefore reimagine the catastrophe genre through their stylistic experimentation and political gestures rather than via a complete rejection of thematic patterns. Both texts break away from the linearity of Wyndham and earlier catastrophe novels in the Wellsian tradition and instead experiment with form (Ballard creates alternative time-systems and surrealist landscapes, while Aldiss experiments with linguistic meaning) and engage with the New Wave pursuit for "inner space." Additionally, both works offer alternative political explanations that dislodge assumptions that humanity will simply rebuild after disaster. Ballard's work entertains the unsettling sentiment that catastrophe is unconsciously desired because of its unleashing of repressed libidinal forces, while Aldiss questions the prominence of English middle-class identity as the most suitable focalizer for visualizing postapocalyptic struggle. In this way, these novels update and rework the British catastrophe narrative. Simultaneously their connection to the genre is not one of schism, but of various interacting continuities and divergences.

Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian. *Barefoot in the Head: A European Fantasia*. 1969. London: House of Stratus, 2000. Print.

———. *Trillion Year Spree: the History of Science Fiction*. London: Paladin, 1988. Print.

Ballard, J.G. *The Drowned World*. 1962. London: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.

———. “Which Way to Inner Space?” 1962. *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. London: Flamingo, 1997. 195–98. Print.

———. *The Wind from Nowhere*. 1962. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974. Print.

———. *The Drought*. 1965. *The Drought*. New York: Liveright, 2012. Print.

———. *The Crystal World*. 1966. London: Fourth Estate, 2011. Print.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Surrealism*. London: Phaidon, 2004. Print.

Collings, Michael R. *Brian Aldiss*. Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1986. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. 1929. New York: W.W. Norton, 1962. Print.

Gasiorek, Andrzej. *J.G. Ballard*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. Print.

Greenland, Colin. *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British “New Wave” in Science Fiction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. Print.

Hewison, Robert. *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960–1975*. London: Methuen, 1986. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2007. Print.

Ketterer, David. “John Wyndham: The Facts of Life Sextet.” *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. David Seed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008. 375–88. Print.

Luckhurst, Roger. *"The Angle between Two Walls": The Fiction of J.G. Ballard.*

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997. Print.

———. *Science Fiction.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005. Print.

Miller, Walter. M. *A Canticle for Leibowitz.* 1959. London: Corgi, 1963. Print.

Nicholls, Peter. "Aldiss, Brian Wilson." *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction.* Ed. Peter

Nicholls. London: Granada, 1979. 19–21. Print.

Nuttall, Jeff. *Bomb Culture.* London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968. Print.

Ruddick, Nicholas. *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction.* Westport,

CT: Greenwood Press, 1993. Print.

Stableford, Brian. *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890–1950.* New York: St. Martin's

Press, 1985. Print.

Wells, H.G. *The War of the Worlds.* 1898. Rockville, MD: Phoenix Pick, 2008. Print.

Wyndham, John. *The Day of the Triffids.* 1951. London: Penguin, 1999. Print.

———. *The Kraken Wakes.* 1953. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.