

Keeping Count of the End of the World A Statistical Analysis of the Historiography, Canonisation, and Historical Fluctuations of Anglophone Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Disaster Narratives

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Abstract

Over the past decade, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives seem to have become more popular than ever before. Since its inception in secular form in the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, the genre has experienced a number of fluctuations in popularity, especially in the twentieth century. Inspired by Franco Moretti's influential *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), the aim of this study is to analyse the historiography, canonisation, and historical fluctuations of Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives in literature and film through an elementary statistical analysis of previous surveys of the field. While the small database on which the study is based essentially consists of a meta-study of historiography and canonisation within the genre, disclosing which works have been considered to be the most important, the data is also used to assess the periods in which the most influential, innovative, and/or popular works were published or released. As an attempt is also made to explain some of the fluctuations in the popularity of the genre – with an eye to historical, cultural, medial, social, and political contexts – perhaps the study might help us understand why it is that we as a society seem to need these stories ever so often.

Keywords: Historiography, Canonisation, Science Fiction, Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, Popular Fiction, Sociology of Literature, Bibliometrics

Introduction

Whether a reflection of widespread fears of terrorism, financial crises, impending climate change, uncontrolled mass immigration, the potential aggressiveness of the working classes, uninhibited and brainless mass consumption, or something else entirely, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives seem to be more popular than ever before. Over the past decade or so, stories about the end of the world as we know it have appeared in a number of genres and forms of media, from depictions of zombie apocalypses in films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), novels such as Max Brooks's *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006), or multi-media franchises such as *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead* – spawning a number of video games, graphic novels, novels, films, and/or television series – to works of literary fiction such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Despite its pervading presence in both popular and literary culture, however, this extraordinary interest in the end times is only the latest in a number of waves that have struck the shores of public imagination since the inception of the secular apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narrative in the first decades of the nineteenth century, with works such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Regardless if one sees it as a genre of its own or a subgenre of science fiction, however, the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster story is mainly a product of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and has produced a large number of both popular and influential works of fiction and film.¹ But what does it look like in a historical perspective, is there any consensus as to what works constitute its (minor) classics, and is there any accounting for the intriguing fluctuations in its popularity?

The aim of this study is to analyse the historiography, canonisation, and historical fluctuations of Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives in literature and film through an elementary statistical analysis of previous surveys of the field. Methodically, the study is inspired by the first part of Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005), but also by related studies within the Swedish tradition of sociology of literature (for instance Williams 1997 and Nordlund 2005), and by bibliometrics and the digital humanities. While the small database on which the study is based essentially consists of a meta-study of historiography and canonisation within the genre, with clear indicators of not only which works have been considered to be the most important, but also the periods (stretching from the 1820s to ca. 2010) in which they were published, the data can, I believe, also be used to assess some other factors, such as the fluctuating popularity of the genre through the years, in different countries and in various media – all differences that beg for explanations with an eye to the historical, cultural, medial, social, and political contexts. As such a contextualisation will to some extent be attempted, perhaps the study might even help us understand why it is that we as a society seem to have a need for these kinds of stories ever so often.

The Database: Construction, Selection, and Demarcation

In order to analyse the historiography and canonisation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives, one first needs to find a reliable selection of texts on which to base the analysis. As there are dozens of monographs and anthologies dealing with British and American apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster stories (cf. Wagar 1982, Rabkin et al. 1983, Seed 2000, and Curtis 2010), pinpointing and weighing the classics against one another from book-length studies would both take a long time and some ingenious ways of determining which are the most important works (such as a bibliometric analysis of the number of times they are mentioned or referred to, or the number of whole chapters or articles that are devoted to them or their authors). A much more convenient way, especially as some of the critics and scholars are recurring ones from the longer studies, is to look for shorter surveys of the genre, often seen as a subgenre of, or theme within, science fiction and thus frequently treated in separate chapters, articles or sections in handbooks, encyclopedias, and introductions to science fiction. With a length restriction of only a few pages, one can be fairly confident that the scholars or critics mention and discuss what they think are the most important and influential (either widely read or serving as inspiration for other writers) works in the field, with only a minimum of idiosyncratic choices added for flavour.² Furthermore, by using texts mainly in handbooks and encyclopedias, one is also certain to base the analysis on the opinions of some of the main authorities on the subject.

The database used in this study is based on the thirteen relatively brief surveys I could find, written by critics and scholars recognised within the field of Anglophone science fiction (most of them interestingly male British scholars specialising in literature).³ They stretch from the mid 1970s to the early 2010s, although with a predominance of surveys written in or after the 1990s, and deal with either parts of or the whole apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genre, usually in both literature and film. The works mentioned are primarily British and American, but there are also examples of other Anglophone titles, and even a few non-English titles that have been considered important for the field of Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives.

The database itself consists of a spreadsheet in SPSS, with different columns for title of the work, name of the author or director, his or her gender and nationality, year of publication, medium, genre, or format of the work, and lastly separate columns for indicating in which of the thirteen surveys the work is mentioned. In all, the database contains 490 unique entries, i.e. titles which have been mentioned (or occasionally referred to, usually through their series) in one or more of the surveys. The only exclusions are a small number of works, often of non-fiction, mentioned in the surveys for contextual purposes.

Doing a selective meta-study such as this is no exact science, but even though some of the surveys only cover a certain subtype of story, or a shorter period (such

as just a few decades), the overall total of mentions nevertheless gives a relatively clear picture of the canon of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories, seen from the perspective of Anglophone science-fiction scholarship. There is, however, always the problem, hinted at above and commented on by David Ketterer, that when writing a survey, “[t]he very best and the very worst examples are the ones that immediately suggest themselves” (Ketterer 1974: 124), which means that some of the often mentioned works might in theory have become minor classics within the genre as much for being notoriously inadequate as for being outstanding or original, even if chances are that these are restricted to the idiosyncratic mentions by individual scholars.

Furthermore, one must keep in mind that surveys in handbooks and encyclopedia entries are often influenced by earlier surveys, either directly, as writers of new surveys often cast a glance at older ones and rely, in varying degrees, on earlier judgements of aesthetic quality and historical importance rather than making individual assessments of every work they mention (which also explains, to some extent, why the works mentioned, out of hundreds or even thousands, are so often the same ones) – or indirectly, as the surveys are in many ways both manifestations of and influences on the critical and scholarly consensus of the time in which they were written, and these change only gradually. In this way, an idiosyncratic inclusion of a work may in time generate further inclusions, and some works may even be handed down as canonical even if they might not be that widely read or appreciated (even by writers of surveys).

Before diving into the database and its results, a short reminder of what the figures stand for might be necessary. Based as they are on surveys written by scholars and critics, the entries in the database do not represent the number of stories written, shot, distributed, read or viewed in the genre, and they are not necessarily an indicator of the popularity of the genre – even if I believe that that does come into it (more of which below) – but a listing of important, interesting or otherwise memorable stories published or released in the genre according to a handful of scholars and critics. Everything else is, by necessity, speculation, albeit with varying degrees of plausibility.

The Apocalyptic Canon

One of the most interesting results to be found in the database concerns the works that are mentioned in the most number of surveys, forming an apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic canon of works consecrated within the field of science-fiction scholarship.⁴ In fact, only 133 of the 490 entries (or 27.1 percent) are mentioned in two or more of the surveys, and of these only 55 (or 11.2 percent of the total) are mentioned in three or more (interestingly, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* falls outside the three mentions while Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* makes it). Conveniently, there are 35 works which are mentioned in four or more of the surveys, marking out a relatively

clear statistical consensus regarding which works in the genre are considered to be the most important, irrespective of the no doubt various criteria – such as perceived quality, originality, contemporary impact, and survival value – used by the individual critics and scholars (Table 1, next page). Among these works are Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s posthumous book-length prose poem *Le Dernier Homme* (1805), “the first tale of the future to consider the death of all human beings and the destruction of the earth” (Clarke & Clarke 2002: xviii), but also what is arguably the first secular apocalyptic novel, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), three novels by H. G. Wells, a few often adapted novels by John Wyndham and Richard Matheson, a handful of works of literary fiction by authors such as Aldous Huxley and Angela Carter, three early novels by J. G. Ballard, and five films, among them the three original *Mad Max* films (1979–1985). Interestingly, three of the top five titles are depictions of nuclear war published in the late 1950s, by Walter M. Miller, Jr., Mordecai Roshwald, and Nevil Shute.

When it comes to the crises or disasters depicted in all the 35 canonical works of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction and film, nuclear wars and pandemics are the most common scenarios, with nuclear wars and their aftermath accounting for sixteen, or almost half (45.7 percent), of the cases, and with pandemics (viruses, plagues, etc.) coming second with five entries (14.3 percent), although diseases (and famines) often figure as secondary calamities in many more, especially in the stories dealing with nuclear war. The disasters in the remaining classics consist of celestial phenomena, alien invasions, floods, and freak occurrences (if they are not unknown).

Besides Mary Shelley’s and Angela Carter’s novels, there are two other novels by female authors (Judith Merril and Leigh Brackett), which might seem little (11.4 percent of the canon), but is in fact slightly more than the proportion of entries with female authors or directors in the whole database (see below). As for nationality, there is an almost equal split between the US and the UK, with 16 entries for the former, and 15 for the latter, and with the Australian *Mad Max* films behind most of the remaining.

Although the 35 canonical works (as suggested by the database) range from the nineteenth century to the mid 1980s, as many as twelve are from the 1950s, and no fewer than eight from the late 1950s (which can be compared to only five entries from the 1960s, four from the 1980s, and even fewer from the other decades). Apart from James Morrow’s novel *This is the Way the World Ends*, there are also just four works published or released since the 1960s – three of which are the *Mad Max* films, and the fourth Russell Hoban’s experimental novel *Riddley Walker* – but chances are that a future study of a similar kind would include a few more, especially Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, but perhaps also Max Brooks’s *World War Z* and Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, which are likely candidates for canonisation not, perhaps, solely on grounds of originality, but on their historical and contextual interest.

Title	Author/Director	Gender	Nationality	Year	Medium etc.	Total
<i>A Canticle for Leibowitz</i>	Walter M. Miller, Jr.	Male	US	1959	Novel	10
<i>The Last Man</i>	Mary Shelley	Female	UK	1826	Novel	9
<i>Level 7</i>	Mordecai Roshwald	Male	US	1959	Novel	9
<i>Earth Abides</i>	George R. Stewart	Male	US	1949	Novel	8
<i>On the Beach</i>	Nevil Shute	Male	UK	1957	Novel	8
<i>Le Dernier Homme (The Last Man)</i>	Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville	Male	Non-English	1805	Poetry	7
<i>The Purple Cloud</i>	M. P. Shiel	Male	UK	1901	Novel	7
<i>When Worlds Collide</i>	Edwin Balmer & Philip Wylie	Male	US	1933	Novel	7
<i>The Day of the Triffids (Revolt of the Triffids)</i>	John Wyndham	Male	UK	1951	Novel	7
<i>The Drowned World</i>	J. G. Ballard	Male	UK	1962	Novel	7
<i>Riddley Walker</i>	Russell Hoban	Male	US	1980	Novel	7
<i>The Crystal World</i>	J. G. Ballard	Male	UK	1966	Novel	6
<i>The Scarlet Plague</i>	Jack London	Male	US	1912	Novel	5
<i>The World Set Free (The Last War)</i>	H. G. Wells	Male	UK	1914	Novel	5
<i>Shadow on the Hearth</i>	Judith Merrill	Female	US	1950	Novel	5
<i>The Long Tomorrow</i>	Leigh Brackett	Female	US	1955	Novel	5
<i>The Death of Grass (No Blade of Grass)</i>	John Christopher	Male	UK	1956	Novel	5
<i>Alas, Babylon</i>	Pat Frank	Male	US	1959	Novel	5
<i>On the Beach</i>	Stanley Kramer	Male	US	1959	Film	5
<i>Heroes and Villains</i>	Angela Carter	Female	UK	1969	Novel	5
<i>After London; Or, Wild England</i>	Richard Jefferies	Male	UK	1885	Novel	4
<i>The Time Machine</i>	H. G. Wells	Male	UK	1895	Novel	4
<i>The War of the Worlds</i>	H. G. Wells	Male	UK	1898	Novel	4
<i>The Second Deluge</i>	Garrett P. Serviss	Male	US	1912	Novel	4
<i>Deluge</i>	S. Fowler Wright	Male	UK	1928	Novel	4
<i>Ape and Essence</i>	Aldous Huxley	Male	UK	1948	Novel	4
<i>The Long Loud Silence</i>	Wilson Tucker	Male	US	1952	Novel	4
<i>I Am Legend</i>	Richard Matheson	Male	US	1954	Novel	4
<i>The Chrysalids (Re-Birth)</i>	John Wyndham	Male	US	1955	Novel	4
<i>The Burning World (The Drought)</i>	J. G. Ballard	Male	UK	1964	Novel	4
<i>Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb</i>	Stanley Kubrick	Male	US	1964	Film	4
<i>Mad Max</i>	George Miller	Male	Australia	1979	Film	4
<i>The Road Warrior (Mad Max 2)</i>	George Miller	Male	Australia	1981	Film	4
<i>Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome</i>	George Miller & George Ogilvie	Male	Australia	1985	Film	4
<i>This is the Way the World Ends</i>	James Morrow	Male	US	1986	Novel	4

Table 1. The 35 apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels or films mentioned in four or more surveys.

Medium, Gender, and Nationality

Besides canonisation, the database as a whole also yields a number of interesting results when it comes to describing the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genre in

general. Starting with medium, genre, and format, the entries consist of (in descending order, and with percentages in brackets) novels (53.3), short stories (20.4), film (18.4), poetry (2.2), children's and YA fiction (1.6), other print (1.4), TV series (1.4), short-story collections (0.6), and drama (0.2), demonstrating perhaps not only the interests of scholars and critics specialised in literature, but also that the genre is predominantly one of novels, short stories, and film, even though the large number of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic TV series and YA books from recent years will probably have an impact on comparable surveys in future.⁵

As already hinted at above, the male dominance in the database is absolutely massive, with female authors and directors standing for less than 10 percent of the entries (or 9.2 percent, to be precise). Naturally, this reflects not only that both science fiction and the film industry have long been male-dominated, but perhaps also that the types of fantasies represented in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories – with widespread disasters leading to chaos and barbarism, survival of the fittest, etc. – are probably more popular with both male writers/directors and readers/viewers. There is, however, a slight difference when it comes to media and genre, as female writers stand for 12.3 percent of the novels, while only 4.4 percent of the films are directed by female directors, and only 4.0 percent of the short stories are written by female writers.⁶ Of course, 12.3 percent is still a very small number, but 32 apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels by female writers does at least amount to a whole shelf in a bookcase, and they contain some of the most interesting work in the genre, often by female writers who have decided to write against its traditionally male values and perspectives.

As my main interest is Anglophone fiction and film, the database doesn't differentiate between the relatively small number of non-English authors and directors. It does so, however, when it comes to the different countries in the English-speaking world. In all, US authors and directors stand for more than half (55.5 percent) of the entries in the database, followed by UK authors and directors, who stand for almost a third (29.8 percent). The non-English category (mostly European authors and directors, even if some of the latter worked in Hollywood) makes up 8.4 percent of the entries, and the rest of the English-speaking world is represented by less than 4 percent, although some of the most well-known works are actually from these countries, such as the Australian *Mad Max* films, the New Zealand film *The Quiet Earth* (1985), or Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's novels.

Looking at nationality by medium, a few interesting differences emerge, as UK authors stand for as much as 39.5 percent of the novels in the database, whereas US authors stand for 52.1 percent (compared to 29.8 percent and 55.5 percent respectively for all media, genres, and formats). Furthermore, while films by US directors make up 54.4 percent of all films in the database, the films by non-English directors stand for as much as 18.9 percent, which is roughly 5 percentages more than the ones by UK directors (13.3 percent). It is also notable that US authors stand for as much as 78 percent (or even more) of all mentioned short stories, with UK authors

standing for most of the remaining. The apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic short story is thus a very American form, probably as the science-fiction magazines, and the tradition of publishing science-fiction short stories, have largely been an American twentieth-century phenomenon; if the British excel at one form of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narrative, it is the novel rather than film (of all UK contributions in the database, 70.5 percent are novels, compared to 50.0 percent for the US contributions).

Periodising Apocalypse

The entries in the database stretch from the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written a millennium or two B.C., over the *Book of Revelations*, the *Völuspá*, the Romantic poets, the British fin-de-siècle writers of scientific romances (such as H. G. Wells), early twentieth-century American pulp fiction, post-war Hollywood disaster and World War III films, and all the way to science fiction and consecrated literary fiction from the last decade, not to mention the various recent zombie films.

Even if there are many potential factors of error involved – such as the fact that the database is based on thirteen more or less subjective surveys written by a small number of people, and that the total number of entries (despite being almost 500) is only a sampling of all the thousands of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives published or released in the last century or two – the database can be used to estimate the periods in which the most number of stories considered to be memorable were published or released, results which can then be compared with not only the changing historical, cultural, medial, social, and political contexts of the last two centuries, but also with some of what has been written on the periodic popularity of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives.

In contrast to the regular field of cultural production, where there is an almost inherent contradiction between perceived aesthetic qualities and popularity – and thus the opinions of critics and scholars rarely reflect the popularity or even the wider cultural impact of individual films or works of literature – in a field of so-called genre fiction such as science fiction, there is probably a sufficient overlap between the tastes of critics, scholars, and a majority of the readers and viewers to permit making at least some assumptions about the popularity of the genre based on its historiography.⁷ Add to this that the historiography of a genre often consists of not only the works which have been judged to achieve certain aesthetic standards, but also works which have, in one way or another, been seen as important in the sense of having influenced other writers, directors, or even public opinion (often through both popularity and publicity) – and that many science fiction films and novels have been included in the surveys at least partially due to their popularity – and it would seem that this method could be a feasible shortcut to assess the fluctuating popularity of the genre in different periods, lacking the time and resources to find not only the total number of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic titles published

or released each year (and in different countries and media), but also the exact figures for the total number of books, cinema tickets, magazines, etc. sold, which would not only be tremendously time-consuming, but often outright impossible.

To further complicate the already complex relationship between consecration, historiography, and popularity, it could be argued that the presence of important or memorable works from certain periods often reflects both the popularity of the specific titles and a widespread interest in the subject matter, and that a few consecrated works might be seen as the tip of an iceberg – that it is statistically likely that a period with many memorable works saw an unusually large number of other works in the genre as well, most of which are today forgotten. On the other hand, it could also be argued that it is often during periods (and in social, political, historical contexts) when there is an increased need for these kinds of stories that authors and directors produce them in unusually large numbers, or even that it is only during these periods and their specific *Zeitgeist* that certain works manage to make lasting impressions and become minor classics (sometimes almost regardless of perceived aesthetic qualities), both of which would seem to suggest that examining the contexts of the consecrated and memorable works of the genre might in fact be seen as at least partially representative for the popularity and impact of the whole genre.

Breaking down all the 490 entries in the database by five-year-periods, starting in 1800, several interesting things emerge (Figure 1, next page).⁸ First, and perhaps most important, is the fact that even if most of the surveys were written since 1990, only four of them are completely from the 2000s, which means that the figures for the 1990s and especially the 2000s are probably on the low side. Preceding the 1990s, however, are four decades – the 1950 to the 1980s – with what seems to be a relatively steady output of interesting and memorable stories in the genre, bringing to mind I. F. and M. Clarke’s words that, “after Hiroshima, the greatest flood of apocalyptic fiction would begin; and, throughout the ensuing four decades, a seemingly endless succession of books and films would describe the End of the World as the last act in a chain of human follies” (Clarke & Clarke 2002: xviii). As we shall soon see, however, this neat conformance with the threat of nuclear war isn’t entirely true.

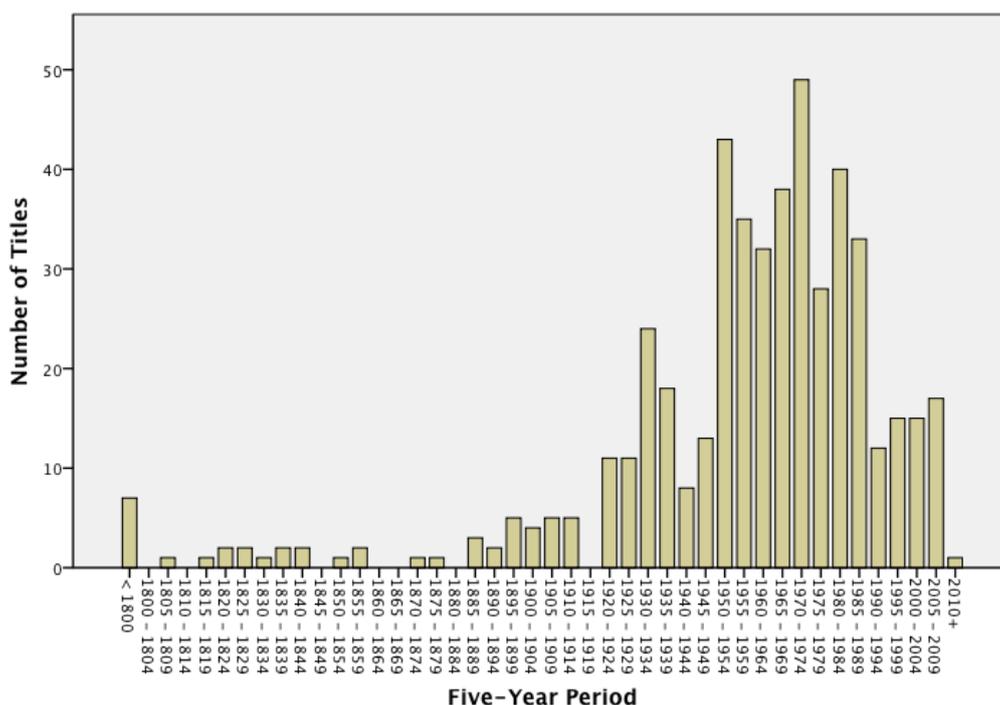


Figure 1. The total number of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives in the database published or released after 1800, by five-year period.

The most surprising element in the breakdown is probably the declines in memorable stories in the genre from the late 1910s and, perhaps even more striking, the early 1940s, coinciding with both world wars. This might be explained by the writers and filmmakers being busy doing military or civil service, or surviving harsh living conditions (such as the Blitz), by paper rationing (which would, however, perhaps affect the number of magazines and books printed rather than the innovations of the authors), or simply by the fact that reality at the time was far too bleak and grim for writing, shooting, publishing, or releasing any memorable fantasies of worldwide destruction.⁹ Furthermore, it is intriguing that the interwar period of 1920–1939 – and especially the Depression years of the early 1930s – produced quite a few noteworthy apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories, with steep rises comparable only to the ones in the early 1950s, the early 1970s, and the early 1980s. Also notable is a relatively continuous output of memorable works from the nineteenth century, starting with British Romantic poems depicting end times and last men, such as Lord Byron’s “Darkness” (1816) and Thomas Campbell’s “The Last Man” (1823). As with Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), these were inspired by the uncredited and anonymous English translation of Grainville’s *Le Dernier Homme* as *The Last Man; or, Omegarus and Syderia: A Romance in Futurity* (1806) (Paley 1989, Clarke 2002, Clarke & Clarke 2002, and Ransom 2014).

In future, a similar study would likely show a sharp rise in interesting apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster stories from the years 2000–2015, following a decade of slightly less important work in the genre. (Contrary to popular belief, the years preceding the millennium don't seem to have seen any sharp rise in popularity for this particular genre, although apocalyptic themes did figure prominently in public discourse at the time.) As for the notable decline in the early 1990s, it might not be entirely related to the fact that the decade is too recent for these historical surveys – it is possible that at least part of it can be explained by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the democratisation of Eastern Europe, the end of the Soviet Union, and the *détente* in international tensions after years of *perestroika* and nuclear disarmament treaties; or, simply by the fact that audiences were tired of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives after a decade infused with such scenarios, and instead turned to fantasy novels, romance, and comedy. Remarkably, in 2002, I. F. Clarke attributed this lack of interest specifically to the disarmament treaty of 1990 and asserted that “the tale of the last days of Earth no longer had any power to attract readers. Nowadays, it seems, the Last Man belongs to an almost extinct species.” (Clarke 2002: xli) Of course, the pendulum swung again in the early 2000s, with a new wave of post-apocalyptic and zombie narratives starting in precisely 2002, with, among others, Danny Boyle's and Alex Garland's *28 Days Later* (2002), and, after the events of September 2001, a changed international context in which they were received. An important factor in the expansion of the 2000s is unquestionably also the breakthrough for computer-generated imagery in the 1990s, which has given new possibilities for depicting especially large-scale or even global disasters (Sanders 2009: 15–16).

As it is difficult to know for sure how reliably the most memorable titles reflect popularity, the results should be compared to previous assessments of the popularity of this and related genres in film and literature, which might also offer explanations for the fluctuations. In an essay condemning the latest wave of horror films in the late 1950s, for instance, Derek Hill observed a connection between horror films and troubled times, claiming that “[e]very horror film cycle has coincided with economic depression and war”, and that the late 1950s with their escalating nuclear arms race experienced “the biggest, ugliest threat of them all, and a bigger, uglier horror boom than ever before” (Hill 1958: 7). What is particularly interesting about Hill's observations is that he tries to trace the cycles back a few decades, and that he touches upon the subject of national economy:

Until the coming of sound, Germany dominated the horror field – a country suffering from post-war depression and the *malaise* of defeat. The first American cycle ran throughout the 'thirties – the depression years – but the films became less popular as the economy gained strength. By the time America entered the war, virtually no horror films were being made. In 1943 a new boom began; and then, after the war, there was another recession.

Horror literature, it has often been noted, becomes increasingly popular when a society is undergoing outward stress. The cinema, which provides a more accurate reflection of a nation's mood, confirms this. (Hill 1958: 7)

Even though Hill's essay deals with horror film, and that his observations concerning the Second World War do not conform with the results of the present study, it is nevertheless interesting to note a few similar conclusions in an essay on a related (and to some extent overlapping) genre. In fact, analogous, recurrent patterns have also been noted regarding pre-Hiroshima apocalyptic films, for instance by Mick Broderick: "Examining the historical clusters of these films prior to 1945, it appears that many reflect popular fears of devastating calamities in times of perceived global crisis, such as the approach of the World Wars, the 1917 communist revolution, and the Great Depression." (Broderick 1993: 364) Unfortunately, this can neither be corroborated nor disproved with the database, as it contains only one pre-WWII film, *Deluge* (1933).

A comparison of the major media of novels and film in the database does, however, show both interesting differences and similarities (Figure 2, next page). Apart from the fact that memorable apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films – which, with all their special effects, were long expensive to make – are clearly a post-war phenomenon, the early 1980s seem to have been an exceptionally good period for film in this genre, especially compared to the late 1980s and the early 1990s, which saw a dramatic drop.¹⁰ (When it comes to novels, a comparable rise can be seen from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, but lasting a few years longer, before the probable drop in the 1990s.¹¹)

The early 1980s are, of course, an especially interesting period, as it saw a new stage in the Cold War, often called "the Second Cold War", with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, heightened international tensions, and especially a renewed and widespread fear of nuclear war. The escalating nuclear arms race is not only reflected in many of the memorable films from this period – such as *WarGames* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), and *Threads* (1984) – but also in the large number of low-budget imitators of the highly successful *Mad Max* films. Although Mick Broderick has listed no fewer than 80 post-nuclear war films from the 1980s – most of them action-oriented and with titles such as *Exterminators of the Year 3000* (1983), *Warrior of the Lost World* (1983), and *Land of Doom* (1986) – very few of these were memorable enough to make it into the surveys (and they were often made in Italy, Spain, Israel, and the Philippines) (Broderick 1993: 366, 376).¹² Notably, they seem to have tied in well with the prevalent ideology of their time (Thatcherism and Reaganism), as Broderick argues that, with their hero mythology, these

cinematic renderings of long-term post-nuclear survival appear highly reactionary, and seemingly advocate reinforcing the symbolic order of the status quo via the maintenance of conservative social regimes of patriarchal law (and lore). In so doing, they articulate a desire for (if not celebrate) the fantasy of nuclear Armageddon as the anticipated war which will annihilate the oppressive burdens of (post)modern life and

usher in the nostalgically yearned-for less complex existence of agrarian toil and social harmony through ascetic spiritual endeavors (Broderick 1993: 362).¹³

Add to this that the depicted wastelands of the genre are often characterised by an absence of a strong state and by anarchic conditions where might is right, and it is easy to see the similarities not only with libertarian ideology, but also with the punk movement of the mid- and late 1970s (which also influenced the films aesthetically).

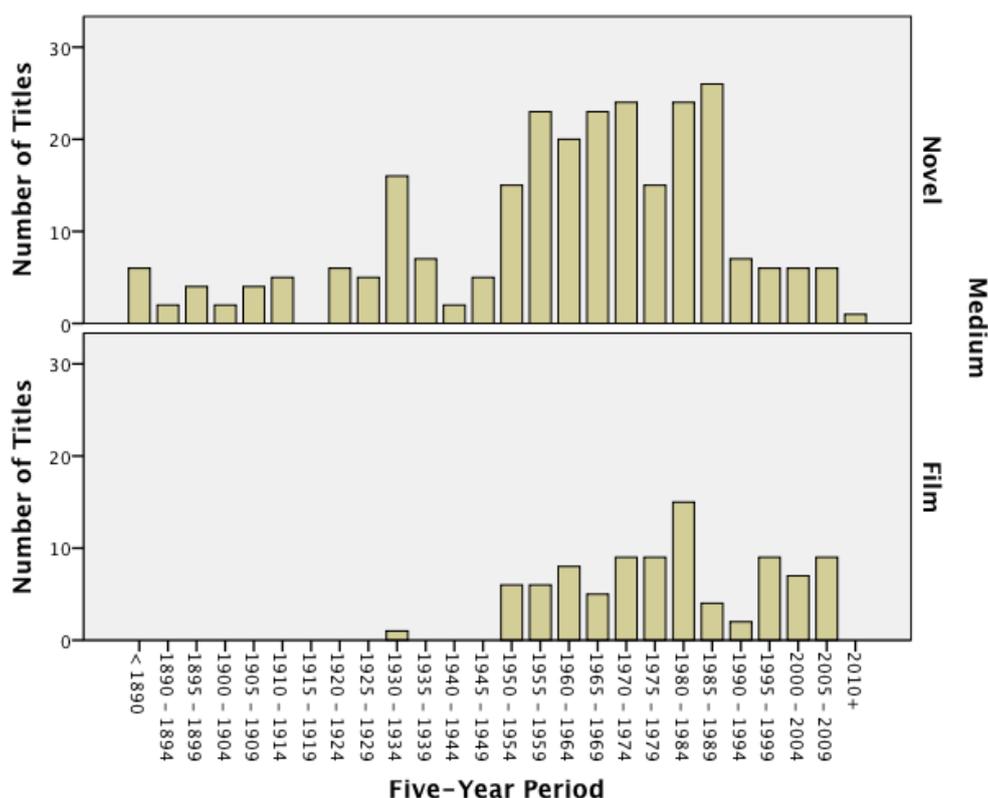


Figure 2. The total number of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives in the major media of novels and film in the database, by five-year period.

Apart from the fluctuations in 1980–1994, however, the output of memorable apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films has been relatively constant since the early 1950s. Compared to the novels, it is also striking that many of the memorable films are from the 2000s, perhaps indicating a rise in interesting work done, but it might also have to do with the fact that it is easier to determine the classics of a young medium such as film.

When it comes to the novels, the late 1970s show a curious, if only relative slump (Figure 2), which begs explanation. In fact, looking only at novels from the two most important countries, one finds one of the biggest and most important differences in the entire database (Figure 3, next page). Whereas many of the classic British apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels were written in the late nineteenth

century and up until the First World War, in the inter-war years and the first three post-war decades, a clear majority of the US classics of the genre were written between 1950 and 1989, with a noticeable peak in the 1980s. The most striking difference between British and American novels, however, is in the fifteen-year period 1975–1989, when it seems interest and innovation abated in the UK while it peaked in the US. This difference is likely connected to the post-war US supersession of the UK as the dominant Western superpower, which seems to have affected the genre fully a generation after WWII.

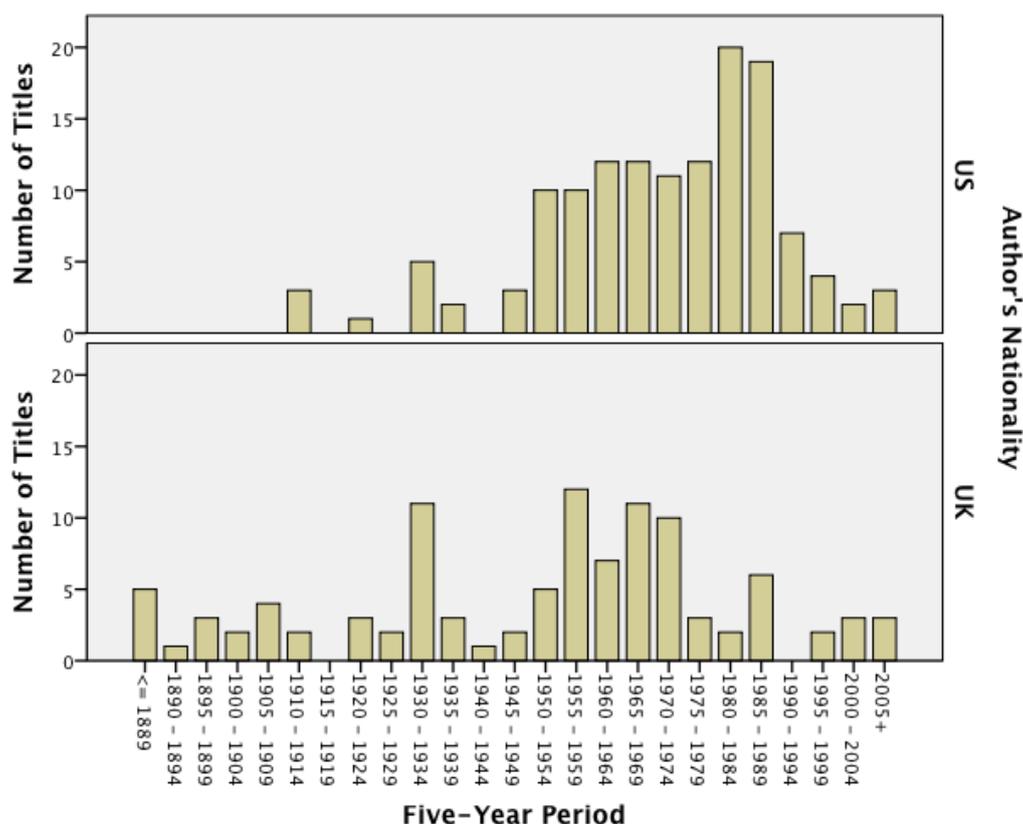


Figure 3. The total number of British and American apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster novels in the database, by five-year period.

Interestingly, the preceding 25–30-year period coincides neatly with the heyday of what has sometimes been called the cosy catastrophe, a specifically British type of disaster novel by writers such as John Wyndham, John Christopher, Susan Cooper, Keith Roberts, John Brunner, and Richard Cowper (most of whom are also represented in the database). According to Jo Walton, these stories, with often quirky disasters killing off almost all but a small number of middle-class survivors who are left to rebuild civilisation from scratch, dealt with "middle-class resentment towards the newly empowered working class" in post-war Britain (with reforms

such as free public education and the National Health Service). They were "immensely popular" between 1951 and 1977, but then disappeared, perhaps because "the zeitgeist had changed and they had served their purpose. By the time they died away, the social world had completely changed, a whole generation had grown up with the post-war reforms and Thatcherism was on the horizon." (Walton 2005: 38)¹⁴ Indeed, the crowning achievement of the subgenre might well have been the highly successful TV series *Survivors* (1975–1977), which also tapped into the prevalent rural nostalgia of the 1970s.

It has also been suggested that the lingering popularity of especially John Wyndham's 1950s disaster novels (with their obvious fears of invasion and supersession) may be related not only to the gruelling experience of WWII, but also to the dismantling of the British Empire and the loss of Britain's status as a superpower.¹⁵ As Roger Luckhurst has pointed out, there is almost something monomaniacal about these stories: "What cultural work does this British 'imagination of disaster' perform for its audience? The repetitive plots invite a reading of the genre that sees it as a compulsion to return to some traumatic event, in order to master its devastating effects." (Luckhurst 2005a: 130) In this instance, the narratives seem to work as a form of symbolic national trauma treatment, not unlike the Japanese monster films following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see Sontag 1966: 218).

In an essay on British science fiction in the 1970s, Luckhurst discusses what he terms the "post-imperial melancholy" of the decade, with its economic and ideological crises, loss of national identity and sense of belonging, and rural nostalgia. Besides deliberating on it as "a crucial decade in reorganising the symbolic capital of Empire" (Luckhurst 2005b: 79), he also sketches (with a reference to Baucom 1999) the historical development of disaster narratives, observing how

the renewal of the English catastrophe novel in the early 1970s was a response to a newly intensive phase of crisis around nationhood – allegorical, or not so allegorical explorations of that 'cult of ruin', as Baucom calls it. The English genre of catastrophe has been intrinsically linked to critical phases of Empire at least since the invasion fantasies and future wars of the late nineteenth-century, flaring again at the waves of decolonisation in the 1940s and 1950s. (Luckhurst 2005b: 84)

Perhaps there is here at least a kernel of an explanation for the striking shift taking place in the 1970s, as in the UK, WWII and the British Empire were more than a generation away, whereas in the post-Vietnam US of the late 1970s and early 1980s, international tensions and threats towards national security were once again on the rise – possibly also making the US novels more forward-looking than the British. Stephen King, author of the popular apocalyptic novel *The Stand* (1978), has described the period in which he wrote it as an unusually turbulent time in US history, following the oil crisis, the Watergate scandal, and the end of the Vietnam War:

There was a feeling – I must admit it – that I was doing a fast, happy tapdance on the grave of the whole world. Its writing came during a troubled period for the world in general and America in particular; we were suffering from our first gas pains in history, we had just witnessed the sorry end of the Nixon administration and the first

presidential resignation in history, we had been resoundingly defeated in Southeast Asia, and we were grappling with a host of domestic problems, from the troubling question of abortion-on-demand to an inflation rate that was beginning to spiral upward in a positively scary way (King 1981/2012: 447–448).

While the 1970s did see a steep rise in localised disaster films in the wake of the highly successful *Airport* (1970), these – which might or might not have been expressions of a sublimated fear of nuclear war – had exhausted themselves come the 1980s (Broderick 1991: 36, Sanders 2009: 14). Early in the new decade, Noel Carroll observed that horror and science fiction film (some of which was, of course, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic) were “the reigning popular forms of the late seventies and early eighties”, and that this popularity had much to do with the social and political context:

The present cycle, like the horror cycle of the thirties and the science fiction cycle of the fifties, comes at a particular kind of moment in American history – one where feelings of paralysis, helplessness, and vulnerability (hallmarks of the nightmare) prevail. If the Western and the crime film worked well as open forums for the debate about our values and our history during the years of the Vietnam war, the horror and science fiction film poignantly expresses the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion. (Carroll 1981: 16)¹⁶

Looking at the fluctuations in the database as a whole, this observation seems to have some validity also for the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives, as it is relatively clear that many of the works considered to be important in the genre are from periods of anxiety, economic recession, and social and political unrest. Disregarding all the potential factors of error, and allowing for some degree of speculation, one possible explanation for these fluctuations is that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic stories have little appeal for, or at least have little impact on, readers and viewers at times of both real crisis and calm – such as the world wars or the 1990s – and that the large number of memorable works in the genre produced in the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1980s reflect a surging interest in these stories among both producers and consumers during the build-up to an anticipated crisis, such as the Second World War, The Space Race and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the so-called Second Cold War of the early 1980s – and in the 2000s, perhaps, terrorism, climate change, and financial collapse.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to analyse the historiography, canonisation, and historical fluctuations of Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster narratives in literature and film through an elementary statistical analysis of previous surveys of the field. Even though there are many uncertainties involved and one should be wary of drawing too far-reaching conclusions from the thirteen surveys used, it is still possible to discern some interesting patterns in the resulting database. Besides

basic facts such as more than half of the database consisting of novels, that female writers and directors stand for less than a tenth of the entries, that more than half of all the stories were written or directed by US authors and directors (and less than a third by British), that almost half of the 35 most mentioned works were about nuclear war, and that many of them were published or released in the 1950s, there are also some intriguing fluctuations, probably having to do with the historical, cultural, medial, social, and political contexts of the stories.

Looking at the database as a whole, it is in fact possible to discern four distinct periods or high points for Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives. These are the early 1800s, when an anonymous translation of Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805) was published in English, and inspired not only a number of British Romantics to write about the last men on earth and the end of the world, but also Mary Shelley's much more secular novel *The Last Man* (1826); the inter-war UK, especially the Depression years of the early 1930s, which saw an unusually large number of memorable apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels; the post-war UK in ca. 1950–1975, coinciding both with the heyday of the so-called cosy catastrophe, a subgenre instigated by John Wyndham, and the dismantling of the British Empire; and, finally, the post-war US, with a steady output from the early 1950s on, but culminating during the so-called Second Cold War of the early 1980s, with a large number of memorable novels and films. To these can be added a fifth, the post-9/11 wave of ca. 2000–2015, much of which consists of zombie narratives in various media, but also of dystopic YA and literary fiction. (Notable periods of general decline were both world wars, and most probably the 1990s, although there were also a few country- and media-specific slumps.)

Through the years, a number of different explanations have been suggested for the attraction of stories about cataclysmic events. They range from Susan Sontag's remark in her classic essay "The Imagination of Disaster" (1965), that in apocalyptic films "one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself", and that they are "concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess" (Sontag 1966: 212–213), and J. G. Ballard's existential assertion that they represent "an attempt to confront the terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game" (Ballard 1977: 130), to Jo Walton's suggestion about the so-called cosy catastrophes, that "their enduring appeal is to the adolescent, who [...] just naturally wants to see the adult world go up in flames and build it again, better" (Walton 2005: 38). Combined with the fact that many elements in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives in general – such as depictions of hostile environments, adult dishonesty, strong emotional content (love, loss, fear, and hatred), and questions of loyalty, friendship, rivalry, and chosenness – would seem to cater to the adolescent mind, this might explain their enormous popularity among teenagers over the last decade. Besides there arguably being something almost inherently narcissistic about stories about the end

of the world (focusing as they often do on the chosenness of a certain individual, group, or at least generation), there is no denying that many apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives deal with subject matter that is related to some of our deepest emotions, anxieties, and fears – of death, powerlessness, separation, and abandonment – but also to fantasies of belongingness, fellowship, and survival, or even sadistic desires and feelings of guilt (Sontag 1966: 223, Wagar 1982: 66–85). As most of these stories include some form of recovery, reconstruction, safe haven, or even utopia, there is also the often exhilarating fantasy of a fresh start, a release from the responsibilities and chores of modern life, and of having the whole world for oneself (Sontag 1966: 215, Wagar 1982: 71–75, Nicholls et al. 2012a, 2012b, Pringle et al. 2013).

While these stories often seem to serve a cathartic function, a purging of emotions neutralising tensions and assuaging fears (Sontag 1966: 225), it would be advisable to distinguish between different types of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives when discussing their lure; even if some forms of attraction can be pinpointed in specific texts, and perhaps even analysed in relation to a particular audience, the range and variation in the narratives dealt with in this study is so wide that speculations about the appeal of the whole corpus risk arriving at blunt generalisations. Different scenarios and threats address different fears (directly or symbolically), and there are also major differences in style, tropes, and reader interest between stories of post-apocalyptic survivors rebuilding a society long after plagues or nuclear wars have run their course, and stories where the protagonists experience virus outbreaks, alien invasions, or zombie apocalypses. In fact, the latter is probably one of the most aberrant types, as it often focuses on gruesome bodily injuries and the dissolution of the individual subject in “the horrifying and disintegrative process of massification” (Luckhurst 2012: 78). Nevertheless, zombie narratives have become one of the most widespread types in recent years, perhaps, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has suggested, because they are an “incarnation of collective anxieties” (Cohen 2012: 401) that challenges both our sense of belonging and of staying in control (as a society, an individual, or a species, even). Besides offering “a permissible groupthinking of the other” and serving as legitimate outlets for aggressions and reminders of our own mortality and the frailty of our bodies, they are, like all monsters, “metaphors for that which disquiets their generative times”, and over the past decade these fears have ranged from terrorism and immigration to financial crisis and climate change (Cohen 2012: 402–405).

Whether or not there is any clear connection between the proliferation of important and memorable disaster narratives and a widespread need for these kinds of stories, it would seem that their lure is far from constant, at least when it comes to novels and films original and/or popular enough to make a lasting impression in the minds of the critics and scholars of the genre. To conclude, then, if the frequency of memorable works or even classics in the genre is somehow indicative of the popularity of or the need for these stories in a society (which isn’t necessarily the

case), we seem to need these stories primarily in anticipation of and preparation for conflicts rather than during actual wars or emergencies, and occasionally as symbolic trauma treatment in the first years following a national or cultural crisis. They seem to function best as pressure valves during periods of build-up to expected conflicts or crises, for letting off emotional steam, and perhaps as a way of mentally preparing for an even bleaker reality which many fear will soon be imminent.

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Notes

¹ It could well be argued that these stories make up a genre of their own; as I. F. Clarke has emphasised, “[t]hese histories of the catastrophe-to-come are quite distinct in mood and intention from all other accounts of coming things. They have their own dedicated roles and separate evolutionary patterns within the tale of the future [...]” (Clarke 2002: xx). The main difference between the apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic disaster story would seem to be that the former depicts an ongoing scenario (such as a viral outbreak or a zombie apocalypse) while the latter focuses on the aftermath of a widespread catastrophe, such as a nuclear war. Confusion is rife, however, and the lines are frequently blurred, which often makes it both difficult and unnecessary to make any strict distinctions between the two types.

² As the surveys are all relatively brief, however, it has not been possible to make distinctions on the importance assigned to individual works based on relative space given in the surveys (as in Williams 1997 and Nordlund 2005).

³ The thirteen surveys are Ketterer 1974: 133–148; Ash 1977; James 1994: 89–92; Clute 1995: 70–71; Clarke 2000; Booker & Thomas 2009: 53–64; Mousoutzanis 2009; Bould & Vint 2011: 29–31, 90–94, 152–154; Seed 2011: 105–110, 113–116; Nicholls et al. 2012a; Nicholls et al. 2012b; Stableford 2012; Pringle et al. 2013. The last four are the most relevant entries in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, and are lightly revised versions of the entries in the 1993 print version (Clute & Nicholls 1993). As most of them are written by slightly different constellations of critics and scholars, they have been regarded as separate surveys.

⁴ For an introduction to the term consecration, see Bourdieu 1996.

⁵ The other print category contains epics and religious texts (which weren’t literally printed at the time they were conceived), but also things like graphic novels.

⁶ The figures when it comes to YA fiction are really too small for any accurate statistics, but it could be mentioned that half (4 out of 8) of the children’s and YA writers are female, which I suspect does reflect a larger number of female writers in that part of the genre, especially in recent years.

⁷ This is perhaps especially the case with the opinions and tastes of the most active readers of the genre (often so called *fans*, loosely organised in a *fandom*), although with the added complication that a substantial part of the reading audience doesn't necessarily share the ideals and convictions of the most active readers, sometimes resulting in bestsellers and blockbusters perceived as emanating from outside the field being frowned upon within the community.

⁸ It should be noted that the statistics are not normalised to accommodate for the fact that the surveys are from the period 1974–2013 (although eleven of the thirteen surveys were written or revised in the 2000s), nor for the fact that the number of books published and films released grew significantly over the course of the twentieth century. Such normalisation might well be possible to achieve, but would ultimately be of relatively little use as my main interest is in the sudden variations between the five-year periods rather than the relative growth of the genre over time.

⁹ It is possible that publishers or studios refrained from publishing or releasing these kinds of stories, as well. The BBFC, for instance, banned the import of horror films to the UK in 1942–1945 (Hill 1958: 9), and very few horror films were made in the UK during WWII.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the only memorable pre-WWII film, *Deluge*, was from 1933, in the same five-year period which saw the largest number of memorable pre-WWII novels.

¹¹ One explanation for the large number of novels from the 1980s is the fact that there were many memorable apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic book series published, which skews the figures slightly.

¹² Although more than half of the 80 films are from the latter part of the decade, almost all the memorable ones – such as *The Road Warrior (Mad Max 2)* (1981), *Le Dernier Combat* (1983), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) – are from the first half, perhaps lending some weight to the argument made above that the memorable titles are often the ones most in tune with the fears and desires of their time.

¹³ Broderick also connects these films to the politics of their time, and concludes his study by stating (in the early 1990s) that "it is difficult to expect films exploiting survivalism to proliferate with the apocalyptic vigor of the neo-cold war '80s" (Broderick 1993: 379).

¹⁴ The term 'cosy catastrophe' was coined by Brian Aldiss in *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (1973).

¹⁵ On Wyndham and the British Empire, see for instance Aldiss 1973: 294; Priest 1979: 195, and Luckhurst 2005a: 130–131.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Carroll's introductory claim that "the Western and the crime film were the dominant genres of the late sixties and early seventies" suggests that analyses like the one attempted in this study should ideally be made on several genres simultaneously (Carroll 1981: 16).

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