CRIME AND THE IMAGINARY OF DISASTER

Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order

Majid Yar
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Majid Yar
Professor of Sociology, University of Hull, UK
For Rodanthi – with thanks
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Situating the Apocalypse, Crime and Problem of Social Order

Abstract: This chapter maps the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study, taking as its focus two key themes that organise the book as a whole. Firstly, it explores the meanings of the apocalyptic, situating these within the cultural history of the West. Tracing apocalyptic thinking from its religious roots in Christian and Judaic theology, it follows the evolution of such ideas into the supposedly secular era of modernity. Central here is the fundamental ambiguity of the apocalyptic – it can be both negative, marking the wholesale destruction of the world as we know it, but also positive, a mechanism of renewal and redemption. Secondly, it seeks to connect contemporary discourses on crime and disorder to apocalyptic thinking through their shared preoccupation with the problems of evil and suffering. It concludes by setting out the book’s approach to textual sampling and analysis, the basis for the exploration of post-apocalyptic fictions in the chapters that follow.

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Introduction

In the realm of modern, popular culture, one doesn’t have to look very far to find the apocalypse. Setting aside for the moment the complex historical, theological and religious meanings of the term, we can suggest that in modern parlance the apocalypse refers to an event, act or occurrence (accidental or otherwise) that brings about the end of the world. Cultural discourses (such as films, novels and comics) that deal with such matters can be termed apocalyptic in tone, tenor and content. These representations may deal with events leading-up to ‘the end’, and depict heroic attempts (successful or doomed) to prevent catastrophe. Alternatively, post-apocalyptic culture imagines what comes after disaster has been visited upon us (Renner, 2012: 204). The end of the world may be interpreted in a most literal manner. For example, in the Hollywood movie *End of Days* (1999), Satan attempts to usher-in the end of the world on the eve of the new millennium. In *The Core* (2003), the molten iron core of the Earth stops spinning; without the magnetic field that its rotation generates, the planet will become a lifeless rock, irradiated by the sun’s emissions to such an extent that no life will be able to survive. In *Sunshine* (2007), the sun again threatens to eradicate all life on Earth, this time because it is dying. However, more commonplace are tales in which the Earth, humanity and life persist, but in a world where the familiar coordinates of social, cultural, political, economic and moral organisation are gone – in other words, what has ended is the world as we know it. As Yuen (2012: xiii) puts it:

> The end of the world rarely is the end, at least in popular culture. Instead, it's the beginning of a new world, a world that is devoid of strong central government and traditional social institutions...

It is such post-apocalyptic scenarios, centred upon human existence in the wake of a radical break with life-as-we-know-it, that provide the focus for the present study.

There is a rich abundance of research and analysis that reflects upon apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic popular culture. For example, scholars from film studies have explored such fictions as manifestations of 20th century fears about imminent nuclear war (Newman, 1999; Shapiro, 2002). Others have related our preoccupation with these tales to a broader fin de siècle anxiety, or a postmodern nihilism that brings with it a loss of belief in ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard, 1984) of
progress, peace, emancipation or liberation. More specific crises, such as the legacy of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, have also been adopted as a lens through which to understand the conspicuous popularity of apocalyptic fictions (Walliss and Aston, 2011). Yet others have read such texts as indicators of a persistent (or perhaps resurgent) interest in religiosity (especially of an evangelical, ecstatic and rapturous kind) in an otherwise supposedly secular era (Bendle, 2005). However, despite this rich and diverse array of interventions, criminologists have been conspicuous by their absence when it comes to examining post-apocalyptic, cultural discourses. Over the past few decades, there has of course emerged a vibrant strand within criminology (often identified with ‘cultural criminology’) that focuses in significant part upon popular cultural forms such as film and television. Critical analysis of these products has aimed to uncover their contribution to reflecting, reinforcing and sometimes reshaping commonplace understandings of crime and deviance (Rafter, 2006; Young, 2009; Yar, 2010). Yet such interventions, as insightful as they are, have restricted their ambit to a clearly identifiable crime genre, examining films, TV shows and novels centred upon policing, organised crime, drugs, prisons, homicide, serial killers and the like (see, for example, Eschholz et al., 2004; Wilson and O’Sullivan, 2005; Fleming, 2007; Rafter and Brown, 2011). In the present work, I seek to extend the gaze of critical, cultural criminology beyond its most obvious textual materials to examine the post-apocalyptic genre. The relevance of such cultural outputs for criminology becomes clearer once we identify and acknowledge the extent to which they consistently deal with issues of crime, law and lawlessness, disorder, risk and violence. There are in fact very few popular representations of the post-apocalyptic world that do not address in some way, shape or fashion, crime and related issues.

The core contention in the analysis that follows can be stated fairly unambiguously, namely that post-apocalyptic fictions (like other popular genres) refract contemporary social concerns into the domain of storytelling, thereby dramatising the tensions, conflicts, fears and contradictions with which a society is wrestling. In other words, they:

transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into... narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the... medium, [they] execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result [they] become part of that broader system of cultural representations that construct social reality. (Ryan and Kellner, 1990: 12)
Important here is an appreciation that cultural discourses cannot and should not be read as straightforward expression of a ‘dominant ideology’ that seeks to ‘dupe’ and thereby pacify the audience in the interests of maintaining the status quo. Such a reading of the political imperatives that configure popular culture has a long and influential history, most notably the theory and practice of ‘ideology critique’ in the Marxist tradition (Althusser, 1994; Murdock and Golding, 2000; Barthes, 2000). In lieu of such a reductive or deterministic approach, and following that of Ryan and Kellner, I suggest that in fact cultural texts give voice to multiple and competing standpoints on the social and political issues of the day. Focusing on Hollywood films, they argue that:

Much of what happens in Hollywood cinema is indeed ideological...but not all Hollywood...products are inherently ideological. The conception of cinematic ideology flattens out necessary distinctions between different films at different moments in history, and it overlooks the distinctive and multiple rhetorical and representational strategies and effects of films in varying social situations. (Ibid: 1)

We can legitimately extend this standpoint in considering other popular cultural products (for example novels, television shows and comics) as well as films emanating from centres of production other than Hollywood. Consequently, one does not find in post-apocalyptic representations (nor in popular culture more broadly) a single, unified or unambiguous perspectives on matters related to crime, law, justice and punishment. Instead we find a complex assembly of meanings and symbols, often contradictory in character. Again, this ‘incoherence’ should not be taken as indication of artistic incompetence or confusion on the part of writers, directors and producers, but as the inevitable reflection of a multiplicity of viewpoints, beliefs and judgements about crime, which we daily attempt to hold and reconcile in a precarious balance. One example of such ambivalence can be found in our simultaneous attachment both to a vision of law-and-order based in an objective system of justice, and a yearning for vengeance and retribution that sets-aside cool, calculated penal decision-making (Green, 2011; Yar, 2014a). Such tensions and contradictions become readily apparent in post-apocalyptic visions of crime.

However, before we can embark upon an exploration of popular culture’s framing of crime in post-apocalyptic worlds, we must engage in some preliminary, conceptual scene-setting. In the remainder of this chapter, such work will be undertaken by elaborating a framework that
links understandings of the apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic on the one hand with issues of crime and disorder on the other. What couples the apocalyptic with crime, I argue, are the common existential and moral concerns addressed by the discourses of ‘theodicy’, ‘sociodicy’ and ‘evil’.

The apocalyptic in context: antiquity and religion

There is no shortage of scholarly discussion and analysis of the apocalypse and the apocalyptic, spanning for example the fields of theology and religion (Collins, 1998; Rowland, 2002), philosophy (Gray, 2008; Zizek, 2011), art history (O’Hear, 2011) and literature (Kermode, 2000; Rosen, 2008). While there is much of value and insight to be gleaned from such a multi-disciplinary abundance of research and reflection, it is notable that contributions to these discussions are less prominent when it comes to the social sciences. Where the apocalyptic is addressed, it tends to serve largely as a convenient metaphor for various (actual, probable or possible) risks and dangers, such as climate change (Gow and Leahy, 2005; Feinberg and Willer, 2011) or pandemics of mutated infectious diseases (Brown and Crawford, 2009). One notable exception is sociologist John R. Hall’s *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (2009). In this ground-breaking study, Hall links the historically shifting meanings of the apocalypse not only to the transition to modernity, but also to the conditions of economic and social dislocation that underpin a heightened ‘climate of apocalyptic expectation’ at particular times in particular societies (Ibid: 4). In doing so, he offers a valuable, historical-cultural sociology of apocalyptic discourse that grounds it in the realm of lived experience and social change. I will draw upon his analysis in the following discussion, alongside contributions from a broader range of humanities scholarship.

Hall begins his analysis of the apocalyptic in antiquity, arguing that early human societies lacked the conception of historical time which could underpin an apocalyptic narrative about the world and its eventual fate or ending. Rather, he contends that such societies experienced time in routine and cyclical terms, very much linked to the demands and patterns of everyday existence – for example the turning of the days and seasons, and the events of human birth, life and death. In other words, time was located ‘synchronously’ in the here-and-now of daily life, rather than
being conceived (as it later came to be) as a ‘diachronic’ movement that links past, present and future in an unfolding sequence (Hall 2009: 13–14). This is not to suggest, however, that time was a ‘profane’ matter, devoid of those moral and existential meanings that we associate with the ‘sacred’. Instead, everyday temporality was organised around ritualised practices and rites (related to events such as birth, death, hunting, harvesting) through which the sacred or transcendent was introduced to the plane of synchronic, cyclical time (as elaborated, for example, in Durkheim’s classic study The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (2008[1995])). Nevertheless, in this mode, existence was conceptualised as belonging to an eternal time that was subject to endless repetition (Eliade, 2005[1954]), rather than as part of a purposive unfolding with a determinate end, after which human life as we have known it will no longer continue. It is the ‘invention’ of a diachronic and historical conception of time that permits human culture to project the apocalypse as the ‘end of the world’, and to link this to the realisation of a cosmic or divine purpose. We need to note here that ‘the end’ has an intertwined double meaning – it connotes both ‘the end’ in the sense of the culmination or conclusion of something (in this case human history) and also ‘end’ as in a governing goal or purpose (telos). After all, etymologically, ‘apocalypse’ is derived from the ancient Greek apokálupsis (αποκάλυψις), meaning to ‘uncover’ or ‘reveal’ – what is in fact uncovered or revealed at ‘the end of all things’ is the divinely or cosmically ordained plan for the world.

Hall argues that the anticipation of such an apocalyptic ending is first explored in Zoroastrianism, a religion whose appearance dates to around 1400 BC in Persia, and is named after the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) who is credited with its pronouncement or revelation (Stausberg, 2008: 562). In Zoroastrian thought, the cosmos is imagined as an ongoing battle between a benign creator-god (Ahura Mazda) who embodies goodness and wisdom, and his counterpart (Ahura Mainyu), who represents evil, chaos and disorder (Boyce, 2001: 19–20). Zoroastrian eschatology foretells ‘the ultimate triumph of good over evil at the final battle... whereupon the world is made “glorious”’ (Hall, 2009: 18). Zoroastrianism’s apocalyptic vision of temporality, as well as its dualism (cosmic history as an eternal battle of good versus evil), undoubtedly influenced the eschatology of Judaism, and subsequently the doctrines of early Christianity (Barr, 1985).

We find both similarities and differences in the visions of apocalyptic history offered by Judaism and Christianity. They are united insofar as they offer what is a fundamentally utopian account of time – the
apocalypse is inextricably entwined with the notion of salvation, in which the faithful, righteous and virtuous will be rewarded and the evil will be punished (Cohn, 2001: 222). As we shall explore in the next section, this configuration of temporality as the realisation of justice (both distributive and punitive) is rooted in religious (and indeed secular) attempts to resolve the problems of theodicy and evil. For the moment, we should note that despite this commonality, the significant differences that exist between Old and New Testament accounts of the apocalypse. In Judaism:

The promise of salvation did not centre on heaven after individual death. It concerned the redemptive events that would affirm the destiny on earth of the Israelites as Yahweh’s chosen people...If the conduct of the Israelites met with Yahweh’s approval, the covenant would be fulfilled through redemptive events occurring within history – for example the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. (Hall, 2009: 20)

At first glance, eschatology appears to play a very limited role in Old Testament theology, as it was ‘intensely grounded in space and time’ (Arnold, 2010: 23), that of the real lived experiences (especially the trials and tribulations) of the Jewish people. However, eschatology does take form as ‘the expectation of a future eon radically discontinuous from the present’, in which ‘the circumstances of history will be transformed but not transcended’ (Ibid.). For example, the Book of Daniel is both apocalyptic (Daniel is a seer or visionary who is blessed with divine revelation) and eschatological (the revelation offered to Daniel concerns the end of human history and the redemption of the faithful) (Collins, 1998: 26–29; Collins, 2003: 75–77).

In contrast to Judaism, Christian eschatology transposes the culmination of apocalyptic redemption into a space of otherworldly transcendence – heaven. In other words, the apocalypse comes to coincide with the end of historical time and of earthly existence as we know it. Thus in the Apocalypse of John, more commonly referred to as the Book of Revelation, the destruction of the earth serves as the pathway to eternal life for the faithful. It is notable that Revelation’s depiction of divinely-ordained catastrophe (from the Greek katastrephein – to overturn, turn down, trample on) provides an enduring repository of images that continue to figure in popular renditions of the apocalypse:

Torrents of hail and fire, pollution of the waters of the earth, the smiting of the sun, moon and stars that spreads darkness in the world ... the plague ... slaughter ... earthquake... (Hall, 2009: 31)
As Maier (2002: ix) observes, ‘no other biblical writing captures the popular secular imagination more than the Apocalypse’. Such borrowings, albeit radically reconfigured when largely denuded of their overarching religious anchors, will be explored in the following chapters. Before moving on, however, it is worth noting that the legacy of this apocalyptic imaginary extends well beyond any circumscribed notion of ‘Western culture’. Rather, it is decisive for shaping the understanding of history and its end also within Islam, described by Norman O. Brown (1983: 169) as ‘an imperious restructuring of Christian Hellenistic and Judaic tradition’.

**Apocalypse: suffering, evil and the problem of theodicy**

It is readily apparent that the aforementioned apocalyptic and eschatological discourses, with their underlying orientation toward redemption, do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Instead, they comprise a form of social sense-making borne of very real historical experiences of suffering. As Hall (2009: 20) amongst many others notes, the narrative of apocalyptic history in the Old Testament is bound up with the persecution of the Israelites and their search for ‘political survival amidst the play of alien powers – Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome’. Likewise, it is no coincidence that the Old Testament’s nascent eschatology comes into clearest focus in the Book of Daniel, seemingly written during a period of particular trauma, namely the exile of the Jews in Babylon following the capture of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar (dated to around 600 BCE). From the standpoint of functionalist sociology, the Exilic writings represent part of a ‘mechanism for survival’ under conditions of crisis (Smith, 1986), with promises of redemption holding at bay an existential threat to the Jewish people. Similarly, the New Testament Book of Revelations (conventionally dated to the latter half of the first century CE) has been located in the context of Christian suffering in the Roman Empire, as well as to intra-communal conflicts within early Christianity about accommodating or opposing ruling Imperial power (Collins, 1983: 85). In other words, religious anticipations of an apocalyptic reckoning are inextricably connected to collective or communal experiences of suffering, both material and symbolic in character. Here we can draw fruitfully upon the historical critique of ethics articulated by Nietzsche.
in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1996 [1887]). His characterisation of Judeo-Christian ethics as a ‘slave morality’ may be received as an assault on the legitimacy of religion in general, and the enduring influence of Judeo-Christian thought in particular. However, it also offers an important quasi-sociological insight into the conditions under which moral systems are born and come to thrive. In essence, Nietzsche’s argument is that the redemptive visions of Judaism and Christianity (most clearly expressed in eschatological narratives in which oppressors shall be punished and the oppressed shall be saved and rewarded) is ‘obsessed with conservation and self-preservation’ (Smith, 1996: xv).  

Projections of the ‘end of history’, in which past and present injustices will be answered by divine retribution, is fuelled by emotions of *resentment*, the hatred of the powerful and a corresponding yearning for vindication (Wallace, 2007: 110–111). It is in this context that we should understand why Nietzsche calls John’s Apocalypse ‘that most desolate of all the written outbursts which vindictiveness has on its conscience’, the product of a ‘priestly people of *resentment par excellence*’ (Nietzsche, 1996 [1887]: 35).

If we wish to understand the social and historical conditions that fuel an apocalyptic imaginary, we must delve a little deeper into the existential predicaments associated with the experience of suffering. Suffering would appear to be an inevitable consequence of inherent human frailty and finitude, and all cultural and religious systems strive to make sense of its presence (Wilkinson, 2005: 2–3). It is especially troubling when pain, privation, misery and death are visited upon the seemingly innocent, while their far less virtuous counterparts appear to flourish and thrive; even more acute is the sense of moral bewilderment when suffering arises from the active choices of human agents, who are either indifferent to the harms they cause, or take a certain pleasure in their infliction (Dearey, 2014: xiii). This is, in essence, the *problem of evil*, a phenomenon whose persistence requires an answer. Hence cultures strive to ‘domesticate’ suffering and evil (that is, make it knowable and explicable, thereby making sense of the otherwise senseless); it is only in this way that we can reconcile ourselves to conditions and experiences that will otherwise overwhelm any sense of a purposeful life or of human agency. The resources upon which humans have drawn, across time and space, to answer the problems of suffering and evil are both creative and diverse. For example, in Evans-Pritchard’s famous study of the Azande (1976[1937]), illness and death are attributed to deliberate acts of witchcraft engineered by malign others, and an elaborate system...
of counter-practices and precautions develops so as to empower individuals to negate its influence. In other words, witchcraft emerges as ‘a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events’ (18). We might extend this underlying logic to a range of magical beliefs and practices which serve to manage risks and dangers, a means to impose a sense of control over events that place actors in peril (Malinowski, 1948: 116).

The conjoined problem of suffering and evil is managed within and across various theistic systems of thought (those religious beliefs that posit the existence of one or more gods or deities that are endowed with supernatural powers). For polytheistic religions, centred upon the existence of a number of such divine entities, the problem of evil can be resolved by attributing the causes of suffering to one or more of those entities. As we have seen in our earlier discussion of Zoroastrianism, a dualistic metaphysics enables the presence of suffering to be explained with reference to the acts of the evil Ahura Mainyu, the destructive counterpart of Ahura Mazda, the ‘god of wisdom’. In the polytheistic cults of ancient Greece and Rome, a pantheon of gods mirrors human traits such as lust, pride, jealousy and duplicity, thereby explaining human misfortune by its association with divine capriciousness, and providing mechanisms through which it could be managed (such as acts of sacrificial piety so as to win the favour or protection of a patron deity) (Price, 1999: 1–2).

The problem of evil is most intractable for the Abrahamic or Semitic religions (including Judaism, Christianity and Islam), because of their monotheistic foundations (Bakhos, 2014; Troster, 2012: 259–260). Central to these faiths is the belief in a single creator-God, who is simultaneously all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-loving (omnibenevolent). The existence (and persistence) of suffering appears to directly invalidate these foundational beliefs. If God is all-loving and good, then why does he permit suffering? Given his omnipotence, He would be capable of creating a world devoid of evil, yet has not done so. If He is omniscient, then He would be aware of the suffering that would plague his Creation, yet has nevertheless given life to a world in which such evils are ubiquitous. Whichever way one moves, one or other of the supposed attributes of God seems to be undermined by the existence of evil. This, in essence, is the problem of theodicy (from the Greek theus (god) and dike (judgement, justice)) – evil places God’s judgement
and justice under question, in extremis undermining faith in His very existence. The Hellenic philosopher Epicurus is generally credited with first posing this problem sometime around 400 BCE (Pojman, 2001: 69), though it has been articulated and rearticulated by philosophers many times since. In the words of David Hume (2007[1779]: 44):

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from?

Philosophers and theologians have offered many and diverse responses to this problem, in an attempt to reconcile belief in God with the existence of suffering. Some, for example, have qualified God’s powers, thereby attributing the presence of evil to his limited puissance – ‘God is... unable... to create a world without evil, but is nevertheless caring and compassionate by at least trying to do His best by the Creatures He created...’ (Dearey, 2014: 5). Others have questioned not God’s omnipotence, but His benevolence, yielding what Roth (2001) calls a ‘theodicy of protest’ in which believers simultaneously ‘keep faith’ with God and engage Him in a ‘dialogue’ through which He is held accountable for permitting evil to flourish. Alternatively, the responsibility for evil can be displaced from God onto other beings (a kind of covert return to polytheism). For example, echoing Zoroastrian dualism, Satan emerges as the agent and engine of suffering (such a metaphysics of good and evil was central so-called Manichaeism, which was declared a ‘heresy’ by the Catholic Church in the 12th century, as it denied God’s omnipotence – Runciman, 1961). Belief in Satan as the personification of evil has persisted throughout Christianity (Maxwell-Stuart, 2011). Beck and Taylor (2008: 151) suggest that:

...belief in Satan helps Christian believers attenuate ambivalent feelings about God in the face of painful life events... functioning as an attributional category to reduce theodic blame toward God.

Responsibility for evil has also been relocated from the creator to his creations – God has gifted humans with the capacity for reason and free choice (Mackie, 1955: 208), and any ensuing evils are the result of humans’ failure to abide the dictates offered through divine Revelation (thus Augustine seeks to reconcile God’s omnipotence with the existence of evil, attributing to the latter to the exercise of human freedom – Berthold, 1981). In a different vein, the very problem has been dismissed.
insofar as the reasons for God’s actions (or inactions) are beyond the scope of human understanding – the limited and finite (humanity) cannot grasp the purposes of the unlimited and infinite (God). These are just a few examples of the ways that the paradoxical existence of both God and evil has been tackled so as to redeem monotheistic faith from the problem of theodicy.

The foregoing discussion may appear to have taken us some distance from our ostensible subject matter, namely the apocalyptic cultural imaginary. However, grasping the dynamic tensions brought about by the problems of suffering, evil and theodicy is central to understanding the historical emergence of apocalyptic visions. In short, I suggest that the anticipation of apocalypse serves as an answer to the problem of theodicy, and its integral quandaries of suffering and evil. We must recall here that the apocalypse, as imagined in the Abrahamic religions, is a redemptive or utopian moment – it is not (in contrast to most contemporary cultural constructions) a disaster to be feared or avoided, but a divinely-ordained culmination of history that is to be anticipated and welcomed. The moral settlement offered in apocalyptic eschatology (the virtuous rewarded and delivered to everlasting life in paradise, the wicked condemned to death or eternal torment for their sins) answers the problem of suffering by projecting God’s justice (theos-dike) forward in time. The deficit of fairness and justice in the present is made good in the future – God’s omnipotence and goodness is not absent from the world, but merely postponed until a time of His choosing. The sufferings, humiliations and privations of the present thus become a test of faith, and those who (to borrow from the Old Testament Book of Joshua) ‘cleave unto God’ will be restored and redeemed (Brueggemann, 1985).

**Evil, suffering and modernity**

For a period of some 2000 years, across Europe and the Near East, the problems of evil and suffering were overwhelmingly framed in religious terms, and were thus largely synonymous with the problem of theodicy – the existence of evil as a challenge to the sustained belief in a benign creator-God. Modernity, in contrast, partakes of a radical cosmological decentring, seeking to replace a theocentric worldview with one grounded in the immanent and tangible realities of material existence. This revolution in thought is, in fact, deeply bound up with the paradox
of theodicy. In his magisterial work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985[1966]), the philosopher and historian of ideas Hans Blumenberg argues that the ongoing effort to resolve theodicy while sustaining the pre-eminence of God incrementally ushers in a *deus absconditus*, a ‘hidden god’ (Lazier, 2003: 620), who of necessity withdraws from the world, ceasing to become an active force in its affairs. It is the vacuum left by God’s absence that creates the space for what Blumenberg calls human ‘self-assertion’ – the idea that the contours of the world are determined by human action, a combination of will allied to the kind of knowledge generated by scientific observation and experimentation (in a sense, the powers of God are now bequeathed to Man) (Jonas, 1954: 432). As we shall see further, this revolution brings in its wake a new way of conceiving time, history and the place of evil and suffering in human existence.

Modernity’s conception of historical time, like that of Christian theology, is not cyclical but linear and diachronic – the time of human society moves in a ‘straight line’ from past to future. However, theological time is a construction of finitude – it has a determinate beginning (in divine creation) and an equally definitive end (in eschatology and apocalypse). In the absence of a divinely-ordained plan for humanity, modernity’s time is infinite and open – its beginnings lie in the unknowable past of the universe, and its future seems to stretch out without any discernible endpoint. However, this disjunction between theological and modern temporality hides an underlying continuity. Modernity’s time may have little space for God’s intervention, but it is not directionless or empty of meaning. Rather, history is still purposive, but instead of God as its agent and guarantor, we have instead the idea of *progress*:

... the modern idea of progress... differs from Christian eschatology in a key aspect: historical progress is essentially a human task (and so an infinite and endless one), not the result of a focused supernatural intervention... man must now tell himself how to deal with reality; he becomes the only one responsible for the world’s condition, reduced to mere material for man’s self-realization. (Palti, 1996: 505)

In essence, modernity retains the *form* of theological temporality (a purposive movement with an underlying logic of moral-ethical fulfilment) but substitutes its *content* (human knowledge, will and agency replace those of God). This reformulation leads Karl Löwith to insist that the modern idea of historical time ‘is nothing else but a result of
the secularization of the eschatological Christian motif of the fall and subsequent redemption’ (Ibid: 504). This is nowhere more apparent than in the teleological philosophies of history propounded by both Hegel and Marx – their differences notwithstanding, both imagine time as the unfolding of a progressive developmental logic, one culminating in the wholeness and reconciliation of society with itself.

The problems of suffering and evil likewise undergo a modernist reconfiguration, partaking again of a pattern of simultaneous differentiation and underlying continuity. Despite the ‘disappearance’ of God, the problem of theodicy is not resolved, but rather transposed into a new frame – it becomes a problem of sociodicy, the persistence of social suffering in the face of humanity’s capacity to change the world for the better (Morgan and Wilkinson, 2001). The challenge is no longer to reconcile the existence of suffering with that of God, but of confronting ‘society’s justice’ (socio-dike), the insufficiency of justice in a world that should progressively eradicate suffering through human intervention. We must also note a corresponding reimagining of evil as a ‘negative’ concept – modern (especially Enlightenment) discourse views evil not as a ‘positive’ force but as a lack, as the privation of the good. Thus, for example, untimely death by starvation or disease is not the result of any evil intent, a punishment for sin, or a test of faith. Instead, it arises from an entirely explicable deficit (of nutrition, medicines, or the scientific know-how needed to understand and overcome its underlying natural – rather than supernatural – causes). Even where suffering appears as the result of human agents’ wilful actions, the conceptualisation of evil-as-lack comes to the fore. For example, criminology habitually attributes the infliction of harm to a shortfall of some kind – the absence of proper reasoning on the part of a perpetrator (Chen and Howitt, 2007); the lack of adequate socialisation and parenting (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986); the denial of opportunities to succeed in life by recourse to legitimate and socially-approved means (Merton, 1938); or the lack of social sanctions that would otherwise deter people from offending (von Hirsch et al., 1999). If crime arises not from malevolence or inherent wickedness, but from an objectively identifiable insufficiency (of resources, opportunities, education or social controls), then it can be progressively overcome through concerted, corrective actions. The progressive promise of Enlightenment modernity is that evil is a transient phenomenon that results from the improper organisation of social relations, and that it can (and will) be transcended through concerted
and directed efforts to change society. In this sense, as Young (1992) argues, criminological thinking is remarkably utopian in character, based as it is upon a conviction that the application of human reason and intervention are adequate to the challenges presented by the infliction of harm and suffering.

The foregoing discussion would suggest that modernity’s ‘break’ with previous patterns of thinking about suffering and evil is decisive, and so consigns religious discourses on evil to an archive of historical curiosities from a less enlightened age. Criminology, as conventionally configured, does indeed present evil (alongside the invocation of associated terms, such as sin and redemption) ‘as a kind of sentimental or residual category that has nothing to do with the work of contemporary social-science research and, thus, has had its day’ (Dearey, 2014: xiv). Yet we should take seriously Löwith’s (1949) insistence that the modern imaginary is in fact a secularised recuperation of Christian theology, and thus labours within and around the categories and concepts that it has inherited. As Dearey (2014: xvi–xvii) elaborates:

... just because religious conceptions of evil tend to come first historically, this does not necessarily mean that they are cancelled out by subsequent philosophical... thinking on the subject; previous language about evil has a nasty tendency to pop up in the most unexpected places...

Thereby demonstrating

... just how durable older and more traditional, mythical and even highly personal and subjective ways of perceiving are, even in the most modern and rationalized areas of our lives.

Another way of putting this is to affirm Bruno Latour’s provocative insistence that ‘we have never been modern’, in the sense that our culture and society has somehow been ‘purified’ of the past and given a new beginning based solely upon scientific reason (Latour, 1993) – a reason that has no space for existential and metaphysical paradoxes associated with suffering, sin, evil and redemption.

The deep-seated and profound resilience of the language of evil is nowhere more apparent than in our supposedly rational institutionalisation of law. The staging of law, most especially in the courtroom, is a theatre in which is played-out a remarkably religious drama that is beholden to ways of thinking and feeling we have supposedly left behind: accusations of moral wrongdoing are made; guilt and responsibility for the infliction of pain are apportioned; confessions are offered and feelings of culpability
and remorse are expressed; and righteous denunciation and punishment are delivered (on the courtroom as emotional dramaturgy, see Dahlberg, 2009). At the heart of law is a presumption that is closely tied to the notion of evil as a wilful and deliberate choice – that of mens rea or guilty mind; ‘there can be no crime, large or small, without an evil mind’ (Bishop, quoted in Sayre, 1932: 974). The roots of this conception of criminal action can be clearly traced to Hebrew and Christian notions of responsibility, sin, guilt and atonement (Levitt, 1922: 128). Here we find a crucial linkage between ‘ancient, theological’ and ‘modern, secular’ meditations on the causes of suffering: in modern discourse, crime serves as the secular substitute for the category of evil, and shares with it common associations of guilt and responsibility, as well as the possibility for redemption through trial and punishment. Hence we see a duality of contradictory standpoints in our modern treatment of the problem of evil. The scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment (the foundational ideology of social science, including criminology) tells us that what appears as evil actually arises from a lack or insufficiency that can be identified and corrected, thereby holding-out the prospect of perfectibility (or at least decisive change for the better). On the other hand, we remain attached to existential-moral intuitions that see in evil something much more troubling and ineradicable – humanity’s capacity for the wilful infliction of pain and suffering, the eternal presence of a wickedness or corruption of the spirit. While ‘progressive’ criminologists may lament the cultural persistence of vengefulness and retribution as an atavistic remnant of reactionary ideology (Hallsworth, 2000; Pratt, 2000), they overlook its deep and abiding sources in a confrontation with the phenomenon of evil. Popular reactions to crime (expressing disgust, outrage and repudiation) are underpinned by a conviction that harmful acts are more than the unfortunate outcome of lack – they are the manifestations of moral evil, of human beings’ free choices to inflict suffering upon others (Dearey, 2014: 61–62). It is this encounter with crime-as-evil that decisively shapes the kinds of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic imaginaries that serve as the focus of the analysis that follows.

An ambivalent apocalypse: crime, modernity and the crisis of social order

To summarise the discussion thus far, we have encountered the figurations of apocalyptic eschatology in Judeo-Christian thought, and I have
argued that anticipations of a redemptive ‘end of history’ offer an answer (one amongst many) to the problem of theodicy – the existence of evil and suffering despite belief in a benevolent and all-powerful God. By projecting God’s justice forward in time, evil will be answered, those afflicted by suffering will be made whole and those responsible for evil acts will suffer divine retribution. Further, I have suggested that in the transition to modernity, the problem of evil is recast as one of sociodicy, in which suffering challenges modernity’s self-image as a progressive movement through which universal human well-being can be assured. Enlightenment philosophy assures us that evil is defeasible; the incremental realisation of reason, science and democracy (a kind of secular Holy Trinity) will ultimately ensure that peace, plenitude and freedom come to replace the painful insufficiency of our present existence. From the standpoint of a progressive philosophy of history (Collingwood, 1994), it would appear that the apocalyptic is redundant – there is no need for a final, decisive moment of reckoning to answer the problem of evil, as suffering will be eradicated through humanity’s remaking of the world. However, as we shall see further, the apocalyptic (like the problem of theodicy itself) persists and in fact continues to play an important role in our modern cultural responses to crime-as-evil.

There are two distinctive modes or register in which the apocalyptic is recast in the modern imaginary – one recuperates the utopian and redemptive narrative of eschatology, while the other inverts it into a dystopian vision of disaster and regression. We shall consider these in turn further.

I noted earlier that progressive philosophies of history, such as those of Hegel and Marx, borrow the form of religious narrative, presenting a purposive, teleological account of a human society that moves towards reconciliation and wholeness. In Hegel’s vision, the dialectical movement of Reason is sufficient to ensure the stately progress of Mind or Spirit (Geist) (Hegel, 1977). Marx, in contrast, comes much closer to the motifs of Judeo-Christian eschatology, envisioning as he does a world-historical conflict leading to the permanent, revolutionary transformation of society: ‘After a decisive struggle would come the end of history. After the end of history would come the earthly utopia’ (Hall, 2009: 134). His hostility toward the Christian religious tradition notwithstanding (McKinnon, 2005), Marx borrows decisively from its eschatological impetus, seeing in the materialist movement of history a means to redeem the suffering of the marginalised, exploited and disempowered; as he puts it, communist
utopianism aims to ‘overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’ (Marx quoted in McKinnon, 2010: 37). In short, Marx appropriates the Judeo-Christian search for an answer to the problem of evil and suffering, alongside the feelings of animus and ressentiment it occasions, and adapts it into the anticipation of a final reckoning at the end of secular history. Marxist apocalypticism sets the template for modern revolutionary ideologies which see in the decisive, once-and-for-all destruction of all existing social, political and economic relations an answer to the present state of suffering. The apocalyptic imaginary of at least some contemporary popular fictions also draws on similar (often submerged) impulses, relishing the prospect of destruction visited upon a social order viewed as irredeemably corrupt and unjust. In its representations of crime, such discourse embraces the collapse of existing constraints on behaviour as the occasion for a vengeful reckoning upon those responsible for the suffering of others; when ‘the gloves come off’, the wicked will ‘get what’s coming to them, with interest’. Another conspicuous feature of these representations is a recuperation of religious messianism, imagining a hero-redeemer who answer the presence of crime through a decisive and uncompromising exercise of judgement and punishment (a motif to which we shall return in due course).

The second, and perhaps dominant, tendency in modern cultural representations of the apocalyptic is to invert the redemptive narrative of Judeo-Christian eschatology, imagining it instead as a catastrophe in which civilisation, law, order, peace and plenitude (in short, progress) are undone. It is a dystopian view of the future built upon pessimism about humankind’s historical direction of travel – the feeling and fear that what awaits us is a disastrous accumulation of collectively self-inflicted woes, a world of risk, danger, pain and suffering. In a cultural-historical context we should note that the 18th and 19th centuries comprised the heyday of utopian discourse, spanning the literary and visual arts, philosophy, politics and social science. The expectation of a better future was grounded in the belief that collective human endeavour, guided by reason and making abundant use of science and technology, was capable of building a society in which equality, freedom and justice would become the norm (Yar, 2014b). However, the plausibility of such rosy prognostications is incrementally eroded under the impact of the 20th century’s parade of horrors and catastrophes. If, as Jonathan Glover (2001) argues, the past century was primarily one of moral atrocities (industrialised warfare, the
Holocaust, Hiroshima, ethnic genocides, Gulags and purges), it has done much to undermine the credibility of modernity’s vision of progress. When innovations in science and technology yield not the alleviation of suffering but grant to mass murder an obscene instrumental efficiency (Bauman, 1991), modernity begins to seem less the solution and more and more the cause of the evils that afflict humanity. When collective deliberations lead not to the public exercise of Reason (Kant, 1992) but the ‘madness of crowds’ (McClelland, 1989), it is increasingly difficult to believe in the unalloyed benefits of human freedom. To borrow from Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), we have become increasingly ‘incredulous’ toward the ‘meta-narratives’ (of Truth, Justice and Liberation) that were packaged and sold under the banner of Enlightenment. Yesterday’s utopias give way to today’s dystopian sensibility – the present is worse, not better than the past, and the future is an even darker and more dangerous place.

The mood of pessimistic foreboding is clearly evident in popular and public portrayals of crime. Criminologists may insist that there has been a long-term downward trend in crime rates (Blumstein and Wallman, 2006; Farrell et al., 2011). Sociologists, historians and psychologists claim an inexorable historical decline in both inter-personal and collective violence (Elias, 2000; Spierenburg, 2008; Pinker, 2011). However, the painstaking observation, recording and tabulation of statistical trends find little purchase on the wider cultural imagination about crime. Instead, public perceptions tend toward a far bleaker assessment of social reality, in which predatory strangers are endemic; constraints on ‘civilised behaviour’ have been undermined by a culture of individualistic hedonism and narcissistic self-regard; rape, murder, child sex abuse and terrorism fill the news; ruling elites – from politicians to bankers – are endemically corrupt; and the criminal justice system is a palpable failure, whether its aim is to apprehend, punish or rehabilitate criminals. The preponderance of such popular impressions should not simply be dismissed as the product of either ignorance or ideology, but situated within the broader, cultural-historical context noted above, namely a loss of faith in modernity’s teleological narrative of progress as the answer to suffering. Similarly, the oft-noted ‘over-representation’ of sexual and violent crime in popular culture (Allen et al., 1998; Shipley and Cavender, 2001) ought not to be explained away as the result of either media ‘sensationalism’ (Dowler et al., 2006) or audiences’ unwholesome appetites for titillation. Rather, it is important to appreciate that we are drawn to the
(sometimes obsessive) contemplation of such acts because they exemplify – in the most dramatic, visceral and emotive way – the phenomenon of evil. Post-apocalyptic scenarios in popular fiction relentlessly circulate around such acts – random violence, torture and brutality, rape and sexual murder – for precisely the same reason, serving as they do to embody our otherwise innominate anxieties about the presence and persistence of evil in our supposedly civilised, modern world. The problem of crime in post-apocalyptic culture ultimately points to a long drawn-out sense that we are living through a crisis of social order, a failure of the societal roles, rules and restraints that might serve to contain humanity’s worse instincts. In Durkheim’s terminology, our impressions of crime are conditioned by an anomic sensibility. As we shall explore in the coming chapters, a variety of evils qua crime come to the fore in post-apocalyptic culture, trans-locating (in Ryan and Kellner’s terms) contemporary developments that are perceived as the sources of disorder and the unravelling of the social fabric. The representation of crime in apocalyptic fictions is thus inextricably bound not only to the experiences of social change and social dislocation, but also to the enduring existential-moral challenge thrown-up by the problems of suffering and evil, a challenge that comes into sharpest relief when the social order appears at its most fragile and uncertain.

A note on genre, selection and method

Before we move on to explore the framing of crime and related matters in post-apocalyptic culture, we ought first to set-out some basic parameters for the analysis developed in the coming chapters. These parameters relate respectively to the question of genre, the sampling of texts chosen for analysis and the methods or techniques deployed in that analysis.

The focus for analysis in this study falls upon a specific genre of popular cultural production, namely that of post-apocalyptic fictions (comprising variously films, television shows, novels and comic books). However, as a genre, the post-apocalyptic can in fact be seen as a hybrid or interstitial field – it exists at the intersection of three other well-established genres, namely those of science fiction, action and crime. From science fiction it borrows commonplace scenarios that usher-in social catastrophe (plagues, nuclear war, genetic mutations and such like); from crime fictions it borrows themes of lawlessness, violence, justice and
vengeance; and from the action genre it takes notions of heroism and bravery in the confrontation with evil. Consequently, the texts explored in this study are drawn from across these genres, but are united by the central importance given to the scenario of catastrophe and life after the apocalypse.

Secondly, there is the matter of sampling or selection of texts. Even a cursory survey of popular cultural production over the past 60 or so years (corresponding to the post-WWII period) reveals a huge array of films and other fictions that represent the apocalyptic breakdown of society and its aftermath. An initial identification of potentially relevant texts was undertaken using existing studies, filmographies, bibliographies and online databases (e.g. Newman, 1999; Shapiro, 2001; IMDB). Through an analysis of published reviews and synopses, a further selection was made, so as to identify those texts that dealt with matters central to the present study, namely issues related to crime, violence, law, victimisation, punishment, revenge and justice. A choice was made to restrict analysis to texts (a) from the post-1945 period and (b) produced in Europe, North America and Australia. The latter choice inevitably entailed excluding a significant number of post-apocalyptic fictions, such as those (especially in comic book and animated form) produced in Japan. However, this self-limiting was, I felt, necessary for analytical reasons; the account offered here seeks to connect texts to their specific contexts – variously social, economic, political, historical and religious. Lacking an appropriate (sociological, anthropological and cultural) expertise as related to Japanese and other ‘non-Western’ social settings, I have elected to restrict myself to those with which I am most familiar and knowledgeable. Finally, alongside these post-apocalyptic fictions, a range of other crime-themed productions will also be briefly considered, so as to better establish the social, cultural and political contexts in which meaning production and consumption takes place.

Thirdly, there is the question of the methods or techniques mobilised for textual analysis. Broadly speaking, established approaches in media and cultural studies can be divided between quantitatively-oriented approaches (such as content analysis) and more interpretively-focus techniques that consider in depth and detail a small sample of texts. Content analysis typically proceeds by generating a numerically large sample (e.g. all texts produced within a given genre over a specified period of time), and then undertaking counts of frequency, so as to map the occurrence of various themes or features (e.g. homicide, sexual violence,
white-collar crime, police corruption and so on) (Hansen et al., 1998; Roberts, 2001). However, one of the major limitations of such analysis is that it is poorly suited to drawing-out the ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ of meanings (Hall, 1993) which are communicated through narrative, characterisation, symbolisation, metaphor and allegory. Consequently, I have elected to adopt the latter, interpretively-oriented approach so as to better enable the complexity of textual meanings to be uncovered, and for these meanings to be related to the particular social and contexts in which they are produced and consumed.
2

Law and Disorder in the Post-Apocalyptic Landscape: Social Breakdown, Sovereign Power and the State of Emergency

Abstract: This chapter explores the ‘crisis of law and order’ that underpins popular representations of the post-apocalyptic world. This world is one in which a regressive atavism takes hold as the institutions of law collapse. This imaginary depicts the fragility of order and the imminent threat of its breakdown, echoing perceptions of a disordered world of random violence, riots, revolutions and terrorism. In post-apocalyptic fictions, this crisis of law and order gives way to a ‘state of emergency’, an assertion of sovereign power which permanently suspends citizens’ rights and any limitations on the exercise of power, all in the name of restoring order. Mirroring current fears about the exercise of sovereign power in the ‘war on terror’, the post-apocalyptic world is one in which dictatorship replaces democracy, law issues from the arbitrary decisions of dictatorial authority, and extra-judicial punishment and execution become the terrifying norm.

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Introduction

In Chapter 1, I explored the historical and cultural background that has shaped the contemporary apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic imaginary. I suggested that cultural productions centred upon the apocalyptic are embedded in a complex and contradictory dynamic. They simultaneously frame the problem of crime-as-evil in a secular and rationalist framework (evil as the unfortunate, yet ultimately defeasible, outcome of inadequate social understanding and organisation), while also refracting the seemingly intractable existential and moral dilemmas first identified in religious (especially Abrahamic) discourses of theodicy and suffering. I further suggested that the resurgence of popular apocalypticism (to be found in recent film, television and literature) needs to be situated within the broader social-cultural history of modernity, wherein a profound loss of faith in progressive and utopian visions of history draws us unerringly towards the fragility of the human condition and a world that appears ever more disordered and threatening. Anxieties about crime (statistically supported or not) represent one of the clearest articulations of this pervasive sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future. In this chapter, we will set about a more detailed excavation and analysis of how the problems of crime and the crisis of law and order is represented in popular fictions, narratives that utilise the apocalyptic as a projective device through which fears about the unravelling of social bonds are thrown into sharp relief.

Crime, modernity and the crisis of law

The first significant trend in the depiction of post-apocalyptic disorder centres upon concerns about the erosion of law, particularly its power to constrain human behaviour and contain violent and acquisitive appetites. The longstanding discussion of a supposed ‘crisis of law and order’, manifest in alienated urban environments beset with incivility and predation, is extended to its logical endpoint in post-apocalyptic fictions – law and order implode under the weight of a catastrophic event (be it a zombie plague, nuclear war, eco-systemic or economic collapse) leaving a vacuum in which evil runs loose, and the innocent and vulnerable are bereft of protection. Such narratives are underpinned by a ‘disenchanted’ understanding of human nature, of the kind that

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can be traced to Hobbes’ discourse on the ‘state of nature’. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes witheringly rejects classical philosophy’s presumptions about a teleological ordering of human existence, one that roots in human nature an imperative toward ethical behaviour and social coexistence (a prime example being Aristotle’s insistence that humans are *zōa politiká*, by their nature ‘political animals’ oriented toward a collective and cooperative life) (Yar, 2002). On the contrary, for Hobbes, human beings are essentially animalistic and individualistic, governed by their appetites and self-interest, and driven by fear and distrust to pursue violence in the struggle for survival. It is this ‘war of all against all’ that legitimates Hobbes’ vision of political power – the necessity for an absolute sovereign power whose word is law, and who can mobilise force so as to command and constrain humans into a condition of peaceable co-existence, suppressing their natural inclinations towards conflict. Hobbes’ account of the problem of human nature, and its resolution through the exercise of sovereign power, provides the template for the modern state – an entity that abrogates unto itself a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Weber, 1965), enforcing the limits and rules upon behaviour which are codified in law, and enacted by its nominated agents (such as armies, police forces, prison warders and executioners).

A parallel view of human nature is given an explicit criminological twist in Lombroso’s concepts of degeneration and atavism – the ever-present risk of a return to an ancestral primitivism in which moral sensibilities are overridden by animal instincts. It is worth noting that the concept of degeneration, as developed in nineteenth century quasi-evolutionary discourses on crime, was seen to affect not only individuals but whole societies (Beccalossi, 2010). Contemporary fears about the collapse of law and order and the reversion to violence recode such notions and play-out their consequences upon the fantastic stage of the post-apocalyptic scene.

The anticipation of a fatal erosion of law and order, and the concomitant liberation of destructive appetites, is explored in a number of popular fictions that may be termed proto-apocalyptic – while these do not explicitly rehearse end-of-the-world scenarios, they nevertheless provide an influential discursive template which is recuperated into post-apocalyptic imaginaries. A particularly significant example is William Golding’s novel *The Lord of the Flies* (published in 1955, and subsequently adapted as a feature film in 1963, and again in 1976, 1990 and 2010). Golding’s tale unfolds against the background of an unspecified wartime
emergency, in which groups of schoolchildren are being evacuated from
the conflict area (echoing the wartime evacuations of British children
from cities to the countryside which was common practice during World
War II). A plane carrying evacuated children crashes on an isolated and
uninhabited Pacific island, and the only survivors are pre-adolescent and
adolescent boys. An important feature of this scenario is the absence of
any adult authority figures, the accompanying teachers having perished
in the crash. The boys are therefore left to their own devices, without
direction from those would normally impose rules upon behaviour – in
Hobbes’ terms, they are subjects without a sovereign. As the narrative
unfolds, civilisation and self-restraint slowly give way to conflict, cruelty
and superstition, culminating in theft, torture and murder. The Lord of
the Flies can thus be read as a pointed allegory about the ugly substrate
of human nature, which comes to the surface when lawful authority is no
longer present. As Golding himself elaborated:

Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that
a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you
could remove all social ills by a reorganization of society ... but after the war I
was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another ... under-
standing that man produces evil as a bee produces honey ... I believed that the
condition of man was to be a morally diseased creation ... (Golding in Spitz,
1970: 22–23)

If mankind is in fact ‘morally diseased’, and disposed by nature towards
evil acts, then lawful authority is the best and only defence of the social
order – without this, we quickly revert to savagery.

Golding’s pessimistic conclusions about human nature are echoed
in subsequent popular fictions. As we noted in Chapter 1, depictions of
crime-as-evil are conditioned by particular social contexts. Golding’s
was explicitly shaped by the atrocities of the Second World War, but we
see other, less dramatic but equally telling, cultural responses to social
dislocation and crisis. For example, the 1970s stands as a landmark
decade in the post-war development of Western societies. It marked the
end of a sustained period of prosperity, with economic recession, mass
unemployment and deindustrialisation replacing growth, rising living
standards and upward socio-economic mobility. The urban landscape
of ‘advanced’ industrial economies bore the imprints of these develop-
ments; for example, in the United States the flight of the white, upper-
middle classes to suburbs accelerated a process of urban decline, leaving
the former heartlands of industrial production to fall into dereliction
and neglect (Frey, 1979; Wacquant, 1993; Cullen and Levitt, 1999). These developments incited a decidedly pessimistic turn and the emergence of a popular sensibility that was increasingly preoccupied by a sense of crisis. As the American social critic Irving Howe (1970: 53) put it, writing at the beginning of that decade:

The rhetoric of apocalypse haunts the air... there is a feeling abroad, which I partly share, that even if the Vietnam war were to end, our cities to be rebuilt, and our racial conflicts to be eased, we would still be left with a heavy burden of trouble... symptoms of a crisis of civilization through which Western society has been moving...

This period also saw a concomitant cultural reaction to social change manifest in a new climate of fear about street crime and the threat posed by a range of ‘dangerous others’, including drug dealers and users, sexual predators, serial killers, gangs and ethnic minorities (we shall return to explore in detail the racialised fears and fantasies that percolate through apocalyptic scenarios). For the moment, we can note how Hollywood film of this era paints an increasingly frantic and anxious picture of the breakdown of law and order in the post-industrial city. Two such proto-apocalyptic representations of the crisis of law can be found in John Carpenter’s Assault on Precinct 13 (1976) and Walter Hill’s The Warriors (1979). In Carpenter’s film, Hollywood’s traditional scenario of criminals pursued (and ultimately cornered) by the forces of law and order is inverted. Set in a depopulated Los Angeles ghetto, Assault depicts a small force of police officers besieged inside a rundown station house by a heavily armed gang on a murderous rampage (‘an army of street killers’, as they are described in the film’s original tagline). In the streets of Anderson, the agents of the law no longer exercise meaningful control over its residents – the law has in effect given up and is on the retreat, attested in the fact that Precinct 13 is in fact being decommissioned at the start of the movie. Throughout the siege, no one comes to investigate the hail of automated gunfire that the gang (‘Street Thunder’) unleash upon the precinct’s occupants, and they are left to defend this last local bastion of the law against overwhelming odds. The evacuation of lawful authority from the spaces of the city is similarly highlighted in The Warriors, which takes as its protagonists a number of rival, New York street gangs who use the city as a staging ground for their vendettas, a war of attack and retaliation as they maraud the streets, parks and subways, armed with chains, knives and guns. The police are notable largely by their absence and their inability to restore any sense of order or bring about a cessation
to the violence. These films exemplify the sense that the city has become a lawless zone, one where crime is rampant and no one is safe.

Themes of lawlessness and its consequences are equally a common feature in post-apocalyptic films, often serving as one of the genre’s main concerns. Luc Besson’s *Le Dernier Combat* (*The Last Battle*) (1983) features a world laid waste by some unspecified disaster. Survivors scavenge amongst the depopulated vestiges of civilisation, routinely resorting to theft and violence so as to secure food and other materials. The film’s main characters (identified only by monikers such as The Man, The Doctor and The Brute) live as isolated individuals, having apparently lost the impetus towards sociality. The absence of collective life and association is highlighted by the fact that, as a consequence of the unnamed catastrophe, humans appear to have lost the ability to speak (there is no dialogue in the film, with the exception of the word *bonjour* – hello – which is uttered twice). Without language humans are reduced to an atavistic state, bereft of the means to generate and sustain a normative order that could mediate and limit conflicts over resources. Such motifs are likewise examined in Michael Haneke’s post-apocalyptic drama *Le Temps du Loup* (*The Time of the Wolf*) (2003). The film is set in France in the aftermath of a catastrophe which has contaminated the food and water supply. It follows a family (the Laurents) who flee the city, seeking refuge in the village where they have a country house. However, upon arrival they find their property already occupied by strangers, and the father of the family (Georges) is killed in the ensuing argument with the present occupiers; his wife (Anne) and their two children are repeatedly turned-away by their former friends and neighbours, as they grow increasingly desperate. They eventually find a rudimentary community of survivors, under the control of a brutal authoritarian named Koslowski, where life is organised through a system of barter and brutal violence. Significantly, when Georges’ killer later arrives and joins the group, Anne is helpless to exact any kind of justice for the murder, as the structures and systems of law enforcement no longer exist (Johnston, 2007). As critic Peter Bradshaw puts it, they are ‘cast adrift in a rural landscape where law and order have broken down, an unending nightmare of fear and horror in which neighbour turns on neighbour...well-to-do comfortable folk have become terrified animals’ (Bradshaw, 2003). The dualism of human and animal is adduced in the film’s title – the wolf has, of course, long served as a cultural metaphor for the destructive urges that lurk inside seemingly civilised individuals, consolidated for example in the horror
genre’s fascination with the werewolf, the so-called *Homo homini lupus* (du Coudray, 2006).

The crisis of law is most clearly and directly explored in those post-apocalyptic fictions that feature police officers as their protagonists. The policeman is, after all, the heroic embodiment of law-in-action, enforcing its prohibitions and apprehending offenders. In the post-apocalyptic world, the lawman (and it is almost always a man) struggles in vain to uphold a system of rules and sanctions whose institutional underpinnings are simply no longer present (there are no organised police forces, courts, lawyers, judges or prisons). One of the most famous popular incarnations of the post-apocalyptic lawman is Max Rockatansky, the eponymous anti-hero of George Miller’s 1979 cult film *Mad Max* (and of its sequels – *The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985)). The film deserves detailed consideration in light of both its dramatisation of law, crime and justice in the context of social breakdown, and its significant influence upon the post-apocalyptic genre as a whole (it furnished the template for many subsequent post-apocalyptic road movies, spawning numerous imitations, including even a couple of pornographic parodies, *The Load Warrior* (1987) and *Mad Jack Beyond Thunderbone* (1986) – Broderick, 1993: 255–256; Newman, 1999: 190). The social setting for the *Mad Max* trilogy appears to be one of progressive breakdown. In *Mad Max*, the material and institutional base of society is still intact, though starting to unravel – it is afflicted with growing lawlessness and material scarcity. In *The Road Warrior*, the decline has accelerated, with people roaming across a desolate wasteland in search of fuel, which has become the scarcest and most precious of commodities. By the time we reach the third, concluding film in the sequence, society as we know it appears to have dissolved altogether, and there are intimations that the world has been unmade through a nuclear war.

The collapse of the social order, especially the system of law enforcement, is visually encoded in the opening minutes of *Mad Max*, through a triptych of signs. The opening shot of the film shows a large, metal gate adorned with the words ‘HALLS OF JUSTICE’ – the symbolisation of law rendered tangible in wrought iron. However, the letters in ‘JUSTICE’ are hanging precariously from their mounting, with the ‘U’ about to fall off entirely – a simple, sly but effective allusion to the parlous state of the system. After a ‘fade’, accompanied with the words ‘A FEW YEARS FROM NOW’, we see another sign, this time on an empty and dusty highway – it reads simply ‘Anarchie Road 3km’. Shortly thereafter, we are
presented with a second roadside sign – this one states that the highway is ‘MONITORED BY MAIN FORCE PATROL’ (MFP – the law enforcement agency of which, we soon learn, Max is an officer). However, someone has vandalised the sign, painting a letter ‘A’ in place of the ‘O’ in ‘FORCE’ – it now reads ‘MONITORED BY MAIN FARCE PATROL’. Hence, without the benefit of any additional commentary or voice-over, we are informed that justice is falling apart, anarchy is close at hand, and the police are perceived as a joke. These three images, presented in quick succession, provide the interpretive frame within which the movie’s plot unfolds.

The narrative of Mad Max recuperates fairly well-trodden themes of good-versus-evil and revenge. It begins with a member of a motorcycle gang (Nightrider) escaping custody by killing a cop and stealing a police vehicle. The MFP engage in a high-speed pursuit that results in carnage before Max finally catches-up to the fleeing prisoner; Nightrider crashes the car and is killed in the ensuing explosion. Max is later told by his boss that the gang are now seeking revenge against him for the death of their fallen friend. Our first encounter with the gang itself (led by the psychopathic Toecutter) features their arrival in a small outback town whose residents they terrorise. They administer beatings to the locals; chain one man to a motorbike and drag him at speed along the road; and gang rape a young woman whom they subsequently chain up like a dog. Max and his partner (Goose) speed to respond to the incident, freeing the woman and capturing one of the gang members (Johnny the Boy). However, back at the Halls of Justice, they are forced by lawyers to release Johnny, as the residents are too terrified to file a complaint against the bikers, for fear of reprisals. The gang later track down Goose, and burn him alive in a car, reproducing Nightrider’s death. Disillusioned and distraught, Max resigns his position in the MFP and takes a road trip with his wife (Jessie) and their young son (Sprog). Inevitably, the gang catches up with the family, killing Sprog and leaving Jessie near death. Max, hell-bent on revenge, steals the MFP’s fastest pursuit vehicle and then sets about extracting information about the gang’s whereabouts through torture. He subsequently kills the bikers one by one. In the final scene, he handcuffs Johnny the Boy to a wrecked car and gives him a hacksaw – Johnny can attempt escape by sawing through either the handcuffs or his own ankle, provided he can do so before the car catches fire. The closing shot is a close-up of Max’s expressional face as he drives away, and we see the car explode in the background.
The film recasts into a post-apocalyptic frame themes already familiar in 1970s crime films, especially the failure of law and order, the cop disgusted by a ‘broken system’, and the recourse to extra-judicial torture and killing in the service of retributive justice (popularised, for example, by the character of Harry Callaghan (Clint Eastwood) in Dirty Harry (1971) and its sequels Magnum Force (1973) and The Enforcer (1976) – Ryan and Kellner, 1990: 42). However grim and pessimistic the tone of conventional cop films, there is at least in their contemporary settings the possibility of a collective social and political response the ‘the crime problem’ – be it achieved through a programme of humane reform and rehabilitation, or through (much more commonly) a ‘tough on crime’ strategy that promotes the likes of ‘zero tolerance’, tougher sentencing or use of the death penalty. In contrast, the disordered world of the post-apocalyptic marks the passage beyond a point where the law is efficacious (or even continues to exist at all in any meaningful sense). The visceral horror of a world-without-law is amplified by the very personal consequences of crime – Max, after all, loses to the gang the three people most dear to him – his best friend, his beloved wife and infant son. However, the fantastic projection of crime and lawlessness into a disastrous future incites a deeply ambivalent moral and affective reaction. On the one hand, it is meant to express the feelings of fear and anxiety that accompany contemporary public discourse on crime, violence and ‘terror’. On the other, it enjoins its audience in a pleasurable anticipation of vengeance and retribution. Alongside popular tales of everyday vigilantism (such as Death Wish (1974)) and the violent, sometimes sadistic, punishment meted-out by super-heroes (such as The Punisher), Mad Max speaks to an ever-present yearning to answer evil in the most uncompromising and merciless terms. It gives a full-throated voice to the raw and visceral emotions of outrage and the desire for symbolic restoration of a damaged world through exemplary, immediate, and sometimes extravagant punishment for wrongdoing (Yar, 2014a). The gratifications offered through the crime-and-punishment scenarios of post-apocalyptic culture will be given further consideration in subsequent chapters. For the moment, we should also note the deep and abiding continuity of Mad Max and similar fictions with religious constructions of the apocalyptic. In Chapter 1, I noted how the Judeo-Christian apocalypse conjoins catastrophic destruction with a redemptive conclusion to the process of history, often framed in terms of a messiah. Across the arc of the Mad Max trilogy, its hero becomes ever more clearly associated
with a quasi-divine sense of mission, in which he not only become the agent of justice (an ‘avenging angel’) but the repository of hopes for the redemptive rebirth of society from its ashes (the messianic as an organising theme in post-apocalyptic culture will provide the focus of detailed discussion in Chapter 5).

For the moment, let us continue with the exploration of crime-and-disorder as embodied in the figure of the post-apocalyptic law-keeper. Insightful in this regard is the hit television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–present), adapted by Frank Darabont from an ongoing comic-book series authored by Robert Kirkman. Both the television show and comic books (despite significant narrative divergence) start from the same premise, namely the struggle for survival in the wake of a ‘zombie apocalypse’ that turns most humans into cannibalistic monsters. *The Walking Dead* is at the forefront of a recent popular, cultural resurgence of interest in the post-apocalyptic zombie genre, including not only films (such as *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, *World War Z* and *The Zombie Diaries*) and TV shows (such as *Z Nation*, *Helix* and *In the Flesh*) but also a burgeoning attendant culture industry:

There are popular “Zombie 5k Runs”, “Zombie, Run” fitness apps for iPhones and Android... “zombie student clubs” that sponsor human vs. zombie Nerf tag and other activities, and a very lucrative zombie/apocalypse industry that sells self-defence gear and manuals to those who want to survive the looming end of days. (Weiss and Taylor, 2014: i)

An American company called Zombie Defence Solutions now markets ‘zombie survival kits’ which equip the consumer with ‘everything that you’ll need to avoid an unpleasant death’ (Zombie Defence Solutions, 2015). The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has produced a range of zombie apocalypse-themed booklets as a means to better communicate emergency-preparedness to the public (CDC, 2015). This abundance of cultural production and popular interest makes the zombie genre a particularly useful avenue for exploring the post-apocalyptic imaginary, including its configurations around issues of ‘race’, gender, sexuality and class, as well as crime, law, violence and political power. The figure of the zombie itself has been read as a metaphor for everything from the racialised ‘other’ and the ‘queer’, to the subject of consumer culture and neo-liberalism (Linnemann et al., 2014; McAlister, 2012; Reyes, 2014; Harper, 2002; Lanci, 2014). At present, however, we shall focus upon significance of the lawman in *The Walking Dead*. 

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The first episode of the series starts with a familiar depiction of the agents of law and order. Two Southern cops are sitting in a patrol car, eating fast food, while one (Shane) regales his partner (Rick) with sexist anecdotes (referring to women as ‘chicks’ and ‘pairs of boobs’). Rick, meanwhile, laments the parlous state of his marriage, citing his wife’s claims that he’s unwilling to communicate or share his feelings. Shane and Rick appear as stereotypes of the American police officer, complete with antiquated views of women, a hyper-masculine disdain for emotional self-expression, all wrapped-up in a certain blue-collar patriarchal swagger (in keeping not only with popular cultural representations, but also classic studies of ‘cop culture’ – Crank, 2004: 229–233; Reiner, 2010; Chan et al., 2010). Echoing the plot of Mad Max, they are dispatched, along with their colleagues, to apprehend a group of armed fugitives who have already shot and injured a police officer. In the ensuing gun battle, all three fugitives are killed, but not before Rick is shot and seriously injured.

When Rick regains consciousness, he is in a hospital bed, an unknown amount of time having passed. The hospital is eerily silent and his calls for help go unanswered. Stumbling into the corridors, he finds disarray – walls riddled with bullet holes and smeared with blood, and a mutilated corpse. Horrible groaning sounds come from behind a padlocked door, upon which someone has pained the words ‘DON’T OPEN DEAD INSIDE’. Outside the building there are piles of fly-ridden corpses, abandoned military vehicles and deserted streets. He encounters his first zombie – an emaciated creature, the bottom half of its body missing, dragging itself along the ground, hissing and gurgling sounds the only thing issuing from its mouth. He makes his way home to find his wife (Lori) and son (Carl) gone. Disoriented and injured, he is rescued by a father and son (Morgan and Duane); as they nurse him back to health, they update him on the events of the past month, since the beginning of the plague. Anyone who is infected dies, but then ‘comes back’ as a ‘walker’ – mindless and driven only by an appetite to feed on living flesh, further spreading the infection through bites. Sufficiently recovered, Rick takes Morgan and Duane to his police station. Rick showers, shaves and then dons his police uniform – thereby reclaiming his role, his ‘master status’, as a police officer. He decides to head for Atlanta, where there are supposedly refugee camps set up by the army, and where the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) is said to be working on a cure for the plague. Running out of gas, he abandons his police car and finds a horse on an
uninhabited farm; he rides into the city, uniformed and armed, like the lawmen of old (Leisner, 2009). The image is redolent of the opening scene of numerous Westerns:

A lone rider, sitting easily in the saddle of his dusty horse, travels across the plains towards a small, new town... He wears a tattered, wide-brimmed hat... and one gun rests naturally at his side in a smooth, well-worn holster. (Wright, 1992: 4)

Rick's arrival in Atlanta thus recuperates a set of sedimented meanings, most particularly those of the heroic law-keeper who represents order and justice in an otherwise wild and unruly land (Andrew Lincoln, who plays Rick, reportedly modelled his portrayal upon Gary Cooper's roles in classic Westerns such as High Noon (1952) – Roberts, 2010). In a world thrown into chaos, Rick – uniform, hat, badge, guns, horse and all – represents the last remaining embodiment of law in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. As the show's narrative unfolds, Rick attempts to sustain his role and responsibility as the agent of law enforcement. He finally finds his wife and son, who have joined with a small band of survivors, led by his erstwhile partner Shane. Rick and Shane soon take joint control as the group's leaders (with Rick ultimately supplanting his friend), their status as police officers according them a special authority in the eyes of the others. Rick's authority stems, in effect, from the others' investment in what he symbolises – the promise of some vestige of rule-bound order, a restoration of the kinds of predictability that have disappeared along with the collapse of society. As Slavoj Zizek (1991: 33) writes of the king or sovereign:

The subjects think they treat a certain person as a king because he is already in himself a king, while in reality this person is king only insofar as the subjects treat him as one... the king's charisma [is] a performative effect of their symbolic ritual...

Rick struggles to sustain the law as a symbolic order, and his place as its embodiment, by insisting that the demands of survival must nevertheless be constrained with the 'old' system of norms and prohibitions. Over time, however, this proves increasingly untenable – encounters with other bands of survivors are as likely to end in violent confrontation and death as they are in cooperation. Rick's symbolic efficacy (materialised in his uniform, badge and hat) is undermined because he is a lawman in a world where law no longer exists, and his articulation of authority is at best an empty gesture, and at worst a cruel reminder of a way of life

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that has been destroyed. His efforts to maintain the precepts of lawful behaviour are a desperate, last-ditch attempt to pretend that, in the end, ‘nothing has changed’ when in fact nothing remains the same. In the face of cumulative failures (including killing an increasingly unstable Shane, and the death of Lori) Rick ultimately hangs-up his uniform and holster, and turns his back on the role of leader.

**Law as tyranny in the post-apocalyptic State of emergency**

Thus far, we have considered post-apocalyptic culture’s reflections on the crisis of law imagined as a deficit – the trepidation we experience in the face of the law’s disappearance, leaving in its wake a society (if it can any longer be described as such) in which actions are no longer subject to limitation and constraint. In this section we shall turn to consider a diametrically opposed scenario that equally haunts the post-apocalyptic landscape – a fear not of the law’s lack, but of its reappearance in a monstrous and distorted form, taking shape as an excess that partakes of the logic of brutal subjection. Law, in this rendition, becomes an instrument of the tyrannical sovereign, its edicts directed solely by a desire to re-establish some semblance of order, irrespective of the violence that is exercised in its name.

A fruitful, theoretical framework for considering the violent excess of post-apocalyptic law is provided by the political philosopher Georgio Agamben, most especially his influential book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Agamben’s starting point lies with Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of modern forms of power as configured around the *bios* – the essential biological existence of human beings. Across his many works, Foucault explored the emergence of regimes of what he calls ‘biopower’, which serve to produce, govern and discipline subjects by ‘taking hold’ of the body. Biopower thus refers to ‘the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy’ (Foucault, 2007: 116). Extending this to the analysis of sovereignty, Agamben argues that its ultimate basis lies in gathering unto itself the power over the basic biological existence of its subjects, ‘bare life’, including the sole right to decide who lives and who dies. The institution of law, as dictated by sovereign power (be this the ancient Emperor, the medieval monarch, or
the modern state) is thus bound-up with violence (the right to determine life or death), even as it forbids its subjects this same capacity (Agamben, 1998: 42). Paradoxically, then, just as the law sets limits on the behaviour of its subjects and holds them accountable, it is itself unconstrained by limits and accountable to nothing other than itself; sovereign power exists in a ‘state of exception’ from its own laws. This state of exception is exemplified for Agamben by the figure of the concentration camp, a space in which human beings are stripped of all rights and reduced to a ‘bare life’ that is subject to total domination, the exercise of power without limit, restraint, or refusal (Ibid: 71). The camp, however, is not just a singular instance of the state of exception, but a logic that increasingly comes to characterise the exercise of sovereign power in modern societies:

... the camp was originally an “exceptional” space... in which the life of the “citizen” was reduced to “bare life”, stripped of form and value... However... the production of bare life is today extended well beyond the walls of the concentration camp. That is, today, the logic of the camp is generalized; the exception is normalized. (Diken and Lausten, 2005: 5)

We see the proliferation of what Diken and Lausten (2002) call ‘zones of indistinction’ in which sovereign power suspends its own laws in the name of a ‘state of emergency’. Over the past decade, on the grounds of an existential risk to society posed by ‘terror’, such exception to lawful limits has become normalised and permanent, distributed across society as such; hence the paradoxically ‘lawful lawlessness’ of states that licence themselves to engage in ‘extraordinary rendition’, detention without trial in secret facilities, the systematic use of torture against ‘terror suspects’, assassinations using unmanned drone strikes, limitations on freedom of speech and assembly, and mass covert surveillance of citizens, all in the name of safety and security (Neal, 2006; Aradau and van Munster, 2009; Hudson, 2009).

The aforementioned exceptions to the ‘normal’ exercise of sovereign power, resorting routinely to a suspension of law on grounds of national and international ‘emergency’, have been met with sustained concern and criticism on the part of lawyers and human rights activists (Lustick, 2006; Blum and Heymann, 2013). They have also found articulation in popular cultural discourses that depict the crisis of law in terms of the exercise of state power without constraint and accountability. In the post 9/11 context, films such as The Bourne Ultimatum (2007), Rendition (2007), Redacted (2007) and Green Zone (2010), take critical aim variously
at war crimes, extra-lawful imprisonment, torture, state-sponsored assassination programmes and mass surveillance. Beyond films that explicitly address the issues raised by the ‘war on terror’, we can also suggest that these developments have found a resonance in a broader sphere of cultural production, one in which the spectre of tyrannical law reappears in metaphorical explorations of the post-9/11 world. Whilst bearing in mind Wallis and Aston’s (2011: 53–54) caution that we must take care in ‘stressing an overarching link between the events of 9/11 and its influence on cultural production’, it is nevertheless possible to discern its impact upon popular culture. They go on to suggest that there has ‘been a significant increase in apocalyptic imagery and themes post-9/11 across a variety of popular media’, and that there ‘have been a large number of apocalyptic films that have directly or indirectly sustained [a] connection’ between the apocalyptic and 9/11 (Ibid: 54). While many such potential affinities may be considered, in keeping with our focus upon crime and disorder, the following discussion will confine itself to the representation of tyrannical law in post-apocalyptic scenarios.

We can resume here the previous section’s analysis of The Walking Dead. I suggested that, with its representation of the policeman, the text offers a sustained reflection on the ‘crisis of law-and-order’, through the projection of a disordered world in which the lawful restraint and regulation of behaviour is no longer possible. The first two seasons of the show can be read as a ‘lament for the law’, exemplified by Rick Grimes’ heroic but doomed attempts to uphold a system of rules whose societal anchors (the state, government, police, courts) have been destroyed. It is not coincidental that, in Season 2, Rick and his fellow survivors find refuge in a prison. What was once a space (like Agamben’s camp) in which occupants were confined in a ‘state of exception’, their rights and liberties suspended, is now inverted as a fragile oasis of civilisation and order, facing an outside world where the logic of the camp (the reduction of human existence to ‘bare life’) is now the norm. Inevitably, the survivors’ attempt to reinstate something resembling a functioning social order (akin to the polis) ends in failure, and they are cast out once again into the zombie-infested wilderness. In contrast to this discourse on the crisis of law as deficit, Season 3 confronts us with its counterpart – the law turned monstrous and excessive in a permanent ‘state of emergency’.

In the third episode of Season 3, we are introduced to the town of Woodbury. An erstwhile member of Rick’s group, Andrea, is found by armed men and taken away in a vehicle, passing out from the illness
she has been suffering. She awakens indoors, being administered to by a doctor. She learns that she is in Woodbury, a town with 73 residents. Compared to the life she has known since the onset of the plague (one of endless fear, flight, hunger, hardship and danger) the town seems like a paradise: it has heavily fortified wooden walls protected from the ‘walkers’ by patrols of armed guards; children play in the streets; there is no apparent shortage of clean clothes, food, water and other essential amenities; and the town has suffered no losses to the zombies since the previous winter. She is introduced to the town’s leader, known simply as The Governor. The Governor appears to have built a properly functioning and well-ordered community, one that is safe and secure from the dangers outside its walls, and which can provide for the needs, well-being and security of its residents. The townspeople are organised, co-operative and grateful to have found a way not only to survive, but to thrive under The Governor’s benign but decisive and determined stewardship. However, we soon learn that things are not entirely as congenial as they may seem. The townspeople hear of a group of National Guard soldiers who are seemingly stranded nearby. The Governor leads a rescue mission, vowing to bring the soldiers back to the safety of Woodbury. However, when he and his men find the group, they simply open fire, killing them all, and then take their supplies of food, medicines and weapons back to town. The Governor tells the residents that he regrettably arrived too late, and that the soldiers had already been bitten and ‘turned’ by the zombies, so he could nothing other than collect their abandoned supplies and return with them. As the subsequent episodes unfold, we are allowed to see the terrifying reality of The Governor’s regime, as he routinely (and in secret from all but a handful of his most trusted subordinates) resorts to kidnapping, torture, imprisonment and execution as and when he deems it necessary in order to secure the town and his own unquestioned authority over it. When he learns about the group of survivors at the prison, he captures and tortures two of them (Glenn and Maggie), seeking information about their strength and numbers; he keeps this hidden from the residents. Rick’s group stages a rescue attempt to retrieve their friends from Woodbury. In the wake of this incursion, The Governor addresses the town:

I should tell you that we’ll be okay, that we’re safe, that tomorrow we’ll bury our dead and endure. But I won’t, cos I can’t, cos I’m afraid...I’m afraid of these terrorists, who want what we have, who want to destroy us!
He whips-up the residents into a frenzy, as they chant in unison ‘kill them!’ ‘kill them!’ The Governor then leads his people in an assault on the prison, with the intention of killing anyone who is not under his absolute control (and in the course of which he also summarily guns down a number of his own men who express reservations about going to war against the prison-dwellers).

The representation of Woodbury, its Governor and their war with Rick’s groups offer a clear allegory of America in the post-9/11 era. Like George W. Bush (a real-life former Southern Governor) Woodbury’s fictional leader declares a war of annihilation against ‘terrorists’ who are deemed to seek the destruction of his people and their ‘way of life’. In service to this war, all rights to question or criticise The Governor’s leadership are tantamount to ‘treason’, and punishable by death. The enemy cannot be bargained with, and their very existence cannot be tolerated – only their complete destruction can ensure safety, order and freedom from fear. In this state of emergency, the only law that can be allowed is the absolute authority of a tyrannical sovereign.

*The Walking Dead’s* transcoding of contemporary anxieties about the law’s excess in the state of emergency is likewise echoed in other recent apocalyptic cultural productions. *Under the Dome* (2013–present), a television series adapted from Stephen King’s novel of the same name, is similarly preoccupied with the figure of the tyrannical sovereign. It is set in the small town of Chester’s Mill, Maine. Suddenly and inexplicably, the town is enveloped in a mysterious, invisible ‘dome’, a force-field that allows nothing other than air to pass its wall. The residents find themselves trapped inside, cut-off from the outside world. The authorities are unable to either understand the nature of the dome, or find a way to remove, bypass or destroy it. Under the dome, we see unfolding a familiar post-apocalyptic scenario, where the shortage of food, water and medicines incrementally leads to conflict and violence as the residents struggle for survival. By an unfortunate happenstance, most of the town’s elected officials were outside the dome when it ‘came down’, so there is a vacuum of legitimate political authority in Chester’s Mill. The exception is ‘Big Jim’ Rennie, an ambitious (and rather shady) local entrepreneur and town councilman. As the only remaining councilman, he grasps for himself the role of leader, a move that the frightened and confused townsfolk readily accept. He soon begins to assert absolute control over the residents, using the town’s small police force as a means to coerce the reluctant into obedience. He organises a programme of firearms
confiscation, taking all weapons in the town into his personal control, thereby monopolising the means of violence. If others seek to oppose his one-man rule, he resorts to murder. When possibilities emerge to escape the dome’s confinement, Big Jim covertly moves to sabotage such attempts; without the dome, he is just a small-town, used-car salesman, but within its walls he is sovereign and all-powerful. A challenge to his authority emerges in the character of Dale ‘Barbie’ Barbara. A former soldier-turned-debt collector for organised crime, Barbie is an outsider who gets trapped in Chester’s Mill while visiting on business. When an increasing number of people start to look to Barbie as an alternative leader, Big Jim frames his rival for murders he himself commits, then organises a manhunt to capture the ‘criminal’. Once Barbie is apprehended, Big Jim orders the construction of a gallows in front of the courthouse. Acting as both judge and jury, he unilaterally declares Barbie guilty, and sentences him to hang. Like The Governor, Big Jim serves as an exemplification of the horrors unleashed when law is granted unlimited power in the name of safety and survival – the price of security and the restoration of order is the suspension of rights and liberties, including the citizen’s right to a fair trial, due process and to life itself.

* * *

Over the course of this chapter we have explored how post-apocalyptic popular culture dramatises anxieties about a crisis of social order, through a corresponding crisis of law. This is articulated through a dualistic discourse in which law is both missing, and reappears as an authoritarian perversion of itself – two sides of a response to a scenario in which law and order appears to be failing. However, the post-apocalyptic imaginary of disaster offers us not only an amplified version of abstract fears about crime-as-evil, but equally configures those fears along existing social and cultural cleavages and tensions. In particular, the genre exhibits a notable tendency to render the problems of crime, risk and disorder in both racialised and gendered terms. Such representation will provide the focus of discussion in the next two chapters.
3

Dangerous Others: ‘Race’ and Crime after the Apocalypse

Abstract: This chapter explores a common theme in the apocalyptic imaginary of crisis, that of overt or covert racial conflict. Projecting anxieties about the racialised ‘dangerous other’, post-apocalyptic culture maps such fears onto a world where the majority are no longer ‘safe’ from the ‘dark’ criminal element. These range from racialised fantasies about black masculinity and its sexual ‘contamination’ of white femininity, to the figure of the post-apocalyptic ghetto gangster, recuperating urban white anxieties about the threat of ‘black criminality’. In other fictions, the racialised other is metaphorically coded as radioactive mutant, ape or zombie. Such fictions, it is argued, are inextricably bound-up with a constellation of commonplace discourses on the intersections between crime and ‘race’, and reflect ongoing social conflicts about ethno-racial ‘otherness’ in a globalised, post-colonial world.

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Crime and ‘race’: from criminology to cultural studies

Criminology’s historical relationship to questions of racial and ethnic difference is a matter of considerable ambivalence, and the discipline’s approach to this area has been characterised by radical shifts, discontinuities and ongoing conflicts. Criminology’s origins are, undoubtedly, bound-up with unambiguously racist attitudes and presuppositions, amongst the most notorious of which is counted, of course, Cesare Lombroso’s biological construct of the ‘born criminal’ which differentially distributes criminal tendencies on racialised and somatic grounds (Rafter and Gibson, 2006: 1–2). As Lombroso (2006: 91) puts it, while introducing his ideas about atavism:

Those who have read this far should now be persuaded that criminals resemble savages and the colored races. These groups have many characteristics in common, including thinness of body hair, low degrees of strength and below-average weight, small cranial capacities... Among habitual criminals as among savages, we find... insensitivity to pain, lack of moral sense, revulsion for work, absence of remorse, lack of foresight... and, finally, an underdeveloped concept of divinity and morality.

Whilst deeply offensive and shocking to contemporary readers, Lombroso was far from unique in this regard, as the period from late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries was characterised by a widespread development of quasi-evolutionary and eugenic perspectives that were used to support biologically-based and racialised, criminological theories (Roberts, 1992; Gillham, 2001). Such accounts were themselves closely connected to theories of racial hierarchy and difference that spanned the discourses of science, politics, religion and the arts, and which were an integral ideological element of European colonial and imperial projects (Said, 1978, 1993). Across the twentieth century, biologically-oriented accounts continued to intermittently propose connections between ‘race’ and crime – from Earnest Hooton’s prisoner studies (Rafter, 2004), through Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) linking of ‘race’, IQ and criminal tendencies, to J. Philippe Rushton’s (1994) use of evolutionary theory to support a racially-based explanation of offending patterns.

Beyond these biologically-based accounts of ‘race’ and crime, criminology has offered a range of more socially-oriented explanations for the disproportionate representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) individuals amongst offender populations. Prominent amongst
such accounts are those which suggest that ethno-racial differences in crime rates can be accounted for by the socio-economic location of minority groups, who are more likely than average to suffer from low income, unemployment, poor housing, and so on – all factors that are identified as criminogenic (Webster, 2012: 108; Phillips and Bowling, 2007: 428; also Sampson and Wilson, 2005). Others have pointed to a distinctive cultural dynamic in which young men from BME backgrounds ‘suffer ascriptions of aggressive hyper-masculinity’, making them prime targets of police attention, resulting in ‘a spiral of amplified contact and conflict’ (Webster, 2012: 108). Institutional racism of this kind, it is argued, permeates the criminal justice system, and can help account for the conspicuously high proportion of those arrested, charged, convicted and imprisoned who hail from minority ethnic backgrounds (Bosworth, 2004; Cunneen, 2005; Holdaway and O’Neill, 2006).

The aforementioned institutional dynamic does not, of course, exist and persist in a cultural vacuum. Rather it is deeply imbricated with wider cultural perceptions, misconceptions and prejudices that serve to sustain stereotypical associations between ethnic difference and crime. Mass media representations (both the ostensibly factual as well as fictional) have been duly criticised for their role in reproducing these cultural configurations (Campbell, 1995; McCarthy et al., 1997). Regarding crime news reporting, Dowler et al. (2006: 840) argue that:

...in both Canadian and American newscasts, racial images saturate media portrayals of criminality and victimization; minority crime victims receive less attention and less sympathy than white victims, while crime stories involving minority offenders are rife with racial stereotypes.

These biases in press coverage of crime issues remain highly salient in North America, especially in light of recent high-profile cases such as the acquittal of George Zimmerman after the fatal shooting of unarmed African-American teenager Trayvon Martin, as well as a spate of cases in which police officers shot and killed unarmed African-Americans such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice (the latter of whom was just 12 years old). The mass mediated reproduction of stereotypes about ‘black criminality’ are not confined to the American context, as attested by classic studies such as Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis* (1978) which explored the moral panic that emerged through British press coverage of a ‘mugging epidemic’ supposedly perpetrated by black youth.
Racism, conflict and ghetto gangsters at the end of the world

The discourse on ‘race’ in crime news reporting intersects with the imagery of popular film and television. As Rowe (2012) notes, the association between ethnic otherness and criminality dates back at least as far back as the gangster movie genre of the 1930s (see also discussion in Munby, 2009). More recent depictions, such as the award-winning series *The Wire*, admittedly attempt to place the racialised dynamics of offending in a more critical, social and economic context. Nevertheless, he argues, they often risk simply ‘reinforcing dominant motifs of drug dealing and the street subculture of African Americans’ (Rowe, 2012: 49; see also Boyd, 2002) on stereotypes of Latino drug dealers, and Chiricos (1996) on the Black underclass in the 1980s panic about ‘crack’ cocaine). However, we must note that the racialised meanings that circulate in such popular representations are not uniform or monolithic. Instead, they are complex, contradictory and shifting, giving voice at different times to the wider political and social conflicts that coalesce around racial and ethnic difference. This is especially apparent if we consider the ‘career’ of racialised discourse in American films, and popular culture more broadly. The late nineteenth century saw the publication of apocalyptic novels such as King Wallace’s *The Next War* (1892) which foretells a ‘race war’ in which blacks attempt to kill all white people in America using poison; they are defeated, banished and ultimately made extinct (Clute and Nicholls, 1999: 1294; James, 1990). The beginnings of American popular cinema are likewise unambiguously tied to the reproduction of racist prejudices, exemplified in the notorious mythologisation of the Ku Klux Klan in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) (Rogin, 1985). What follows in ensuing decades is a tendency to reduce ethnic others (be they African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans or Hispanic-Americans) to a combination of invisibility, marginality and racist stereotyping. However, the period of the 1950s and 1960s sees, in tandem with the struggles of the civil rights movement, a significant shift in cinematic explorations of ‘race’ and ‘race relations’. For example, liberal sensibilities in Hollywood found articulation through films such as *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), *12 Angry Men* (1957) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) which focus upon the racism permeating both American society and its criminal justice system. By the early 1970s, the cultural self-assertion of the Black Power movement finds voice in ‘blaxploitation’ films such as...
Shaft (1971), Coffy (1973) and Foxy Brown (1974), which feature African-American men and women as heroic crime-fighters (Ryan and Kellner, 1990: 122–123). The conservative ‘counter-reaction’ to the claims made by progressive social movements of the era in turn manifest through the consolidation of racially-charged stereotypes of urban gangsters and drug dealers in the 1980s and 1990s (Denzin, 2001). Such conflicting encodings of the relationship between ‘race’, crime and social conflict are also apparent in post-apocalyptic fictions across these decades.

A notable contribution to the civil rights-era discourse on racial conflict can be found in The World, the Flesh and the Devil (1959). The film utilises a commonplace scenario of post-war science fiction films, namely that of global devastation wrought by nuclear war and the struggle for survival after much of humanity has been destroyed. However, in this text, the post-apocalyptic serves as a stage upon which the racist legacy of American history, and the hopes of liberation and reconciliation championed by the civil rights movement, can be explored. It features just three characters, whose tense unfolding relationship provides a critical commentary on racial conflict and violence. The film’s hero, Ralph Burton (Harry Belafonte) is an African-American mining engineer who is trapped underground when the nuclear devastation is unleashed. Protected from the deadly fall-out of the attack, he emerges into a depopulated world, and makes his way to New York City. He is spared the prospect of unrelenting isolation and loneliness when he meets a young white woman, Sarah Crandall (Inger Stevens), and the two become friends. However, Sarah’s growing sexual attraction to Ralph makes him uncomfortable, and he appears simultaneously drawn to her yet unable to transcend the taboos around inter-racial relationships that have configured American society (even though that society no longer exists in any recognisable form). Even after the end of the world, racism continues to cast its shadow over human relationships. The narrative becomes more conflict-ridden when Ralph and Sarah are joined by a third survivor, a white man named Benson Thacker (Mel Ferrer). Benson desires Sarah, but comes to see her attraction to Ralph as an impediment to his own hopes, so he sets about tracking down and killing his ‘rival’. However, Ralph refuses to fight, and Ben likewise is unable to bring himself to kill. The film ends with the three survivors walking away together, holding hands, and the words ‘The Beginning’ are projected onto the screen over this final shot. The World, the Flesh and the Devil simultaneously offers an indictment of the irrational distortion.
of the human self and social relationships wrought by racism, and an optimistic projection of the possibility of reconciliation and an end to racial conflict.

If *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* makes effective use of the post-apocalyptic to express the burgeoning hopes of the civil rights movement, later popular fictions are given to a far less benign assessment of the place of ‘race’ in the American future. In Chapter 2, we encountered a number of ‘proto-apocalyptic’ fictions that cement commonplace connections between the city, crime and disorder. In both John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* and Walter Hill’s *The Warriors*, the ghetto and the city serve as spaces in which violent, rampaging gangs overwhelm the rule of law. Another of Carpenter’s films, *Escape from New York* (1981), revisits this terrain in an explicitly post-apocalyptic setting, and does so by recuperating racialised representations of violent criminality. The film’s preamble informs us that by 1988 there has been a 400 per cent rise in the crime rate, and in response the US government has turned Manhattan Island into a maximum security prison used to incarcerate felons from across the country. The island is surrounded by a 50ft concrete wall which is patrolled by armed police equipped with helicopter gunships. Those sentenced to the island are given a simple choice – ‘termination’ and cremation, or confinement in the prison for life, without any chance of release. There are no guards inside the prison walls, and the convicts are left to their own devices to improvise survival as best they can. The film’s action unfolds some years later, in 1997, when the United States has been in a protracted war with the Soviet Union and China. The US President (Donald Pleasance) is on his way to a peace summit when his plane is brought down by hijackers from the ‘National Liberation Front of America’, acting in the name of ‘the workers’ and striking a blow against the ‘imperialist’ state. The plane crashes on Manhattan, and the President is the only survivor, managing to make use of an ‘escape pod’. The police’s attempt to mount a rescue is repelled when they are informed that the President has been taken captive by the prisoners, and any further incursion onto the island will result in his immediate death. In the face of this situation, Police Chief Hauk (Lee van Cleef) turns to Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell), a former Special Forces soldier and decorated war hero who has been convicted for armed robbery. Plissken is about to be incarcerated on the island for his crimes, but is offered the chance of a pardon, if he can infiltrate the prison and rescue the President within 24 hours. Using a stealth glider,
Plissken covertly enters the city (in an *ex-post* irony, his chosen landing site is the roof of one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre). What he finds on the island is a violent and lawless world in which gangs vie for scarce resources such as food and fuel. The gangs have names such as the ‘Crazies’, ‘Skulls’, ‘Indians’ and ‘Gypsies’, a motley agglomeration of the unstable, murderous and ethnically ‘other’. The President, Plissken learns, is now the captive of the self-styled ‘Duke of New York’, an African-American gang leader (Isaac Hayes) who has claimed a position as *de facto* sovereign. His plan is to barter the President’s life for escape from the island for all prisoners. The Duke’s first appearance recuperates stereotypical images of the ghetto gangster, as he is driven around the city in a ‘pimp mobile’ complete with giant illuminated chandeliers and a disco glitter ball. His henchmen include some equally familiar racial stereotypes, such as gun-toting Black men sporting afros and bandanas and a sinister ‘Oriental’ complete with a ‘Fu Manchu’ moustache. The Duke terrorises the President for his own amusement, chaining him to a wall and using him as target practice. He forces the captured Plissken to engage in a gladiatorial combat-to-the death, pronouncing his intention to lead the prisoners to freedom with Plissken’s head mounted on the hood of his ornate car. Inevitably, Plissken manages to prevail and escape – but not before the Duke is brutally mowed-down by a machine-gun wielding and increasingly deranged President.

The ethno-racial matrix of the film’s post-apocalyptic future is recuperated in its sequel, *Escape from L.A.* (1996). An introductory voice-over tells us that by 1998 ‘hostile forces in the United States grow strong. The city of Los Angeles is ravaged by crime and immorality’. A Christian, fundamentalist politician (soon to be elected President) predicts that an earthquake will destroy this ‘city of sin, the city of Gomorrah and Sodom’. An earthquake, measuring 9.6 on the Richter scale, does indeed strike L.A., and in the ensuing flooding it is turned into an island. The President declares that L.A. is no longer a part of the US, and will henceforth serve as a place of deportation for ‘all people found unfit to live in a new, moral America’. In 2013, Snake Plissken is again facing imprisonment, this time for ‘moral crimes’ (the new America is one in which smoking, consumption of alcohol and red meat, and extra-marital sex are all crimes). As one of the island’s overseers puts it: ‘prostitutes, atheists, runaways...we’re throwing out the trash!’. However, Plissken is offered a reprieve if he undertakes another
mission. This time the President’s daughter Utopia, disgusted with her father’s authoritarianism, steals the controls for a ‘doomsday weapon’ and escapes to L.A. Here she meets up with her lover, Cuervo Jones, a revolutionary from the Peruvian communist Shining Path movement, who now runs ‘one of the most dangerous gangs in L.A.’ Jones has united ‘all 3rd world countries’ and together they are planning an invasion of America – described as ‘the revenge of the pre-industrial societies’. The weapon – which uses satellite-based devices to target and permanently shut down all electronics, will be used by Jones to render the US defenceless, thereby ensuring that the invasion is a success. Jones, with his beret and beard, appears as a facsimile of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. Plissken is ordered to enter L.A., retrieve the weapon’s control system, and kill Utopia who has been condemned for ‘sedition’ by her father. As before, Plissken finds a lawless landscape dominated by ‘ethnic’ gangs with names such as the Korean Dragons, Black Jihad and Saigon Shadow. He kills many of Jones’ followers in the ensuing conflict, Jones himself dies, and Plissken escapes the city with the weapon and Utopia in tow. Instead of surrendering the control unit, he activates it on a global scale, rendering all modern technology useless. This way, neither the (authoritarian) United States government nor its (‘3rd world’) enemies have an advantage in the imminent war. In the film’s final scene, as electricity fails and all goes dark, Plissken lights a cigarette from a discarded packet – it bears the colours of the stars-and-stripes, an eagle, and the words ‘American Spirit’.

Together with its predecessor, Escape from L.A. articulates a reactionary cultural politics, one that has become ever more prominent in the USA with the rise of the so-called Tea Party movement. It is characterised, firstly, by a profound hostility to government and the authority of the state, seeing in them an attack on those ‘inalienable freedoms’ which serve as the mythic foundations of America. Secondly, it is equally fearful of migrants and ethnic minorities (who are associated with cultural contamination, disorder and welfare dependence) and the corresponding erosion of a white, patriarchal, muscular Christianity that is claimed as the bedrock of the nation’s founding (Williamson et al., 2011; Barreto et al., 2011). It is unsurprising therefore that the films’ star, Kurt Russell, has been outspoken about his right-wing views, including support for ‘limited government’, the National Rifle Association (NRA), the PATRIOT Act, and ‘neoconservative’ politicians such as Newt Gingrich (Mitchell, 1998; reason.com, 2004).
Monsters as metaphors: mutants, zombies and others

Thus far we have considered the construction of ethno-racial difference, and its association with crime and social conflict, as it appears in popular post-apocalyptic fictions. Despite the notable examples discussed above, the dominant tendency within this genre has been to avoid or evade explicit explorations of ‘race’ within end-of-the-world narratives. In most such fictions, minority ethnic characters are either absent, or feature as ancillary characters (such as servants and ‘sidekicks’ – Foertsch (2007)) in plots featuring white protagonists. As Nama (2008: 10–12) puts it, the literal representation of minorities in this field is largely a combination of ‘structured absence and token presence’. However, we can also find a sustained preoccupation with issues of racial difference, risk and danger that takes shape at the implicit level of metaphorical symbolisation. Science fiction (a genre of which the post-apocalyptic is very much a part) is thus:

... a powerful lens by which to observe the collective racial desires, fantasies, and fear circulating throughout American society ... the genre is an ideological kaleidoscope, producing hegemonic and counterhegemonic social parables, ethical paradoxes, and trenchant allegories. (Nama, 2008: 2–3)

Prominent amongst the metaphorical devices used to embody racial difference is that of the monster, who represents (and stands in place of) a dangerous ‘otherness’ that threatens society. The monster as racialised metaphor is, of course, nothing new in Hollywood. For example, as Rosen (1975: 7) notes of King Kong (1933) ‘It doesn’t require too great an exercise of the imagination to perceive the element of race...Racist conceptions of blacks often depict them as subhuman, ape or monkey-like’. He goes on to note that the film’s plot is on the one hand an allegory about slavery: white explorers find Kong on an uncharted island; they bring him to the New World in chains where he is exploited for entertainment and profit; when he rebels against his captivity, he is destroyed. On the other hand, the film clearly draws upon a range of racialised (and racist) tropes. Kong is the dark, dangerous, violent ‘other’ who threatens to visit destruction upon the civilised space of the metropolis. He equally embodies racialised fears and fantasies about a hyper-masculine, ‘primitive’ sexuality that covets white women, and which must be eliminated so as to save them from contamination and corruption (it is worth noting that for its German release, the film was aptly retitled King Kong
and the White Woman (Dines, 1998: 294)). Langager (2011) consequently concludes that:

It evokes colonialism, the slave trade, Reconstruction, minstrel shows, Jim Crow, white supremacy...miscegenation...to say nothing of the contemporaneous rape hysteria in the South that fed into systematic lynchings and institutional segregation.

The figuration of the monstrous as racial metaphor and allegory is, as we shall explore further, also a recurrent feature of post-apocalyptic fictions.

Typical of the coded racialised representations found in post-war apocalyptic cinema are those which feature in World Without End (1956). The film follows a four man crew on an exploratory mission to Mars. A malfunction in their spacecraft accelerates it to extreme speeds, and they crash land on an unknown planet. Exploring the environs, they come to realise that they are in fact on Earth, but have been thrown forward in time; it is now 2508 AD, and the world has been devastated by an atomic war that took place several centuries previously. A small community of technologically-advanced survivors live in an underground complex, while some others attempt to survive on an inhospitable surface where the background radiation levels remain dangerously high. The ship’s crew soon encounter another, more immediate threat – so-called ‘mutates’ or ‘beasts’ who are the distorted remnants of humanity. Unlike the (uniformly white) human survivors, the ‘mutates’ are dark, fur-clad primitives, who have no ability to use language beyond grunts and growls, and are unrelentingly violent. Like Hollywood’s vision of cannibalistic primitives to be found on the ‘dark continent’, these spear-wielding, tribal creatures serve as the antithesis of the West’s self-image. They are, in essence, atavistic ‘throwbacks’ who threaten the survival of what remains of civilisation. In the context of 1950s America, the ‘mutates’ represent a conjoining of two ‘existential threats’ that haunt the nation – the looming external spectre of nuclear war, and the internal schisms brought about by a civil rights movement that is starting to pose challenges to heretofore unquestioned racial hierarchies.

The theme of the racial cleavages and conflicts that characterised post-war America are given a further and even more sustained treatment in the series of post-apocalyptic movies that begins with Planet of the Apes (1968), and continues through four sequels (released in rapid succession across the years of 1970, 1971, 1972 and 1973). The first film
in the sequence (adapted from Pierre Boulle’s 1963 novel *La Planète des Singes*) follows a crew of astronauts who are, like those in *World Without End*, undertaking a deep space voyage. They are awoken from hibernation when their ship crashes on an unfamiliar world. Here the movie’s protagonist, Taylor (Charlton Heston) discovers a shockingly inverted reality – humans exist as bands of nomadic primitives, while the dominant species on the planet are apes (chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans). Taylor is captured by armed apes on horseback, and taken to Ape City where he is held captive alongside other humans who have been enslaved. Upon discovering that he is intelligent, and unlike other humans has the power of speech, he is deemed a threat by those in power, and faces the prospect of castration and lobotomy. He escapes with the assistance of two scientists – Zira and Cornelius – and goes in search of an explanation for humanity’s current state of primitive existence. He and his companions discover sophisticated artefacts that predate the civilisation of the apes, including dentures, spectacles, and a talking doll in the form of a human child. It becomes clear that there was once an advanced human society on the planet, of which now only archaeological traces remain. In the final scene, Taylor round the headland of a beach, to see the remnants of a fallen Statue of Liberty jutting from the sands – the Planet of the Apes is, in fact, Earth, long after humans have destroyed their civilisation through nuclear war. In one of the iconic moments of popular Hollywood cinema, a distraught Taylor sinks to the ground and screams in despair: ‘All the time, it was... We finally really did it. You Maniacs! You blew it up! Ah, damn you! God damn you all to hell!’

The theme of self-inflicted destruction through nuclear conflict is, of course, a staple of post-war science fiction, and as such *Planet of the Apes* is an unremarkable contribution to the genre. However, its significance lies in the way that the text uses this scenario to explore issues of ‘race’, including inter-racial danger, conflict and violence, and in doing so projects contemporaneous social, cultural and political anxieties (indeed, as Williams (2011) argues, popular discourses of nuclear weapons and nuclear war are shot-through with ethno-racial dynamics). The film is ambiguous insofar as it offers both ‘hegemonic’ and ‘counterhegemonic’ messages, and thus simultaneously challenges and reinforces racialised tropes and typologies. At one level, the film can be read as allegory that confronts America with its own racism. The humans (oppressed, abused, enslaved and treated as ‘animals’) symbolise the African-American experience of slavery and post-emancipation oppression; the apes
(fanatical in holding to a belief about their own superiority, and their right to rule the world) stand for the white power structure that dominates the institutional spheres of politics, law and science. Humans, for example, are used by the apes for medical experimentation, echoing the racialised eugenics programmes that had flourished for many decades, especially in the Deep South (Dikötter, 1998: 471–472; Roberts, 1992: 1961–1964). As such, ‘Taylor becomes a semiotic testament to the racial punishment black have endured in America... Taylor is hunted down, kidnapped, periodically whipped and even burned in order to compel his compliance’ (Nama, 2008: 128). However, the film at the same time recuperates obvious racialised associations, not least those that represent the ‘other’ as an ape or monkey. It is significant that there is a clear caste system at work in the film – the chimpanzees are the scientists and scholars, the orangutans comprise the class of administrators and politicians, while the gorillas a serve as the military. Onto these castes is mapped a clear phenotypical continuum, alongside a corresponding range of behavioural characteristics. The chimpanzees are the lightest-skinned, and are gentle, thoughtful and highly intelligent (it is they, in the form of Zira and Cornelius, who befriend Taylor and help him escape). At the other end of this continuum, the gorillas are avatars of Blackness, and are aggressive, violent and brutal. Thus there are ‘good apes’ who seek understanding and accommodation with humans, and ‘bad apes’ who seek only domination and destruction of Taylor and his fellow humans. The different castes within ape society allude fairly directly to white perceptions of African-Americans in the 1960s, ranging from the pacific and integrationist orientations of the civil rights movement, to the revolutionary and confrontational stance adopted by the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements (Greene, 1996). It is worth noting the social and political context within which the film and its sequels were produced: events such as the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles (as well as riots in Cleveland, Chicago, Newark, Detroit, Baltimore and many other cities); the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; and the foundation of the Black Panther Party (Van Deburg, 1993; Fairclough, 2002). This context is pivotal for understanding the complex and variegated treatment of ‘race relations’ in Planet of the Apes – it articulates, in allegorical form, both white liberal support for an integrationist project of ethnic inclusion and that same constituency’s anxieties about a militant and revolutionary Black Power movement that wishes to fundamentally subvert the existing system of racialised privilege.
The monstrous as a metaphor for the racial other is also clearly present in popular cultural texts that feature the zombie, including those that imagine a ‘zombie apocalypse’ which destroys society. The zombie is firmly located in a matrix of racial symbolisation, given its origins in Haitian Voodoo (Vodou), where the zonbi is imagined as a dead body reanimated by magic. Intriguingly, the ethnobotonist and ethnographer Wade Davis (1988) argues that the zombie has a real material and social existence (at least in the context of Haitian religion and culture). In essence, he claims that the trance-like state associated with the zombie is induced through a combination of psychoactive drugs and cultural rituals, and that it serves as a form of social sanction used to punish transgressors and maintain community order. In contrast to Davis’ careful scientific analysis, the popular mythologisation of the zombie inverts this relationship with the production of social order; it is a malevolent incursion that destroys, rather than preserves, social cohesion. It is also, from its earliest cinematic incarnations, firmly located within a framework of racialised danger and the encounter with a dark otherness. Films such as White Zombie (1932), The Devil’s Daughter (1939), King of the Zombies (1941) and I Walked With a Zombie (1943) are all set on Caribbean islands such as Haiti and Jamaica, and typically feature a plantation to which a white protagonist travels, only to find dark forces at work in the form of voodoo masters and their shambling, inhuman creations:

The films invariably cast black sorcerers (or quack sorcerers) plotting for conquest of and control over white women, and blackness is unmistakably linked with primitive menace, superstition, and the diabolical. (McAlister, 2012: 461)

The plantation setting is not incidental, as it is redolent with sedimented cultural meanings, including racial oppression and abjection, and the ‘threat’ of slave revolts and uprisings that figured in the history of Haiti and other Caribbean colonies (Kadish, 1995; Blackburn, 2006). Slavery and its aftermath is, we can suggest, a central defining feature of the zombie’s original symbolic construction: ‘the zombie represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it’ (McAlister, 2012: 461).

The recent resurgence of the zombie has moved away from a literal association of monstrosity with racial otherness. However, the genre nevertheless retains this link at a metaphorical level. Moreover, the preoccupation of early zombie movies with blackness has been
supplemented by a coded concern with a range of internal and external ‘others’ who are viewed in terms of social risk. Instructive in this respect is Achille Mbebe’s (2003) argument that modern regimes of biopower (organised around locating, mapping, controlling and disciplining populations, according to varied and hierarchical subject categories) are prominent in their use of racial classification. In their contemporary incarnation, they are preoccupied with the territorialised control of human movement, most especially focused upon ‘others’ (migrants, refugees) who threaten the borders (and orders) of the West (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002). Across the advanced industrial world (spanning North America, Europe and Australasia) recent decades have seen the mobilisation of economic, military and police power to ‘protect’ the nation’s integrity against unwanted outsiders. The cultural counterpart (and ideological anchoring) of this politics takes shape as a discourse on contamination, crime and disorder (Seremetakis, 1999; Schuster and Solomos, 2002; Tzanelli and Yar, 2009; Vila, 2010). The post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ has added further layering to such fears, with an Arab/Islamic other figuring as the harbinger of death and destruction for the Western ‘way of life’ (Semati, 2010; Burman, 2010). Popular culture has, of course, offered plenty of representations that give voice to such concerns – these range from Islamic Jihadists armed with nuclear weapons (*True Lies* (1984)) and toxic nerve gas (*Executive Decision* (1996)), to Latin American terrorists (*Collateral Damage* (2002)) and drug lords (*Clear and Present Danger* (1994)). The contemporary zombie can be viewed as a metaphorical counterpart to these dangerous others, a fantastic rendition of the threatening subaltern in the guise of the undead; as Ahmad (2011) puts it, ‘gray is the new black.’ In this conjunction it is worth noting, firstly, that the contemporary zombie is characterised, first and foremost, by its cannibalistic appetites. An obvious parallel offers itself here, namely the racist association of blackness with a tribal primitiveness that is obsessed with anthropophagy. As Rice (1998: 106) observes, ‘At the centre of the white-held stereotype of the bestial other, as promulgated in a variety of discourses from the academic/anthropological to the cartoon character, is the figure of the cannibal’. In productions such as *The Walking Dead*, the zombie is literally consuming America, eating its citizens alive. The meaning here is, of course, polysemic; it is commonplace in recent cultural analysis to read the voraciousness of the zombie as a metaphor for the excesses of consumer capitalism (McAlister, 2012: 473; Harper, 2002; Bailey, 2013). This does not, however, preclude an alternative
metaphorical construction, one in which the monster that consumes America stands in place of the ethno-racial other (the illegal immigrant, the welfare mother) who is castigated for taking the resources and livelihood of ‘hard working Americans’. Since California’s controversial ‘Proposition 197’ – which sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to public education, welfare benefits and non-emergency medical care – a heightened sense of hostility towards immigrants has been become a conspicuous feature in the discourse of the resurgent right (Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Wilson, 2001). A second salient facet of the post-apocalyptic zombie scenario connects the source of the crisis to a contamination that enters from outside the nation’s borders. In the 1995 medical pandemic movie Outbreak, an Ebola-like virus is introduced to the United States via an infected monkey that has been illegally smuggled into the country from Africa (an unambiguous semiotic chain is thus set in place: Africa-monkeys-illegal entry-disease and death). In Max Brooks’ best-selling novel, World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War (2006), the source of the zombie plague is traced to a ‘patient zero’ from China (paralleling, we might suggest, the rise of Sinophobia in a post-Cold War world where China is seen as insurgent superpower that threatens America’s political and economic supremacy).

The relationship between fantastic scenarios of a zombie apocalypse and the underlying social realities of crime, violence and discrimination is a complex and mutually-conditioning one. In this regard, Linnemann et al. (2014) offer an insightful account of how ‘fiction’ crosses back over into ‘fact’, with brutal consequences. In May of 2012, Miami police shot and killed Rudy Eugene, a black man of Haitian descent; at the time, he was supposedly ‘eating the face’ of a homeless man. The popular press soon started to call Eugene the ‘Miami Zombie’ and the ‘Causeway Cannibal’, triggering talk of a ‘zombie apocalypse’. Linnemann et al. argue that what is at work here is the symbolic dehumanisation of ‘populations superfluous to the neoliberal social order’ (507), reducing them to the subhuman and ‘socially dead’. By constructing Eugene as a ‘zombie’ and ‘cannibal’, popular discourse not only draws deeply on the well of racialised fears of the ‘black other’, but also licences state power to dispose of those deemed to have no rightful place in society. Killing can be undertaken indiscriminately, and without consideration of rights and limits, when that which is destroyed has been denied the status of human being; the inhuman cannot, by definition, be the subject of human
rights, and is thus disposable in the name of preserving an order that is perceived as under threat from its ‘others’ (a prime case of what Mbebe (2003) calls the necropolitics of modern regimes of biopower). The case of Rudy Euenge, and its mass-mediated aftermath, is a powerful testimony to the cultural politics that underpins contemporary regimes of popular representation, and how those regimes are implicated in racialised anxieties about crime, disorder and existential risk.

* * *

This chapter has focused upon the ways that post-apocalyptic fictions come to articulate social cleavages centred upon ‘race’ and ethno-cultural otherness, and which are in turn closely associated with construction of crime, risk and danger. I have argued that these transcodings work at both the level of literal representation (the stereotypical rendition of ‘blackness’) and through metaphor and allegory (in which the ‘dangerous other’ appears in the guise of the animalistic, inhuman and monstrous). In the next chapter, this analysis will be complemented and extended through an exploration of the cultural politics of gender and social change as they are played-out in the domain of the post-apocalyptic imaginary.
Crime, Disaster and the Crisis of the Gender Order

Abstract: This chapter explores the theme of gender, sex and crime in the post-apocalyptic genre. It is notable that across many films, TV shows and novels, the breakdown of law and order in the wake of catastrophe is represented through the ubiquitous threat of rape and sexual violence. These texts depict atavistic male desire as an ever-present threat that is only held at bay by law and order – in their absence, it resurfaces and brutally subjects women, returning them to the status of chattel or objects. A second strand in post-apocalyptic culture articulates patriarchal fears of feminism and women’s liberation from the traditional, patriarchal gender order. Such texts imagine a post-crisis world in which men have been reduced to subservience and brutalisation by a female-dominated society that relies on ‘unnatural’ means of reproduction such as artificial insemination to sustain itself. These fictions communicate a complex and contradictory vision of patriarchal power as both a threat to, and something threatened by, social change.

Criminology, gender and popular culture

Chapter 3 began with a brief consideration of criminology’s relationship with issues of ‘race’ and ethnic difference. The discipline has been characterised by a similarly complex, and often problematic, engagement with gender across its history. Its discourse on crime and gender has taken shape through, firstly, a promulgation of sexist stereotypes derived from and reflecting the broader patriarchal, social and cultural context in which it developed. Secondly, until relatively recently, it has rendered gender (especially women’s experiences of offending, victimisation, criminal justice and punishment) largely invisible. The first of these tendencies is exemplified, once again, by Lombroso, who’s *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* combines an unswerving belief in female inferiority with a theory of offending that reduces women to cyphers for biologically and psycho-sexually based pathology (Lombroso and Ferrero, 2004[1895]). As Smart (1997: xiii) notes, criminological work as late as the 1960s was still uncritically reproducing sexist stereotypes predicated upon unquestioned assumptions about women’s biological inferiority. The second tendency, subject only to corrective interventions by feminist scholars over the past few decades, simply elected to treat women as if they didn’t exist for the purposes of criminological inquiry. Males were taken as the sole point of reference for developing aetiological accounts of crime, and female offending was either ignored as inconsequential due to its supposed scarcity, or seen as a phenomenon that could be straightforwardly explained with reference to androcentric studies (Heidensohn, 1996). The discussion of women’s experiences of victimisation and punishment fared no better, subject as it was to a combination of wilful neglect and unfounded, prejudicial assumptions (such as the myth of female provocation and precipitation in cases of rape and sexual assault (von Hentig, 1940; Amir, 1967)). Criminology’s (often reluctant and halting) rehabilitation has served to shine the light of critical analysis upon the gendered dimensions of crime and punishment, addressing inter alia the connections between a patriarchal social system and the production of criminal law and law-enforcement policies and practices. This has extended beyond mapping, explaining and understanding women’s experiences to belatedly recognise that men are also gendered, and that the social production and performance of masculinity must also be considered in the formulation criminological accounts (Newburn and Stanko (eds), 1994; Collier, 1998;
Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). An important element of criminology’s efforts to more adequately address issues of gender has been the attention devoted to exploring mass-mediated and popular cultural constructions of crime and criminality, so as to better grasp their role in reflecting, reproducing or challenging the existing gender order.

Criminological analysis of gender in popular culture has taken shape around a number of inter-related themes. Firstly, and mirroring broader developments in feminist cultural studies, the discipline has examined how factual and fictional representation are implicated in sustaining stereotypical views of women as offenders. For example, the depiction of female criminality as a form of sexual dangerousness has been firmly entrenched in film and television, ranging from the ‘femme fatale’ of 1940s film noir to the wily (and sometimes deranged) seductress of Fatal Attraction (1987), The Last Seduction (1994) and Basic Instinct (1992) (Leitch, 2002). Conversely, women have figured as ‘ideal victims’ of criminal predation (Christie, 1986), vulnerable, passive and in need of rescue (Chadder, 1999: 75–76; Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000; Kuklanz and Moorti, 2006). Serial killer movies, for example, are strewn with the violated and mutilated corpses of women, serving as the disposable narrative device that propels a (typically male) hero to bring a psychopathic monster to justice. Crime fictions have likewise fetishised a hard-bitten hyper-masculinity that combines the valorisation of violence with heteronormative sexual prowess (Sparks, 1996; King, 1999; Krutnik, 2006). However, such representational configurations have remained neither static nor uniform, but have been subject to contest and revision in tandem with broader social and cultural negotiations around the meanings of gender. For example, the long-standing role of female characters in crime films (as either victim or villainess seductress) has been supplement with the rise of the female cop and action hero (Inness (ed), 2004; Schubart, 2007). The extent to which such characters offer a vision of female agency and empowerment (as opposed to a sexualised fantasy for the heterosexual, male consumer) remains a disputed question (Tasker, 1993; Edwards, 2004). What is apparent, however, is that crime fictions comprise an arena within which contested meanings of gender, in the context of social change and conflict, are articulated and explored. In this respect, post-apocalyptic culture offers a rich resource, given its preoccupation with ideas of crisis, disorder and dislocation in the face of social, cultural and economic change. We shall turn now to consider the representation of gender and crime in such fictions, with a
view to gleaning insights into the underlying social concerns, anxieties and ideologies to which they give voice.

Crime, disorder and sexual violence

A notable and recurrent feature of post-apocalyptic fictions is the portrayal of crime in terms of sexual violence. In Chapter 2, I noted, for example, how *Mad Max* communicates the sadistic evil of the bikers through their gang rape of a young woman. Similarly, in *Time of the Wolf*, a girl is raped at knife-point in the camp run by Koslowski, while witnesses do nothing to intervene. In Stephen King's post-plague, horror novel *The Stand* (1978) (later filmed as a television mini-series) women are held captive by a group of male survivors, repeatedly raped, then killed or discarded when they are deemed no longer of interest. In the zombie apocalypse of *28 Days Later*, an injured bicycle courier (Jim) awakens in a London hospital to find the world in chaos. He meets-up with a young woman (Selena), a teenage girl (Hannah) and her father (Frank). The group hear an emergency radio broadcast from the military, instructing survivors to make their way northward to Manchester, where the army has established a refuge that is secure from the zombies. In the course of their journey, Frank is bitten and ‘turned’, leaving Jim and his two female companions to continue onwards to safety. They arrive at a military encampment which is under the command of Major West. Their initial relief is short-lived, as they realise that the broadcast message is a lure – West has promised that he will provide his (all male) troops with women for both sexual relief and as a means to repopulate the country. Selena and Hannah are forced to don elaborate ball gowns as a prelude to serial rape, while Jim is to be executed. Jim manages to escape, kills the women's captors and they flee. At the end of the film, Jim, Selena and Hannah are living in a remote rural cottage (reproducing the structure of the heterosexual nuclear family of father-mother-child) and look forward to the prospect of rescue as they are spotted by a jet flying overhead. Similar scenarios, in which women face the imminent threat of rape, are also a feature of a number of other post-apocalyptic fictions such as the TV shows *Falling Skies* (2011–present) and *Revolution* (2012–2014).

The near-ubiquity of gendered sexual violence in representations of post-catastrophe crime and disorder demands analysis. Why are the
risks of predation so often imagined in sexualised terms, and what might this tell us about contemporary ideas and anxieties about gender? The answer, I suggest, is complex and differentiated, with a number of divergent elements contributing to the kinds of representations noted above. Firstly, at the level of narrative organisation and characterisation, the figure of the rapist (like the child molester or serial killer) serves as a readily-available and familiar ‘shorthand’ through which evil is communicated; it enables the reader or audience to clearly identify the malign criminal against whom the hero or heroes must do battle. However, as Bufkin and Eschholz (2000: 1317) argue, the depiction of rape as the action solely of the ‘sadistic and disturbed’ stereotype of the sexual offender serves to misrepresent and obscure the underlying realities of sexual violence in society, not least the incidence of partner- and intimate-perpetrated offences (Meyer et al., 1998; Basile, 2002; Martin et al., 2007). In this respect, post-apocalyptic fictions are continuous with a broader range of crime-related films. However, we can suggest that in the imaginary of disaster, the risk of rape goes further than making straightforward recourse to the ‘sadistic and disturbed’ stereotype of the sexual offender. Rather, it is notable that the perpetrators are often ‘ordinary men’ who, prior to the collapse of law and order, would not have contemplated such behaviour; in other words, they have changed from conformity with, to contempt for, the law’s prohibition against sexual aggression and assault. I would suggest that what we see at work here is a deeply pessimistic and reductive understanding of human nature in general, and masculinity in particular. The underlying idea would appear to be that, in the absence of strict social controls and a system of sanctions and punishments, innate appetites will be unleashed, and moral imperatives or cultural codes will have little sway over predatory instincts. The prospect of widespread sexual predation following the collapse of law-and-order thus references a fear that without the presence of an authority which can compel conformity, we will revert to an atavistic state. The idea of a biologically-driven basis for sexual aggression has long enjoyed currency not only in popular prejudice, but also in legal and criminological thinking (underpinning, in effect, the kinds of arguments about victim incitement and precipitation noted earlier). If anything, such views, in a somewhat qualified form, have recently reappeared with renewed vigour. For example, Jones (1999: 831) laments that ‘law’s model of rape behaviour...has increasingly and heavily favoured pure social science theories of causation, uninformed by theories that would integrate social science and life science perspectives’.
He goes on to argue that ‘because rape was historically more likely to result in reproduction than any number of alternative behaviours, such as voluntary abstinence, it is plausible that behavioural biology has something to contribute to an understanding of rape’s complexities’ (833–834). Thornhill and Palmer (2000) propose a widely-debated and controversial thesis, that rape behaviour is explicable as an evolutionary adaptation, or side-effect of adaptations, related to reproductive drives. Such viewpoints give popular credence to the notion that violence (sexual and otherwise) is an ineradicable element of human nature, is not socially learned, and cannot be unlearned or ‘overwritten’ by cultural context – the threat is ever-present, barely contained, and the failure of law and order will unleash it on an unprecedented scale. In other words, the representation of rape as an exemplar of the post-disaster breakdown in law-and-order recuperates those ‘rape myths’ (Burt, 1980) that depict perpetrators as propelled by biologically dictated sex drives (Bohner et al., 2009).

A counter-veiling analysis of sexual violence in these texts centres not upon atavistic conceptions of masculinity and male sexuality, but upon the increased social and cultural visibility of rape as a crime problem that has emerged over recent decades. A historical examination of criminal justice policy and practice provides ample evidence of the marginalisation of sexual offences against women and children, including the denial of the very existence of such offences occurring within the space of the family. This social silence on the issues of rape was reflected in the fact that ‘prior to the 1970s, the mainstream UK and US media paid very little attention to rape’ (Kitzinger, 2009: 76). In popular fictions, such as Hollywood films, sexual violence was likewise marginalised as a crime problem:

Until recently, movies avoided taking sex crime as their text. The topic was long forbidden by Hollywood’s Production Code, which outlawed depiction of anything that might offend “common decency”... The topic was also socially taboo, and in any case no one (including criminologists) knew much about it. (Rafter, 2007: 407)

The concerted efforts of the Women’s Liberation Movement to make rape and sexual violence socially visible and demand that it be recognised as a serious and widespread social problem were effective in driving change not only in law and criminal justice, but also in shifting both the quantity and quality of media coverage that it received (Kitzinger, 2009: 76–77). Popular cultural discourses were likewise impacted by a broader social awareness of rape. The 1980s and 1990s, for example, saw a number of
films that explicitly took as their focus the inter-connected issues of rape and partner-violence. Amongst these, we can note *Shame* (1988) in which a female lawyer travelling through the Australian Outback helps a ‘date rape’ victim pursue justice, in the face of locals’ desire to cover-up the crime so as to protect the perpetrator, the son of a wealthy local businessman. Likewise, the Oscar-winning *The Accused* (1988) is a loose dramatisation of a real case in which a young woman is gang raped in a bar, while other patrons look on and applaud; with the help of a female prosecutor, she seeks justice against both the perpetrators and those onlookers who encouraged the assault. In *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), a woman who suffers protracted abuse from her husband is forced to fake her own death in order to escape him. We can suggest that the emergence of rape and sexual violence as themes in recent post-apocalyptic fictions echoes this broader trend in popular culture to recognise the scope and scale of the risks and harms that women daily encounter. The representation of perpetrators as ‘ordinary men’ likewise may go some way toward acknowledging the reality of rape that feminist activists and scholars have striven to bring light, namely that far from being committed by the ‘sadistic and disturbed’, it is in fact an integral element of patriarchal culture. The utilisation of a dystopian future setting to offer an allegorical critique of contemporary gender violence and oppression is tacked in an explicit feminist frame in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1990) (adapted from Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel of the same name). In the wake of an attack by Islamic terrorists that kills the US President and most of Congress, power is seized by a fundamentalist Christian movement that builds a totalitarian society based on theocratic principles. Central to this new order is the systematic subjugation of women, and its protagonist (Offred) is one a class of ‘concubines’ who are forced into sexual servitude. In sum, the representation of gendered sexual violence as commonplace in a chaotic future may be taken to reflect the heightened sensitivity to such issues that has belatedly become a part of mainstream public perceptions and criminal justice practice.

**Monstrous women: patriarchal fears, misogynistic fantasies and the ‘backlash’**

In the preceding discussion we have explored the ways that post-apocalyptic fictions envision women as victims of crime, a discourse that...
draws upon both hegemonic understandings of sexuality and violence, and elements of a counterhegemonic critique of gender relations in a patriarchal society. In this section we turn to examine a different theme, namely the figuration of women not as ‘at risk’ but as the sources of risk and danger that men are forced to confront when the familiar coordinates of the existing gendered order have been undermined.

As Creed (1986: 44) notes, ‘all human societies have conception of the monstrous feminine’ ranging from Medusa in ancient mythology to the devouring, acid-dripping and razor-toothed queen of the Alien movies, by way of Mother in Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory, Creed suggests that the fascination with the ‘monstrous feminine’ in popular culture expresses patriarchal culture’s horrified fascination with the ‘abject’ – that otherness which threatens meaning, identity and the coherence of the subject. Hence ‘abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject’ (45). By representing the feminine in terms of the dangerous, contaminating and destabilising, patriarchal society both articulates its conception of women as ‘less than’ men, and at the same time uses such representations as a coded justification for women’s subordination (the ‘unstable’, ‘uncontrolled’ and ‘irrational’ must be kept at bay in the name of reason, order and lawful authority). Analysis of this kind offers a fruitful avenue for unravelling the dynamics of gendered representation in popular culture (Russo, 1995; Grant (ed), 1996), and can be effectively applied to post-apocalyptic texts, especially if those texts are placed in the social, historical and cultural context of shifting and contested regimes of gender relations.

The first text that warrants examination here is the 1958 science-fiction ‘B movie’, Attack of the 50ft Woman. The titular woman is Nancy Archer, a wealthy heiress with a penchant for excessive drinking and psychological volatility (her philandering husband, Harry, reveals that she has recently been released from ‘the booby hatch’). While driving at night, in a state of inebriation, Nancy encounters an alien being that has arrived on Earth in a spacecraft. The alien exposes her to radiation, and she later grown into a giant. She is kept chained and drugged by doctors while they ponder how best to treat her. Nancy awakens, escapes her restraints, and goes in search of her unfaithful husband. First she tracks down and kills Harry’s latest girlfriend, Honey, and then Harry himself. At the end of the film, Nancy is killed by armed sheriffs. Its obvious allusion to the
radiation-induced mutation aside, *Attack of the 50ft Woman* exemplifies the culturally reactionary climate of 1950s America in respect of gender relations. While World War II saw massively increased female participation in the labour force, including significant inroads into male dominated roles in industrial production and engineering, these gains were rapidly reversed in peacetime (Anderson, 1981). The ensuing decade saw the assertion of an ideology that sought to firmly re-inscribe women into a gendered division of labour based upon domesticated roles as wives, mother and carers. Fulfilling such roles was closely linked to notions of patriotism and the defence of the American family in the context of the Cold War and fear of infiltration by ‘un-American’ forces (May, 2008: 94–97). The character of Nancy embodies the fear of female non-conformity with the strictures of conservative ideology. It is Nancy, not her husband Harry, who ‘holds the purse-strings’ in their relationship, by virtue of her $50 million inheritance; her hard-drinking lifestyle is at odds with idealised images of a demure, restrained and well-behaved femininity. Of course, her aggressive stance towards Harry, and his serial infidelities, is linked to long-standing stereotypes of the emotionally volatile and neurotic woman. Her newly-acquired monstrous stature and physical strength symbolise the danger she presents to conventional gender roles which serve to keep women in positions of social subordination, and she must inevitably be destroyed so as to preserve the existing gender order. It is also worth noting that the scenario of *Attack of the 50ft Woman* is knowingly revisited and satirised to great effect some 50 years later, in the animated feature *Monsters vs. Aliens* (2009). The film’s lead character, Susan, is about to marry a narcissistic and self-absorbed TV weatherman, Derek, and adopt the role of dutiful wife in order to help him achieve his journalistic ambitions. As the ceremony is about to commence Susan is struck by a meteorite containing a mysterious element (‘quantonium’) that makes her grow to huge size, as well as granting her immense strength. She is captured by the military and incarcerated in an underground facility alongside other ‘monsters’ which have been deemed too dangerous to roam free. However, when aliens invade, and conventional military responses are ineffective, Susan and her fellow captives are called upon to save the Earth. In doing so, the monsters become heroes, and Susan discovers a sense of self-confidence, agency, independence and purpose. At the end of the film, she rejects Derek (whom she now realises is ‘a jerk’) and heads off with her fellow monster-heroes to confront a new threat that is facing the planet. The ‘50 foot
woman’ of the new millennium answers the patriarchal ideology of the 1950s through a feminist inversion of the ‘monstrous feminine’, turning abjection into heroism.

The drawing together of anti-communism and patriarchal anxieties about gender relations is not confined to the US context, and is also apparent in cultural productions emanating from the other side of the ‘Iron Curtain’. Especially telling is the post-apocalyptic Polish comedy, *Sexmission* (1984). Two men (Max and Albert) take part in a scientific hibernation experiment, and wake up in the year 2044. They find themselves in a post-nuclear world where humans reside underground so as to escape the devastated surface. This subterranean society is comprised entirely of women, all men having apparently died-off due to a particular form of radiation. The all-female society is an authoritarian feminist regime, and reproduction is achieved through artificial means. Max and Albert are neither welcome nor wanted, and face the prospect of either execution or ‘naturalisation’ – being subjected to a sex-change. They escape to the Earth’s surface and discover that the world is entirely habitable; men were not killed-off by radiation but subjected to forced ‘naturalisation’ by the feminist regime, so that men could be eradicated once and for all. With the help of two scientists that they have seduced, Max and Albert sabotage the regime’s reproduction facilities, ensuring that henceforth male babies will be born. With men restored to society, ‘normal life’ (the heterosexual order) can now be rebuilt upon the surface, and the reign of feminist totalitarianism overthrown. The film ends with a close-up of a newly-born, male baby’s penis – a triumphal phallic symbol of defiance against the emasculating and castrating forces of the female state.

The ideological dynamics of *Sexmission* need to be understood in its social and political context. The early 1980s marked the period in which Poland’s communist regime came under concerted challenge from the independent trade union Solidarity (Solidarność), and by 1981 it had been banned by the government and martial law imposed so as to suppress the burgeoning social protest movement. The film uses allegory as a means to satirise and condemn the authoritarianism of the communist state, substituting female domination for the domination exercised by state socialism. In the Polish context this allegory is readily identifiable for audiences as, according to Agnieszka Graff (2005: 4): ‘our recent history has been told through an extended gendered metaphor. State socialism was imagined as a totalitarian matriarchy with no private sphere and no intimacy, a world of castrated men and overbearing
women’. She goes on to note the close association of anti-communist sentiments with the yearning to restore a ‘traditional’, patriarchal social order which had been challenged by socialism: ‘transition to democracy has established itself in collective consciousness as the re-masculinization of national culture, supposedly feminized by state socialism’ (Ibid). It is worth noting here that the foundation of the Solidarity movement was itself deeply connected with the Catholic Church, and gave voice in part to a ‘theological nationalism’ that juxtaposed ‘Catholic values’ to those promulgated by the socialist state (Osa, 1997: 77–78). What has emerged in the post-communist era is indeed a ‘new exclusionary mythology’ that includes ‘a condescending, patriarchal treatment of women’ (Tismaneanu, 1998: 32). Since the end of state socialism, women’s rights in Poland have suffered successive setbacks, as an alliance of the conservative right and the Catholic Church have introduced, for example, sweeping restriction on abortion rights (Holc, 2004; Graf, 2007); the country has also seen falling rates of female labour force participation, underpinned by a resurgence of conservative gender attitudes that re-inscribe women into ‘traditional’ roles (Pollert, 2003). Bearing this context and history in mind, Sexmission can be seen to clearly transcode anti-feminist sentiments, using the post-apocalyptic scenario as a stage upon which patriarchal hostility to women’s place in the political, public and economic sphere can be expressed; sentiments that have flourished in the post-transition era to the detriment of women’s rights and opportunities (Occhipinti, 1996).

In Chapter 2, I noted how the cultural politics of Hollywood cinema shifted rightwards in the 1970s and 1980s, expressing a reactive hostility to the claims and gains made in previous decades by a variety of social protest and emancipation movements. The conservative discourse on crime and disorder included within its ambit a clear gendering of risk and danger. Notably, for example, the single, emancipated professional woman appears in films such as Fatal Attraction (1987) as a deranged and murderous siren who threatens the integrity and sanctity of the heterosexual family (not to mention brutally curtailing the lifespan of the family’s beloved pets). Babener (1992: 25) argues that ‘these films become cautionary tales about life in Reagan’s America, paranoid fantasies about the threat to patriarchal authority posed by weakened manhood, female sexuality and feminist empowerment in the volatile 1980s’. Indeed, this cultural trend had already been prefigured in the 1970s, with the rise of a nascent ‘new right’ and an Evangelical ‘moral majority’ that was
preoccupied with the reassertion of moral order and regulation, with a particular fixation upon women’s sexual behaviour (David, 1982). This cultural movement laid the groundwork for what later emerged as a significant ‘backlash’ against the mainstreaming of feminism (Faludi, 1991), with its concerted opposition to abortion rights, The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and sex education in schools (Pohli, 1983: 552–553).

The apocalyptic imaginary in the period of rising cultural conservatism likewise recuperates the emerging backlash to feminism in its depiction of monstrous women and a post-catastrophe world in which men are an ‘endangered species’ and are subjugated by female authority. A particularly misogynistic vision of gender relations emerges in the 1975 post-apocalyptic film *A Boy and His Dog.* Set in 2024, after World War IV, it follows an 18-year-old boy (Vic) and his intelligent, telepathic dog (Blood) as they scavenge for survival through an American wasteland. They have a symbiotic relationship, in which Vic provides food for Blood, and the dog in return hunts down women for Vic to rape. They meet a young woman, Quilla, with whom Vic has sex, and she then entices him to join her Downunder, the subterranean city where she lives. He learns that he has been brought there to help impregnate its women. However, this is performed using mechanical sperm extraction and artificial insemination, and once men have achieved their quota of fertilizations they are sentenced to death, a process known as ‘farming out’. Quilla declares her love for Vic, and chooses to escape with him to the surface. Once there, they find Blood starving, and Quilla wants Vic to leave him behind so they can continue onwards together. At the end of the film, we see the boy and his dog at a campfire, and Blood indicates that Vic has chosen to feed Quilla to him so that he can live on. As novelist and critic Joanna Russ (1976) notes, the film borrows the time-honoured trope of a good man seduced and undone by a scheming, wicked woman. However, it extrapolates from contemporary hostility towards women in general and feminism in particular in order to present a vision of society in which it is men, not women, who are used, abused, and killed for sexual purposes by conniving females. Vic’s willingness to commit rape without compunction or conscience is presented as the simple exercise of his natural instinct for survival, equivalent to scavenging for food. In contrast, the true violation is Downunder’s use of men for reproductive purposes while denying them their ‘right’ to sexual gratification. Ultimately, the film is what Russ calls a ‘homosexist’ text, one that combines sexist contempt for women and their rights, and
a homo-social fantasy of comradeship that uses women as (both metaphorically and literally) *meat*. As repellant as it is, *A Boy and His Dog* is merely an extreme articulation of the hostility to women’s emancipation that percolates through a number of subsequent post-apocalyptic texts.

Fictions such as *Sexmission* and *A Boy and His Dog* express a dualism that lies at the heart of patriarchy’s construction of the feminine-as-abject – woman is both the object of desire and fear. This is apparent in the genre’s ambivalence towards scenarios in which the existing sexual structure of society is disrupted. From the viewpoint of patriarchal fantasy, there is a heterosexual ‘utopian’ anticipation of a world in which men are few, women are plentiful, and there is the promise of unrestricted opportunities for sexual pleasure. In *World Without End* (1958), discussed in Chapter 3, the time-travelling astronauts are amazed and gratified that the subterranean society of survivors is characterised by a plenitude of nubile and alluring women, and rather effete, ‘bloodless’ and impotent men. Consequently, these robust, ‘red-blooded males’ from modern America find themselves presented with a cornucopia of enraptured women; the eldest member of the crew proclaims his astonished delight that he, ‘a grandfather!’; is being pursued by these young beauties. This same fantasy scenario is followed through to its sexually explicit endpoint in the Mad Max-themed porn movie, *The Load Warrior* (1987); in a post-atomic world, Moore is the only remaining source of uncontaminated sperm, inevitably leading to a frantic competition for his ‘services’ from a succession of lusty women. Underpinning such plots is, we can suggest, a desire to ‘turn back the clock’ on social and cultural change to an imagined era in which women’s primary role was to provide sexual gratification for men. Yet this fantasy is also frustrated by an anxiety of role-reversal, a future in which female self-assertion and sexual aggression threatens to displace men from their ‘rightful’ position as the superordinate gender. It is noteworthy that post-apocalyptic narratives often position women as objects over which men must compete so as to reclaim them into a structure of heterosexual relations, one which binds women within relations of monogamy and sexual exclusivity. In *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), Benson feels compelled to kill Ralph so as to secure Sarah for himself. In *Captive Women* (1952), a post-nuclear New York becomes the site of a struggle between the resident tribes and invading outsiders who come to Manhattan to ‘steal their women’. In *Last Woman on Earth* (1960), an unspecified apocalypse leaves only three survivors – a married couple (Evelyn and Harold) and their
lawyer (Martin). After an initial period in which they are preoccupied with the demands of material survival, a conflict soon develops between Harold and Martin over Evelyn, which becomes the plot’s focus (the poster for the film proclaims, ‘They fought for the Ultimate Prize!’ and is accompanied by images of a semi-naked Evelyn, her breasts and genitals barely covered by a tattered sheet, and the two men who are stripped to the waist and locked in combat with knives). As the struggle between the men intensifies, Martin points out that, in the present conditions, Harold’s marriage certificate is meaningless – in other words, the institutionalised and law-bound structures that once ‘gave’ Evelyn to Harold are defunct, and she can be ‘taken’ by another. The film ends with Martin dying of stab wounds inflicted by Harold – he and Evelyn are, tellingly, in a church as he expires – the site of an unconsummated ‘marriage’ that would have sealed his ‘claim’ over her. This apprehensive and conflict-ridden contest over women-as-property is also apparent in more recent fictions. For example, in *The Walking Dead*, the erstwhile friendship between Rick and Shane turns to animosity because of Rick’s wife, Lori. Thinking Rick dead, Lori starts a sexual relationship with Shane, only to have Rick reappear to ‘reclaim’ his wife and son. Shane, wanting Rick’s family as his own, becomes increasingly hostile, and the ensuing feud with Rick ends in Shane’s death. In this regard, as Nuckolls (2014: 102) points out, *The Walking Dead* offers a conservative cultural critique that is concerned, inter alia, with the ‘restoration of traditional marriage’ and the salvation of the nuclear family. In sum, the genre’s depiction of heterosexual, monogamous relations in crisis resonates with a broader critique of social and cultural change offered by conservatives, who often present women’s liberation and feminism as the sources of a crisis that is undermining the family, morality, society and masculinity. As conservative historian and philosopher Paul Gottfried (2001) laments:

...the change of women’s role, from being primarily mothers to self-defined professionals, has been a social disaster that continues to take its toll on the family...the movement of women into commerce and politics may be seen as...the descent by increasingly disconnected individuals into social chaos.

This sense of a feminist-induced ‘disaster’ and ‘chaos’ is encoded and replayed in post-apocalyptic discourse, which articulates both a fear of changes in gender roles and hierarchies, and looks backwards toward the restoration of patriarchal authority, the heteronormative family, and female subservience to male needs as ‘wife and mother’.
Post-apocalyptic heroines: action, empowerment and liberation after catastrophe?

Thus far we have considered the inter-connections between post-apocalyptic fictions’ discourse on gender, risk and violence in light of patriarchal and culturally conservative reactions to social change, most especially those wrought by feminism and women’s emancipation. However, to reiterate a crucial point, the domain of cultural production is seldom seamless or hegemonic when it comes to ideological articulations. Rather, it is variegated and contradictory, reflecting a range of social sensibilities and standpoints. In this final section of the chapter, we will explore how ideas of women’s empowerment and agency are reflected and represented in the genre’s depictions of female heroism in the face of crime and disorder.

As I suggested in Chapter 1, post-apocalyptic fictions can be situated at the intersection of a number of genres, especially those of science fiction, action and crime. It has been argued that, across these genres, we can discern a significant shift in recent decades when it comes to gendered representation. Traditionally, science fiction, crime and action films (as well as TV shows and novels) have been centred upon male protagonists, with women either absent, consigned to the narrative margins, or depicted variously in terms of vulnerable victims, dangerous distractions or sexual conquests. However, as numerous cultural analysts have suggested, these gender stereotypes have come under challenge with women incrementally figuring in roles that are more central, active, and varied, including the presence of female heroes who are significantly more empowered than their cultural predecessors (Tasker, 1998; Brown, 2004; Gauntlett, 2008). For example, in the crime genre, we see the ubiquitous male detective joined by complex, rounded, and competent female leads – television crime dramas such as *Prime Suspect* (1991–2006), *Silent Witness* (1996–), *The Killing* (2007–2012), and *The Bridge* (2013–2014) serve as conspicuous (and commercially successful) examples. Likewise, science fiction and action-adventure films have featured numerous female heroes who either usurp the traditional role of hyper-masculine protagonist, or rework such characters into new, gender-differentiated directions – obvious examples include characters such as Ripley in the *Alien* series (1979–1997), Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (2001–2003) and *Æon Flux* (2005). Similar patterns of reconfiguration can be discerned in at least some popular post-apocalyptic cultural productions.
The most obvious and straightforward depiction of post-apocalyptic, female heroism appears in the *Resident Evil* series of films (2002–2012). Based upon a hit video-game series of the same name, the plot deals with a zombie plague that is the result of bioengineering experiments undertaken by the ruthless Umbrella Corporation. Across five films, the Corporation, and the zombies, are given battle by Alice (Milla Jovovich), a former security officer for the Corporation who now opposes them. Alice is assisted in her quest to defeat the Corporation and save humanity by a number of female soldiers and agents, such as Rain, Ada and Jill Valentine. What is notable about the films is the extent to which female characters displace men as the primary action figures, and it is they who carry the responsibility for challenging evil in the post-apocalyptic world. However, as with many such popular renditions of female action heroes, there is a clear ambivalence at play, with the characters portrayed in stereotypically feminised ways – young, slender, beautiful and often attired in skin-tight, figure-hugging body suits or revealing dresses (the series’ star, Jovovich, is internationally renowned as a fashion ‘supermodel’ as well as actress). It doesn’t take a great deal of analytical acuity to surmise that the representation of female heroism here is paired with a very conventional sexualisation that appeals to the films’ overwhelmingly heterosexual, male audience. Much more interesting in this regard is the character of Sarah Connor who features in *The Terminator* films (1984–1991) as well as a spin-off TV series (2008–2009). Over the first two films in the franchise, we see Sarah transform herself from frightened and hunted girl to a strong, determined and capable woman. She is unrelenting in her quest – firstly to derail the upcoming nuclear war (‘Judgement Day’), and later to protect her son John and equip him to act as leader in the inevitable war with sentient machines that are bent on eradicating humanity. More than simply a female cypher for the traditional male warrior, Connor’s character offers a critique of patriarchal masculinity, violence and war. Even when she thinks it is necessary, she is unable to bring herself to kill another person. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), she speaks passionately from the standpoint of woman and mother to condemn the male fixation with technologically-driven death and destruction: ‘Fucking men like you built the hydrogen bomb. Men like you thought it up. You think you’re so creative. You don’t know what it’s like to really create something; to create a life; to feel it growing inside you. All you know how to create is death...’ In this respect, Sarah Connor is the first genuine female (and feminist) hero of apocalyptic fiction, one
who offers an indictment of the patriarchal social order and the destructive military-industrial complex it has created.

A more nuanced depiction of post-apocalyptic female heroism, breaking with the action figure motif, is offered in the film *Children of Men* (2006), adapted from P.D. James’ novel of the same name. The world of 2027 is plagued with violence, terrorism and ecologically-induced catastrophe. However, even worse is the fact that, for unknown reasons, the human species has been rendered infertile – no human baby has been born for 18 years, and a slow extinction seems all-but inevitable. Britain has become an authoritarian, militarised society, and those who arrive from outside seeking safety from the ravages of war and starvation (refugees, or ‘fugees’ as they are colloquially known) are criminalised. Those ‘fugees’ who survive brutal violence and random executions are herded in camps where they live in squalor, awaiting deportation. A disillusioned radical activist (Theo) is asked for assistance by an anti-government revolutionary group, led by his former wife, Julian. They want his aid helping Kee – a young, black woman and refugee – escape the country. Theo reluctantly agrees to help, both for the money on offer and because of his feelings for Julian. However, when the attempt to smuggle Kee to safety results in bloodshed (including Julian’s death), Theo wishes to withdraw and return home to London. At this point Kee reveals her importance – she is in fact pregnant, and as such stands as possibly humanity’s last hope for survival. The goal is to get her out of Britain by boat and unite her with the Human Project, a group of scientists working on a way to reverse the affliction of infertility. *Children of Men* uses the post-apocalyptic scenario to offer a critique of contemporary Western ideologies, politics and prejudices (Brown, 2013). Kee is the ‘abject’ – the black woman and foreigner who is deemed worthless at best and a contamination of the nation at worst. Like her fellow ‘fugees’, she is considered disposable, subject to annihilation without recourse to rights or legal protections. She is, in the term coined by Aas (2011) a ‘crimmigrant’, a transnationally mobile human subject who is reduced to a criminal object, something to be controlled, captured and expelled in the name of national ‘purity’; yet is precisely with this gendered, racialised and criminalised ‘other’ that the future of the advanced industrial world now rests. As Sparling (2014: 161) puts it, she ‘represent[s] the irony of a form of national imaginary that will soon become obsolete, for its only hope for a viable future resides in that which it rejects’. Through Kee’s quite determination to save herself and her baby, for the
good of humanity, female heroism is recast through a critique of a political culture that, in today’s world, offers women like herself nothing but injustice, neglect and rejection.

Before concluding our discussion, we can consider here a final post-apocalyptic text that also offers a critique of the patriarchal social order, but which does so from the standpoint of women’s collective capacities for action, rather than in terms of individualised heroism. Brian K. Vaughan’s hit comic book series *Y: The Last Man* (2003–2008) starts from a fairly familiar premise, namely that an unspecified virus has killed all mammals carrying the Y chromosome. The only surviving human male is young man named Yorick Brown. In the wake of the plague, society is thrown into chaos – not least because in the existing social order most positions of power and professional knowledge had been monopolised by men, and women must struggle to rapidly learn how to discharge those occupations from which they have found themselves long excluded. The United States has to look to the Secretary of Agriculture for its next President, as she is the highest-ranking member of the federal government left alive, all other roles having been captured by men. Yorick himself is anything but heroic – a callow, sometime shallow, and physically unimpressive specimen. Yet valuable specimen he is, as he holds the key to any possibility for human reproduction. Across the ensuing adventures and misadventures, he is sought by various groups and nations who wish to study and use him so as to find a way to ensure their own long-term survival. He is largely incapable of providing for his own safety, and this responsibility falls to a number of female characters such as the clandestine government operative Agent 355, the Israeli commando Alter, and Yorick’s mother, a former Congresswomen. The dilemma of humanity’s long term survival is ultimately resolved through the development of cloning technology. In an epilogue, set some 60 years later, we see the kind of society than women have built – if not a utopia, then certainly much better than the male-dominated system that preceded it. The last vestiges of patriarchal authority have disappeared – upon encountering a man for the first time, a young woman calls him ‘sir’, then says ‘No, wait. ‘Sir.’ Sir, right? I’ve never actually used that word before’ (Wolk, 2008). In the wake of patriarchy, there are no more ‘sires’ and no superordinate and subordinate genders.

* * *
Across this chapter, we have explored the representation of gender in post-apocalyptic fictions, seeking to unravel the ways that they handle its interconnection with issues of crime, risk, danger, victimisation, injustice and heroism. I have argued that the ideological underpinnings of these texts are closely linked to contemporaneous social and cultural developments, not least the conflicts over social change brought about the women’s struggles for emancipation, and patriarchy’s reactive efforts to constrain women within its traditional gender order. In the final chapter, we return to the beginnings of our discussion in Chapter 1, to examine themes of social renewal, rebirth and redemption after the apocalypse, which borrow heavily from the utopian and messianic root of Western apocalypticism.
5

The Utopian Apocalypse: Crime, Justice and Redemption

Abstract: This chapter explores the ambiguous, double-sided character of the apocalyptic imaginary of crime, seeing it as welcome destruction of a flawed and failing social order that cannot secure justice. Rather than envisaging disaster as the realisation of a dystopian future of violence and predation, the ‘end of world’ serves as the gateway to creating a more moral society, one in which law satisfies victims’ need to punish offenders and see exemplary justice delivered. Drawing upon the original messianic roots of apocalyptic discourse, popular fictions express yearnings for a heroic carrier of frustrated hopes that the wicked will be brought to account for their crimes and the just will be rewarded with redemption.

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Over the preceding three chapters we have explored the projection or transcoding of contemporary concerns about crime, law and disorder into the space of post-apocalyptic fictions. These texts typically articulate a sense of crisis brought about by social, political, technological and cultural change; from the breakdown of norms about ‘proper’ social behaviour, through racialised and gendered fantasies of danger and otherness, to the dark shadows of imminent global catastrophe and thermonuclear conflict, post-apocalyptic fictions offer a dystopian vision of the future, drawing upon the tensions and anxieties that configure the present state of Western societies. In this sense, these texts belong to what Elisabeth Rosen (2008: xv) calls the ‘neo-apocalyptic’; whereas ‘the main intent of the traditional story of apocalypse was to provide its audience with hope of a better world’ more recent secularised narratives comprise ‘a literature of pessimism... positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends’. However, this dystopian sensibility is not exhaustive, and at the heart of post-apocalyptic discourse we find a striking ambivalence. Recuperating and reflecting the religious origins of the apocalypse, the genre also mobilises disaster and catastrophe into a seemingly counter-intuitive utopianism, one that sees in the end of society as-we-know-it the possibility of transcending evil, punishing wickedness, and redeeming society from its own failings. In this final chapter, we shall explore this utopian and redemptive thread in post-apocalyptic popular culture, and consider its ‘answers’ to the problem of crime as a social evil.

‘A truer kind of justice’: the apocalypse as the return of righteousness

In Chapter 1, I suggested firstly that the religious origins of apocalyptic thinking are inextricably linked to a sense of moral purposiveness – the advent of all-encompassing catastrophe is seen not as accidental or random, but imbued with divine meaning. The apocalypse comes as a reckoning in which the problem of evil will be answered and the yearning for justice in the face of oppression will finally be satisfied. Secondly, I argued that in the modern era a rational, scientific and ‘disenchanted’ worldview appears to dispense with divine purpose and a teleological reading of history. However, despite eschewing explicitly religious beliefs about the movement of history, modern thought nevertheless retains a
conviction that a redemptive logic may still be at work in the development of society. We find at work here the logic of substitution identified by Löwith (1949) – the substantive religious or theological content of apocalyptic eschatology may be rejected, yet its formal structure (the notion of a logic or direction at work in the unfolding of history) is nevertheless retained. In this sense, even in the modern apocalyptic imaginary, the visitation of catastrophe upon society happens for a reason, and in that reason lies the possibility of redemptive justice. Such justice appears as a corrective for the evils visited by the powerful upon the powerless, and offers a moral settlement in which the scales will finally be balanced.

In the Judeo-Christian figuration of the apocalypse, the end of the world may be seen as the inevitable consequence of humanity’s refusal to abide by the edicts of conduct dictated by revelation (the basis of Augustine’s theodicy); by choosing to sin, evil and injustice are ushered into the world, and a divine reckoning for the wicked is thereby assured. While the contemporary cultural imaginary seldom makes explicit recourse to religious narratives of the apocalypse, it does so implicitly by recasting the visitation of catastrophe as a secularised variant of Pauline dictum that ‘death is the wages of sin’ (MacGregor, 1961). It is noteworthy, for example, that in recent apocalyptic fictions all-encompassing disaster is so often attributed to malign motivations and wilful ignorance on the part of the powerful. As Ostwalt (1998) puts it ‘In these contemporary, cinematic apocalyptic scenarios, human action (often based on stupidity or greed) directly or indirectly leads to an apocalyptic disaster; therefore, human beings supplant cosmic forces as the initiators of the apocalypse ...’ For example, it is the greed of corporations intent on ‘playing God’ by developing dangerous technologies that unleashes a plague of zombies in the Resident Evil films, and it is the search for ever-more destructive viral weapons by the government that is responsible for similar events in 28 Days Later. It is the hubris of our scientists and political masters that drives us to nuclear Armageddon in so many post-apocalyptic narratives. Such sequences of cause-and-effect closely mirror Judeo-Christian exhortations to repent and refrain from evil, lest it be answered by fate in the form of terrible punishment.

A further element in the interconnection between secularised notions of evil and its tragic social consequences is the depiction of catastrophe as a form of corrective justice in which we see a reversal in the relations between powerful oppressors and those powerless people whom they have subjected to suffering. In Chapter 4, we encountered the redemption
of the First World’s abject ‘other’, the ‘crimmigrant’ whose supposed worthlessness is transmuted by disaster into the ultimate value – the possibility of life itself. The story of Kee, the heroine in *Children of Men*, offers a clear, if secularised reframing of the biblical pronouncement that come the apocalypse ‘the last shall be first, and the first last’ (Matthew 20: 16) – ‘an eschatological reversal motif’ (Meadors, 1985: 305) in which the earthly persistence of injustice is transcended at the end of history. This same notion of reversal is at play in the Hollywood apocalyptic blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). A scientist strives in vain to convince world leaders that human-induced climate change is about to cause a catastrophic change to the earth’s weather systems. When the inevitable disaster arrives, the Northern hemisphere is instantly catapulted into a new Ice Age; North America, like Europe, is turned into an Arctic tundra upon which nothing can grow and in which humans cannot survive. Some of the film’s most symbolically-laden (if rather didactic) scenes take place at the US-Mexican border. This border has served for so long as the line at which human worth and worthlessness are demarcated by the rich and powerful; those who are undesirable and alien are kept at bay by fences, barbed wire and armed patrols. However, ecological catastrophe results in a dramatic reversal of fortunes, as once-wealthy and privileged Americans flee the devastation southwards, where Central and South America now constitute a ‘land of plenty’ – warm, habitable and capable of providing food and shelter. Americans mass at the border, plead desperately for passage, and attempt to bribe Mexican border guards with all that remains of their worldly possessions. It is only when the US President offers to ‘forgive all Latin American debt’ that Mexico opens its border and agrees to host the American government-in-exile. As a humbled President declares: ‘Not only Americans but people all around the globe are now guests in the nations we once called the Third World. In our time of need, they have taken us in and sheltered us...’ *The Day After Tomorrow* draws upon a number of inter-related themes that derive from Judeo-Christian eschatology – the attribution of responsibility for catastrophe to human wrong-doing or ‘sin’, a reversal of relations between the oppressors and the oppressed, and ultimately the possibility of building a better and more just world through forgiveness and reconciliation.

The motif of eschatological reversal is similarly apparent in Neill Blomkamp’s science fiction film *Elysium* (2013). The socio-economic and political setting of the film is distinctly dystopian in character,
and references familiar themes of a society trammelled with extremes of exploitation, exclusion and injustice. Taking place in 2154, Earth has become polluted and over-populated, and its inhabitants suffer lives of dangerous and back-breaking labour (if they are fortunate enough to find employment at all), and struggle to access the bare essentials of food, housing and crude medical care. In contrast is a super-wealthy, elite life in luxurious isolation on Elysium, a terraformed space station in Earth's orbit. Its citizens enjoy the best of everything, including access to medical technologies that can cure any disease and prolong life. Elysium is fortified and bristling with weaponry, and any attempt by the Earth's desperate populace to reach the station by shuttle is met with destruction. The plot follows a former car thief-turned-factory worker, Max, who lives in the slums of Los Angeles. After being poisoned by radiation in an industrial accident, and with only five days to live, he strives to make his way to Elysium, where he can be cured using the advanced Med-Bay technology available there. In his ensuing struggle Max and his companions overthrow the masters of Elysium, and all earth-dwellers are granted citizenship. The film ends with a fleet of ships leaving for earth, bearing the medical technology and supplies that will finally give its inhabitants the same life chances of health and well-being that had been exclusive to Elysium's elite. Beneath its dystopian veneer, Elysium clearly articulates a utopian apocalypticism. Through catastrophe and crisis, the daily realities of suffering and injustice are transcended, the mighty and powerful are 'brought low', and a new social order is inaugurated in which the oppressed are redeemed and inherit not only Earth, but also space. The film also maps its battle between good-versus-evil, and oppressed-versus oppressors, onto the contemporary politics of exclusion and immigration. Elysium stands allegorically for modern America, a nation which protects itself and its privileges from the impoverished masses who strive to illegally reach it in search of a better life. Elysium's ethno-racial coordinates are likewise apparent. While the primary dialogue is delivered in English, the film's linguistic mis-en-scene (the background language spoken in the L.A. slums) is Spanish; while the hero is portrayed by a white actor (Matt Damon), his name is – Max da Costa – is unambiguously Latino. Indeed, the film's combination of socio-political critique and ethno-cultural specificity invites an obvious association with the utopian imperatives of Liberation Theology – a movement that emerged across Latin America in response to the experience of poverty and exploitation, and which links the struggle
for emancipation to an interpretation of the Gospels that emphasises the special place reserved for the poor as the elect (Gutierrez, 1970; Berryman, 1987).

If *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Elysium* offer a redemptive narrative of apocalyptic renewal based upon humanist visions of reciprocity, solidarity and mutual care, other post-apocalyptic fictions move in a different direction. A recurrent theme in many such texts is the response to crime and violation through the embrace of a retributive form of justice, one that answers the problem of evil through a turn to vengeance. Vengeance is presented as an elemental response to violence and violation – in the words of Adam Smith ‘As every man doth, so shall it be done to him, and retaliation seems to be the great law that is dictated to us by nature’ (Smith in Rieder, 1984: 131). However, it is not simply enough to see this as a spontaneous and destructive instinct, as claimed for example by Erich Fromm in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) (Marongiu and Newman, 2012: 2). There is, it can be suggested, a moral quality underpinning vengeance, which ‘consists of its implicit wish to restore symmetry to imbalanced social exchange’ and as such ‘embodies an embryonic form of law’ (Rieder, 1984: 133). In other words, vengeance takes shape in response to the experience of injustice and derives its symbolic and moral appeal from its corrective impetus. Yet, as I suggested in Chapter 1, it is precisely such moral emotions that are rendered illegitimate in modern regimes of law, where punishment is monopolised by the state and subject to a rational calculus that carefully weighs a range of factors in its determination. Popular disenchantment with this abstracted, deliberative and allegedly ineffective response to crime underpins a cultural imaginary that looks to vengeance as a means to restore the immediate and visceral connection between evil and its condemnation. This imperative is apparent, for example, in dystopian and proto-apocalyptic contributions to the superhero genre. In Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* (2005) Bruce Wayne’s journey to becoming the Batman starts when, as a child, he witnesses his parents being gunned down in a street robbery. Gotham city is depicted as mired in crime and violence, and the forces of law and order are at best ineffective, and at worst compromised by systematic corruption, serving at the behest of the very criminals whom they are supposed to apprehend. The message of the film is that crime is rife, and the justice system cannot or will not offer a brutalised citizenry any meaningful protection. It is this perpetual failure to deliver justice that both explains and legitimates the
extra-legal intervention offered by the superhero. The Batman embodies the principle of elemental justice, meting out direct and brutal physical punishment to offenders, in an attempt to save a society in crisis through a restoration of the fundamental moral order.

The post-apocalyptic hero as the instrument of vengeful justice is a commonplace figure in popular fictions of the 1980s and 1990s – precisely the period which sees a growing sense of cultural crisis and pessimism about law and order:

By far the most significant and dominant generic movement of this apocalyptic genre is the emergence of the... hero mythology of the 1980s... interested in conveying the survivors’ heroic acts of justice, reprisal or vengeance... what little fabric of community remains is constantly threatened by rampaging bands of marauders, challenged only by self-righteous individuals and occasionally by smaller, organized groups. They are the Warriors, Terminators, Exterminators, Equalizers, Hunters and Gladiators of the post-apocalyptic future. (Broderick, 1996: 268)

In Chapter 2, we explored the ‘crisis of law-and-order’ through the lens of the iconic post-apocalyptic road movie Mad Max. The character of Max embodies the appeal of retributive justice – eschewing the bounds of a legal system that is seemingly ‘broken’ he instead makes recourse to an intuitive economy of punishment. His acts of vengeance mirror perfectly the crimes to which they respond – just as his partner and friend Goose is trapped in a car and burned alive, so the perpetrator (Johnny the Boy) meets with exactly the same fate. Across the slew of subsequent films inspired by Mad Max, we see a kind of fantastic theatre in which crime and violation are enacted precisely so that the satisfactions of retribution can be vicariously experienced by an audience that yearns for a direct and immediate response to the existence of evil. For example, the post-apocalyptic exploitation film 2020: Texas Gladiators (1982) luxuriates in a staging a whole sequence of brutal rape scenes (starting with the gang rape of a nun) so that the perpetrators can then be justifiably killed by the movie’s heroes. In Cyborg (1989) the cure for a devastating plague is at stake, but its anti-hero, Gibson, is driven not by concern for the future of humanity but his imperative to avenge himself against the man who killed his lover. Such texts in effect welcome the apocalyptic destruction of society, so that it can be replaced ‘with an archaic mythology steeped in heroic acts’:

Virtually all advocate a reinforcing of the symbolic order of the status quo by maintaining conservative social regimes of patriarchal law (and
lore). In so doing, they articulate a desire for (if not celebrate) the fantasy of...Armageddon as the anticipated war that will annihilate the oppressive burdens of post-modern life... (Broderick, 1996: 269–270)

It is undoubtedly true that a conservative and reactionary ethos plays a role in the popular embrace of the apocalyptic. Nevertheless, we must appreciate the powerful appeal of such scenarios which transcends the conventional demarcations of left- and right-wing politics. The utopian fantasy offered by the post-apocalyptic imaginary activates a fundamental ambivalence about modern societies’ answer to the problem evil. While the institutions and codifications of a rational society require a cool, considered, impersonal and balanced response to crime and predation, these fail to resonate at the level of deeply-felt, moral emotions; emotions that incline us to see crime, as a problem of evil, as more than simply a matter of the ‘privation of the good’, an absence that can be rectified by proper social, economic and political policy. Rather, crime activates a much more immediate sense of evil as something tangible and substantial (or ‘radical’, in Kant’s terminology), and which necessitates repudiation, censure and retaliation. It is precisely to such moral emotions that post-apocalyptic fantasies of retributive justice and vengeance speak.

**Utopia, redemption and the new messiah**

In the preceding section I have argued, firstly, that alongside the dystopian anticipation of social breakdown, there exists within popular post-apocalyptic discourse a clear strand of utopianism, one that anticipates and relishes the prospect of disaster, insofar as it makes space for activating a more ‘elemental’ notion of justice. Secondly, I have suggested that this orientation needs to be contextualised in a much longer cultural-historical frame, one that looks back to the religious origins of eschatology, in which the apocalypse is configured as a moment of redemption wherein the problem of evil will finally be answered, and justice delivered. This interconnection between contemporary (and ostensibly secular) reflections on the end-of-the-world and their religious and theological antecedents is never clearer than in the genre’s preoccupation with a heroic messiah figure who will deliver justice and pave the way for the renewal of society, solidarity and harmony. All such tales partake, of course, of an enduring mythopoesis or narrative archetype, one that Joseph Campbell
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(2008) famously called the ‘monomyth’ or the ‘hero’s journey’. Following this template, stories trace a hero-protagonist’s quest, in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges and tribulations, towards apotheosis and redemption. However, beyond this supposedly universal theme in cross-cultural storytelling, the post-apocalyptic hero draws much more specifically on a set of tropes and symbols that originate in the messianic discourses of Judeo-Christianity. Starting with the Old Testament anticipation of a prophetic figure who will deliver an end to the exile and suffering of the Jewish people, and culminating in the Christology of the New Testament, such messianism is closely bound-up with the a utopian expectation of redemption (Hughes, 1997; Horbury, 2003). For example the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah proclaims that:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch... and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. (VanderKam, 2000: 195)

In the New Testament, the messiah’s intervention extends beyond the earthly deliverance of God’s chosen people, and embraces the salvation of humanity as a whole, overturning the existence of evil and injustice for all time.

In the domain of popular culture, the figuration of an apocalyptic messiah is exemplified by the character of Max in The Road Warrior (1981) and Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome (1985). In Mad Max (1979), he is presented as an instrument of retributive justice, punishing crime as part of his personal quest for retaliation against those who have wronged him. However, in The Road Warrior, Max is recast as a saviour who delivers justice to the oppressed. While Mad Max alludes tangentially to the catastrophic breakdown of society, its sequel uses a narrator to offer both a more detailed exposition of the disaster that has transpired, and the mythic place of Max within subsequent events. The narrator (who features in the film as a young boy), reminisces about the past from the vantage point of later life. The viewer is told about ‘a time of chaos... this wasted land’ in the aftermath of a conflict between ‘two great warrior tribes’:

Their world crumbled... the cities exploded. A whirlwind of looting... a firestorm of fear. Men began to feed on men. Only those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to pillage, would survive. The gangs took over the highways... ready to wage war for a tank of juice.
Into this dystopian scenario the narrator introduces Max:

And in this maelstrom of decay...ordinary men were battered and smashed. Men like Max...the warrior Max. He lost everything, and became a shell of a man, a burned-out desolate man, a man haunted by the demons of his past. A man who wandered out into the wasteland. And it was here...in this blighted place...that he learned to live again.

In our first encounter with Max, he learns of a settlement in the desert that is pumping oil and refining it into petroleum – the scarcest and most sought-after commodity. However, the settlement is under siege from a gang of vicious marauders, led by 'Humungus' (a hugely muscled man, his disfigured face hidden behind an iron mask). When a couple of the settlers are attacked outside their compound, Max manages to save one of them (the other, a woman, has been gang raped and then executed by the marauders). He returns the injured man to his people, with the promise of gasoline for his car as a reward. There he learns that the settlers plan to leave the wasteland, heading to the distant 'sunshine coast', which he is told is 'a paradise...2000 miles from here. Fresh water, plenty of sunshine...nothing to do but breed!'. Here we see a clear Biblical allusion – a persecuted people, lost in the desert, seeking a ‘promised land’ where they will be safe from their oppressors. While the marauders dress in black leather and metal, the settlers wear white robes, reminiscent of the traditional desert attire of the Middle East. In a further reference (this time to the New Testament gospels of Luke, John and Mark) the marauders crucify three captured settlers, ‘high on a hill’, where their helpless friends can see their suffering. Initially reluctant to become involved, Max witnesses the brutality inflicted upon the settlers, and volunteers to help them in their attempt to escape the wasteland, and the reach of the marauders, once and for all. Max triumphs in battle with Humungus and his gang, and the settlers are free to depart. However, like a post-apocalyptic Moses, Max does not follow his people to the Promised Land – the last we see of him is as a lone, forlorn figure, staring into the distance of a desolate landscape. The narrator concludes: ‘And so began the journey north to safety, to our place in the sun. And the Road Warrior? That was the last we ever saw of him. He lives now only in my memories.’ The Road Warrior’s redemptive messianism is revisited and extended in the final film of the trilogy, Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome. It offers a narrative in Three Acts, across each of which the existence of injustice and its transcendence through the agency of a messianic hero are explored.
The First Act begins with Max crossing the desert in a wagon, when he is attacked from the air by the pilot Jedediah and his son, who possess what appears to be the only remaining functional aircraft. Dispossessed, Max makes his way on foot across the wasteland, be-robed and bare-foot, an amalgam of Moses and Christ, cast out into the wilderness. He eventually arrives at a chaotic, noisome and crowded settlement called Bartertown, a kind of postmodern and post-apocalyptic Sodom and Gomorrah. Assuming (correctly) that his stolen wagon has been brought there for sale, he seeks to recover his property. He is taken to a giant structure that is built on stilts, and looms above the town. This is the abode of Aunty Entity, the woman who founded Bartertown and considers herself its ruler. She makes Max an offer – he will be provided with a vehicle, fuel and supplies, if he is able to kill a man at her behest. Aunty is in the midst of a power struggle for control of the town, challenged from Undertown – the subterranean factory where the dirty and dangerous work of energy production is undertaken, using pig shit to produce methane. In charge of Undertown is Aunty’s rival, MasterBlaster – an entity comprising two individuals who work together as a single unit. Master is a dwarf, the ‘brains’ who possesses unrivalled technological know-how, and Blaster is the ‘muscle’, a giant who wears an iron mask and acts as Master’s enforcer. As Broderick (1993: 259) notes, Bartertown serves as a ‘post-nuclear capitalist microcosm’; it is a world of exploitation in which those ‘above’ (both socio-economically and literally) benefit from the labour of those ‘below’ (including the chained convict labourers who are forced to toil in Undertown, where a ‘life sentence’ amounts to a couple of years before a premature death). Aunty wants Max to challenge and kill Blaster through the ritualised gladiatorial combat that is used to settle disputes in Bartertown. These fights are staged in the Thunderdome, an enclosed arena in which armed combatants fight to the death (‘two men enter, one man leaves’ is the only sacrosanct rule). Max duly challenges and defeats Blaster. However, Blaster’s iron mask is dislodged, revealing the confused face of a man who is clearly intellectually disabled – as Master plaintively puts it, ‘he has the mind of a child’. Max, moved by compassion and pity, refuses to deliver the killing blow, telling Aunty that ‘this wasn’t part of the deal’. Aunty, enraged by Max’s refusal to keep his side of the bargain, orders Blaster killed. Max himself, in reprisal for breaking his contract, must face ‘the wheel’ – a roulette that randomly determines the punishment to be meted-out for breaking the laws of Bartertown (‘justice is only a roll of the dice, a flip of the coin,
a turn of the wheel’). His sentence is ‘the gulag’ and he is tied to a horse and sent out into the desert to die an inevitable slow death from thirst. Meanwhile, without Blaster’s protection, Master is tormented by Aunty’s henchmen, until he agrees to co-operate and maintain the Undertown’s power systems.

In the Second Act, the narrative takes us away from Bartertown. Max is prostrate from thirst and heat, unconscious and near death. However, he is found and rescued by a tribe of ‘lost children’ who live at an oasis in the desert. The children nurse Max back to health. He asks them who they are, and they reply that they are ‘the waiting ones’; ‘waiting for what?’ he continues – ‘waiting for you’ he is told. The children then offer, in the form of ritualised oral story-telling, their version of history. It begins with the ‘Pox-Eclipse, full of pain’, and continues on to the heroism of Captain Walker, the pilot of a great ‘skraft’ (jet airliner) who was taking people to safety. The plane crashed in the wasteland, and the children appear to be the progeny of those refugees who survived. They await the return of Walker, who will finally take them ‘home’ to ‘tomorrow-morrow land’, the world of great cities and marvellous technologies. They believe that Max is the mythic Captain Walker, returned at last (a Second Coming that will usher-in life in paradise). He insists that he’s not Walker, and that everything is gone – the cities are destroyed and there is nowhere to go. Beyond the desert, all they will find is ‘a sleaze pit called Bartertown’ which will ‘swallow them whole’. However a small group, led by a headstrong girl named Savannah, reject Max’s version of events, and set-out across the wasteland. Max, knowing what awaits the children, follows and manages to rescue them (but not before one of the children is swallowed by the treacherous quicksand that is dispersed across the desert). Without supplies, they have no choice but to make their way to Bartertown.

The Third and Final Act begins with Max leading his charges covertly into Undertown. He wishes to find Master, who ‘has the knowing of many things’, and may be able to assist them. With help from a rebellious convict labourer, they rescue Master and flee the town, destroying the power production facilities in the course of their escape. Aunty and her forces inevitably give chase. In the desert, they find the hideout of the pilot Jedediah and his son, and Max instructs him to fly the escapees to safety. However, with Aunty’s forces in close pursuit, Max ultimately has to sacrifice himself, staying behind to give battle, so that the plane can take-off. The aircraft eventually arrives at the ruins of a great
city – Sydney, the remnants of its iconic Opera House still clearly visible. We see an older Savannah (now a mother cradling a baby) surrounded by attentive children in what appears to be a church. Here she offers an updated version of the tribe’s mythic history:

I sees those of us who got the luck, and started the haul for home. It led us here and we was heartful’ cause we see what there once was. One look, and we knew we’d got it straight. We remembers the man who finded us – him that came to salvage. And we lights the city. Not just for him, but for all of them that are still out there...

In the final shot, we see Max, once again clad in his desert robes, making his way alone on foot across the sand dunes into a setting sun.

I have considered Beyond Thunderdome in some detail as it captures in a concentrated and unambiguous way the key elements that recur across numerous post-apocalyptic fictions that offer a utopian, messianic vision of human redemption. Primary amongst these elements we find:

1. A disordered society in which crime, violence and cruelty are rife;
2. The exploitation of the powerless by the powerful;
3. The oppressed and forgotten who await the coming of a messianic hero figure;
4. The arrival of that hero who ultimately delivers the virtuous from injustice, making possible a renewal of social bonds based upon morality, reciprocity and solidarity.

It is noteworthy that Max, like all messiah figures is human, and humane, yet not fully a part of the world of human relations; he stands apart from it, an outsider who is conspicuously different and unique. For example, unlike the typical handsome action hero, Max does not engage in any romantic encounters, betrays no discernible sexuality and has no interest in worldly pleasures. He is driven by a ‘purer’ sense of purpose – first vengeance, then survival, and ultimately a reluctant acceptance of his destined role as saviour. Likewise, it is not coincidental that the elect, who devoutly await their messiah, are a tribe of children – a clear echo of Jesus’ rebuke to his disciples to ‘Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew, 19: 14). Such recuperation of messianic and Christological themes is not unique to the Mad Max trilogy, and can be found in any number of recent popular apocalyptic narratives (Kozlovic, 2004). For example, in The Terminator series of films, the fate of humanity lies with John Connor,
whose initials (JC) mark him out clearly as a quasi-divine individual. Like his messianic predecessor, this ‘JC’ is the product of an improbable birth – fathered by a soldier that he himself has sent back in time to protect his mother from assassination (he is, in a sense, both the Father and the Son). Gibson, the hero of *Cyborg*, is literally crucified, only to descend from the cross in order to bring his enemy to justice. In *Elysium*, Max da Costa dies once he has delivered humanity from its servitude to the celestial elite, and in effect gifted them with ‘eternal life’ via advanced medical technology: ‘when Max dies at the computer desk in Elysium’s main data centre, his body posture resembles that of Christ on the cross. Max’s arms are by his side. His head hangs down toward his right side, much the way Jesus is portrayed in many paintings of the crucifixion’ (Yorulmaz, 2014: 4).

What are we to make of this recuperation of Judeo-Christian messianism within ostensibly secular texts that deal with the fate of modern society? At one level, of course, at least some of these narratives may be intentionally configured as parables which allegorically re-present religious doctrine in a popular and contemporary form. However, it is perhaps more plausible to suggest that their origins, and popularity with audiences worldwide, lie with the enduring dilemmas of evil, suffering and injustice, and the appeal of a unique hero who will offer to resolve them in a way that ‘ordinary’ people feel they cannot. A cultural sense of dislocation and disinvestment from the abstract and formal institutions of law and justice creates a yearning for some response that resonates more directly with the moral emotions experienced in the face of injustice. What the post-apocalyptic hero offers, in the final analysis, is an answer to the ‘problem of evil’ that speaks to the sensible and affective dimensions of human experience, and the investment in a hope for a better society which might not be justified by a rational assessment of contemporary conditions, but which nevertheless endures.

**Concluding reflections**

The impetus for this book’s explorations lies in the assessment that criminological analysis can benefit from looking beyond a relatively confined range of cultural texts (such as press coverage of ‘crime news’, ‘crime films’, and televised ‘crime dramas’). I suggested at the outset that post-apocalyptic popular discourse, with its focus upon catastrophic social
breakdown resulting from a disaster of some kind, offers a potentially fertile domain for criminological inquiry. Replete with representations of crime, violence, victimisation, danger, vengeance, justice and redemption, such texts are deserving of attention from those who are interested in tracing the meanings given to crime and punishment in contemporary popular culture, and who wish to learn something about our wider social sensibilities as a result. I hope that I have gone some way to successfully linking key themes in criminological research with the cultural manifestations of ideas about crime and related issues as they appear within an ostensibly non-crime related genre. In post-apocalyptic fictions we find a rich and diverse array of characterisations, images and symbols that can shed light on the conflicts, anxieties, fears, hopes and fantasies that so often coalesce around crime, law and disorder.

Beyond the broad aim summarised above, I have also sought to elaborate two more particular hypotheses. Firstly, I have argued that post-apocalyptic fictions (like popular cultural products more broadly) transcode or project into their scenarios contextual social developments that are re-presented and thrown into sharp relief in allegorical form. For example, perceptions about the failures of law and order and the shifting and reworking of hegemonic social relations, as they pertain to ‘gender’, race, and global human mobility – find voice in post-apocalyptic narratives. By paying attention to what such productions ‘have to say’, and ‘how they say it’, we can add to the efforts of critical cultural scholarship that aims to better understand how ‘social problems’ (real or imagined) come to be framed. The second hypothesis, somewhat more unusual for criminological reflections on popular culture, is that contemporary ideas and ideologies about crime are in fact deeply indebted to long-enduring efforts to grasp and resolve fundamental moral and existential dilemmas, most especially those related to evil, suffering and their reconciliation with ideals of justice. To this end, much of the analysis offered here has sought to draw-out the connections between contemporary, secular, discourses and the apocalyptic and eschatological preoccupations that configure religious (particularly Judeo-Christian) thought. Taking seriously Karl Löwith’s critique of claims that the modern worldview entails a decisive ‘epistemic break’ with pre-modern ideas about human history, I have argued that such received views recurrently appear in contemporary popular storytelling. This is not to suggest that a return to religious answers to the problems of evil and suffering can offer an appropriate resolution to contemporary conflicts and dilemmas about crime,
punishment and justice. Rather, it serves as a means to better understand how our present-day attempts to grasp and tackle these dilemmas are in fact an inextricable part of a much long cultural-historical conversation; one that seeks, in shifting social and political conditions, to nevertheless come to terms with some fundamental moral and ethical questions that are the common inheritance of human society. In post-apocalyptic culture and its ‘imaginary of disaster’, we can trace the contours of such efforts to address the enduring problems of crime, suffering and injustice.
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