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### **The self-sufficiency movement and the apocalyptic image in 1970s British culture.**

The purpose of this paper is to examine post-apocalyptic drama, an important emerging genre of 1970s television, and in particular the series *Survivors* (1975-1977) in the light of what came to be called the self-sufficiency movement – a back-to-the-land philosophy of self-reliance and organic sustainable production which had much in common with the ecological and environmental movements also flourishing through the decade.

*Survivors* was a BBC television drama that ran for three series between 1975 and 1977 and which focussed upon the lives of a tiny numbers of survivors of a global pandemic attempting to subsist and rebuild some form of community. The three series received a generally favourable reception from critics and the public and, over time, respect for the series has grown – following good sales of the DVD box sets, the BBC announced its intention to revive the show with a new series due to debut in Autumn 2008. Academic interest has also grown over recent years alongside a high level of activity from the large and vigorous fan community. Indeed, although I'm not an expert on cult television and its fandom, as far as I know *Survivors* is the only television series to have had an entire website ([www.survivors-mad-dog.org.uk/](http://www.survivors-mad-dog.org.uk/)) dedicated to just one episode of it. The interest in apocalyptic scenarios, of course, remains as strong as it has always been but there is perhaps even more interest in the scenario posed by *Survivors* today than thirty years ago; then, the apocalyptic pandemic was widely seen as a metaphor for nuclear war which was, at the time, a taboo subject for television drama in the UK: following the BBC's banning of Peter Watkins' docudrama *The War Game* in 1965 the subject was to remain almost entirely undiscussed on television screens until the showing of Mick Jackson's *Threads* in 1984. Today the nuclear threat has receded considerably in the public consciousness along with that of the cold war, but the threat of a pandemic is much

more widely discussed given both the recent fear over SARS and, more significantly, the current threat of Avian Influenza H5N1.

In one sense it is easy to see how *Survivors* fits into a specific genre of post-apocalyptic science-fiction that developed from an initial flourishing in the immediate post-war era – a period that saw a range of texts on apocalyptic themes as diverse as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956), Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and Neville Shute's *On the Beach* (1957). Arguably the most influential apocalyptic novel of this period however was John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) which, through its much-imitated scenario of a tiny group of survivors being forced to cooperate and rebuild civilization, established itself as the founding text of what Brian Aldiss categorised as the 'cosy catastrophe' (2001, p. 279) genre. Aldiss' term signifies how limited and parochial he considered the form (he famously described *The Day of the Triffids* as 'utterly devoid of ideas') nonetheless it has found a widespread currency in defining a certain kind of (post) apocalyptic narrative. There is no build-up towards a disaster, no prefiguring of doom, no attempts to hold it off – indeed, the first stage of the complex apocalypse Wyndham depicts is already complete by the time the novel opens. The main character William Masen, having been fortunate to miss the blinding cosmic light show, is only witness to the aftermath as first disease and starvation and then the predation and scavenging of the triffids take their toll on the blinded citizens. *The Day of the Triffids* remains the most well-known example of the genre and has led to several adaptations in the UK alone - twice in the form of radio serials, once as a film but most significantly as a major BBC series developing out of the 1970s boom in apocalyptic television drama and shown in 1981. Recently re-released on DVD, its influence can still be read strongly today in a film like *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002). As if to announce its position within this tradition, when *Survivors* finally made its long-awaited appearance on DVD in 2003, the cover of the accompanying booklet in each series box set featured the tag-line '28 years later...' at the top.

*Survivors* fitted this post-apocalyptic mould perfectly. Its initial scenario of a pandemic that kills virtually the entire population of the world leaving only a tiny number of the eponymous survivors to struggle to stay alive was straight from the Wyndham model. The playing out of the narrative beyond the opening apocalypse

proved to be rather different however: although *Survivors* with its deserted cities, its hostile local chieftans and its return-to-nature imperative clearly owed a great debt to the *The Day of the Triffids*, in its focus on communal living rather than the nuclear family, its lack of an enemy force other than hunger and hostile communities and the open-ended television format that enabled it to explore a much wider area of experience, *Survivors* transcended many of the limitations of the genre, even as it remained in thrall to others. For it is still, in many ways, a very cosy catastrophe. The genre has been criticised for being a very English, middle class vision of the apocalypse where, despite the breakdown of society, the economy and law and order, middle class mores survive when all else fails. This is, I feel, rather an unfair dismissal of what has proven to be a remarkably influential vision of what may be to come, yet it is undeniable that British apocalyptic visions from Wyndham through to *Survivors* and beyond have featured a central cast of middle class protagonists who show an unerring belief that an inherent decency and recourse to traditional morality will be enough to survive in the post-apocalyptic world. It is an oft-made but well-made point how middle-class the *Survivors* were; those with accents deriving not from the home counties are either lazy and/or troublesome labourers or jumped-up hostile chieftans. As one television critic noted the time: 'it's the poor what gets the plague' (Cross 2003, p. 9).

Undoubtedly, part of the thematic divergence *Survivors* demonstrates is due to its form: as an open-ended television drama, *Survivors* is inevitably obliged to depart from the structure of much previous apocalyptic narrative due to its inherent seriality. In the bounded forms of post-apocalyptic novels and their adaptations, the narrative most commonly takes the form of a quest to a place of safety where the process of survival and later renewal are implied but beyond the temporal limits of the diegesis – this can be clearly seen in works like *The Day of The Triffids* or *The Death of Grass*. The *Survivors*, by contrast, achieve the goal of their quest after a few episodes and must then settle down and engage with actually getting on with day to day living in their new world. It is here that the engagement with the contemporary 1970s rise in interest in self-sufficiency begins to show its real influence.

The self-sufficiency movement in Britain was a loosely defined set of groups with different backgrounds and different philosophies of life that were nonetheless united

around a common interest in ideas such as growing your own fruit and vegetables, raising livestock and living a more organic, sustainable life. People were drawn to it from many areas: some came from the ecology movement and brought with them in particular ideas about the dangers of pesticides and additives; others came out of the hippy movements of the 1960s and brought ideals of communal and co-operative living; some were middle-class dropouts from the rat-race who wanted to live a simpler, more home-oriented and fulfilling lifestyle and some were political activists who wished to create a new society. Indeed, there were a rich mix of other motives and philosophies as well, as an examination of the contemporary literature demonstrates.

The important thing about these various groups is that they began to coalesce together to the point that in 1975 the self-sufficiency movement was well-enough established for several things to happen: as we have already seen, *Survivors* started on television but it wasn't alone in the BBC spring schedules – also making its debut at the same time was the classic sitcom *The Good Life* about a suburban couple who attempt to become self-sufficient in their back garden to the horror of their straight-laced and snobbish neighbours; in the same year the Centre for Alternative Technology was set up in Machynlleth as a visitor attraction and educational centre - which it remains to this day - and *Practical Self-Sufficiency* magazine appeared, demonstrating that there was enough of a movement to sustain a regular publication (it continues to this day under the name *Country Smallholding*). The opening editorial of issue one sets the tone for what the magazine, and the movement it represented, believed:

This magazine has come into being because there is a need for it. The country faces grave economic difficulties and the likelihood of severe shortages, Rapid inflation, unemployment, soaring food prices, chemically adulterated foods and the increasing dehumanising of our Society, have all contributed to a growing awareness of the need to be more self-reliant – to grow more of our own food – to make less demands on a welfare state which can no longer cope with the needs of its citizens... The need is for direct experience of the whole and natural life, irrespective of the situation in which we find ourselves – whether it be in the centre of a city or in a commune in Wales. This is of paramount importance, not only for us, but for our children – for knowledge and experience gained in childhood are never lost. (Editorial, PSS Issue 1, p. 3)

The economic situation of the early seventies had certainly done a lot to contribute to a widening interest in the ideas of self-sufficiency – the 1973 oil crisis, the miners' strike in 1974, rampant domestic inflation and the introduction of the three-day-week

in the UK, leading to widespread and long-lasting power cuts around the country, meant that alternative ideas about energy production and living more independently of central services found a wide audience. In addition, they made the post-apocalyptic world of the *Survivors* with its candlelight, oil lamps and enforced separation from modern infrastructure perhaps a little more familiar to its contemporary audience in the mid-1970s than it would be today. A crucial element of the philosophy of the self-sufficiency movement is the importance placed upon the knowledge of traditional skills. From the same editorial it is claimed that:

this is primarily a practical magazine where we shall seek to rediscover and pass on knowledge of traditional skills and practices of good husbandry and craftsmanship. Much of this 'small-scale' knowledge is in danger of dying out – so accustomed have we become to having everything 'laid on' for us. In order to do this we need your help in the form of letters, suggestions, advice and contributions from your experience.

This was, according to *Survivors* creator Terry Nation, his main interest and drive in creating the series: 'our civilisation had the technology to land a man on the moon but as individuals we don't even have the technology to make an iron spearhead – we are less practical than iron-age man' says central character Abby in episode two. This also echoed a favourite point of argument made by John Seymour, one of the most important and influential figures in the self-sufficiency movement, who liked to challenge people to work out the multi-layered processes of manufacture that led to the creation of even the most basic items. Seymour would later write a book called *The Forgotten Household Crafts* (1987). The building-up of an 'archive' of traditional skills - from woodworking to animal husbandry to growing wheat to making soap – was a central preoccupation of the self-sufficiency movement and one that came to shape the narrative of *Survivors* to a powerful degree. We follow the characters in the community as they try to remember what they knew about gardening, as they research veterinary skills from any books they can find, as they experiment and make mistakes and as new people arrive broadening the success of the community with their previous experience and skills. It is in many ways not unlike a dramatised version of *Practical Self Sufficiency's* 'Getting it Together' pages, whereby several pages were set aside in every issue for short items sent in by readers asking each other for advice, swapping tips, sharing experiences and offering surplus for barter.

There is an undeniable apocalyptic drive underpinning the self-sufficiency movement, which popular memory of it as beards, sandals and woolly jumpers greatly underestimates. There is a real urgency in the rhetoric seen in these contemporary texts, frequent allusions to possible disasters ahead, although unlike that crop of early 1970s prophets who influenced them (I'm thinking of writers like Alvin Toffler (1970), Paul Ehrlich (1971), Gordon Rattray Taylor (1970) and Edward Goldsmith (1972)), the self-sufficiency movement rarely identifies any particular future event – they are resolutely *not* in the business of prophecy. Indeed, they are equally concerned with the ongoing ecological problems of the day, as much events to react to as anything yet to come. They are neither looking forward towards an apocalyptic future, nor, as some might have it, looking back in some medievalist sense. There is certainly a regard for, and idiosyncratic study of, the past - yet the building of this archive of knowledge, both traditional and innovative, is, through and through, a *futuristic* act. It is *not*, however, an ark against future catastrophe; the self-sufficiency movement is envisioning its own discrete future, a future that will not be traumatised or jolted by apocalyptic revelation. An alternative future that proceeds from its alternative present – the disasters that are prefigured in its apocalyptic rhetoric are those that will affect the mainstream society it has already left behind. But the self-sufficiency movement is not some form of survivalist cult either – it doesn't seek to form a new way of life in order to hold out and weather the travails ahead, it proposes a new way of life simply for its own sake. Future catastrophes, in this philosophy, will be largely irrelevant. We can perhaps see a parallel with Rowley's famous definition of an apocalypse as a future that breaks into the present with a sort of rupture, rather than the prophetic future that develops from it in temporal terms (1963, p. 38): in this sense the self-sufficiency movement has already undergone its own reflexive apocalyptic rupture and is already living its own independent future. This is reminiscent of Berger's (1999) argument that what we consider contemporary apocalyptic is actually form of post-apocalyptic, that post-Auschwitz and post-Hiroshima, we are living in a kind of ante-apocalyptic stasis with the main disasters already over. I disagree with Berger on this, but I think he is correct to seek to problematise this kind of late twentieth century apocalypticism. What I would venture to suggest is that rather than view these post-apocalyptic narratives as a sort of adjunct to or development from the mainstream apocalyptic, we should view them rather as a shift in focus, a move to the post-armageddon stage of the apocalyptic process showing both a secular concern for

those left behind and an interest towards the structural and historical confusions of an ending of time.

What, it seems to me, is so radical about the self-sufficiency movement is that in both re-evaluating the past and proposing a fundamentally different view of what the future might look like, it is also challenging some basic tenets of historical temporality. Apocalyptic texts throughout the twentieth century have proposed that the effect of some global disaster would be to compel the survivors into returning to a kind of autarkic squalor; the nightmarish visions of post-apocalyptic landscapes have been in a large part defined not by what they contain but by what they have lost. The familiar visual grammar of the post-apocalyptic – the ruins, the deserted city streets, the empty houses and abandoned cars and the declining roads – offer an eloquent testimony to everything that will be forcibly abandoned after the apocalypse. Being compelled to return to the land and eke out a basic sustenance while having to make do without all the comforts and facilities remembered from the pre-apocalypse world has long been an accepted trope of how awful these futures will be as well as providing the reader of these texts with the reflexive frisson offered by reading a speculative future nightmare from the comforts of the modern world. These attitudes were particularly sharpened in the 1970s when the discourse of being forcibly medievalised was surrounding events in South East Asia. While the American army seemed intent on carrying out the notorious orders of General Le May to ‘bomb [the Vietnamese] back to the stone age’, at the same time the domestic revolutionary movements they were combating seemed intent on a similar mission themselves. This keystone year of 1975 also saw a far more sinister version of middle classes abandoning urban life and moving to agricultural communes when, in April, the Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh and ended the long civil war in Cambodia . They launched the most radical revolutionary plan ever witnessed: the cities were emptied and former urban dwellers reassigned to live in farming co-operatives. All ‘former people’ were now declared ‘peasants’ and Year Zero was proclaimed in what seemed far closer to medieval serfdom than anything else. And yet the radio stations still operated, the air force, the trains, the pharmaceuticals industry, international trade – they all continued. And the revolutionary authorities of Democratic Kampuchea, far from considering their actions backward looking, saw the purging of ‘old’ (modern, capitalist) Cambodia as wiping the slate clean and allowing the foundation of a new, peasant society – they

referred to themselves as the most advanced country in the world (Chandler 1999; Kiernan 1996). Khmer self-sufficiency was their goal, just as ‘juche’ – ‘self-reliance’ – had replaced Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology of North Korea in 1971. Of course, the western reaction to the Khmer Rouge revolution was to denounce it in horrified terms and view it, in the words of Elizabeth Becker, as ‘a deliberate step backwards – away from modernity...shunning the advances of the industrial revolution in its effort to become a self-sufficient agricultural nation’ (Becker 1978). And yet for the British economist Malcolm Caldwell who visited Democratic Kampuchea in 1978 this wasn’t necessarily a bad thing: ‘I have seen the past and it works’ he reflected, ironically reflecting Lincoln Steffens’ famous 1921 comment on the Soviet Union ‘I have seen the future and it works’. Marxism, that philosophy of progress and modernity, seemed to have been radically reconfigured in Cambodia.

Those self-sufficiency enthusiasts who were setting up smallholdings in the 1970s shared little or nothing of the ideology and philosophy of the Khmer Rouge (although Allaby and Bunyard, two of the leading theorists of the self-sufficiency movement, wrote approvingly of Chinese communes as a model for the self-sufficient society (1980, pp. 229, 231)) and yet I think that what they did have in common was a challenge to enlightenment notions of progress which stated that the world of the future, rather than continuing in a trajectory of progress and development, may actually look rather more like our past than the traditional science fiction visions of an increasingly technological world. It is this tension, it seems to me, which is fundamentally the one underpinning much of the comedy of *The Good Life*. For Margo, the fact that her neighbours keep goats, chickens and pigs isn’t in itself too much of a problem – indeed, at times she enjoys displaying the Goode’s garden to her guests in the manner of an exhibit. What seems to upset her most is the apparently unexplainable fact that her neighbours seem *happy* to have their electricity and gas and telephone cut off, to live without dishwashers, hairdryers and colour televisions, to patch their worn clothes and fashion garments out of old bits of material, to make do and mend. To a wealthy middle-class woman of the 1970s like Margo, these activities would seem like memories of the enforced self-reliance of her parents’ generation during the war – the very thing that post-war consumerism was supposed to have served to banish. And this is the real radicalism of the self-sufficiency

movement – it proposes that our future may look something like our past but, unlike the apocalyptic texts of Wyndham and others, it views this as something to be celebrated rather than dreaded. The Ecologist magazine, an important text of the self-sufficiency movement, described itself proudly in its advertising as the ‘journal of the post industrial age’. Again, a challenge to temporal progress – ‘post industrial’, at once futuristic and suggestive of neo-medievalism. This strange tension was pivotal also in another piece of BBC television drama from 1975 - the curious children’s series *The Changes* in which the population suddenly reject all forms of technology and return to pre-industrial ways of life – a stone age society within the diegesis of 1970s Britain. One fan website describes the show’s resolution, where *The Changes* are reversed and the world returns to modernity, as a ‘shame’ (Gosling [no date]).

It is in *Survivors* though that we see this radicalism at its keenest. The first series began, in its initial episodes, by inhabiting a well-trodden post-apocalyptic diegesis of brutal, lawless settlements, people afflicted with disease and starvation and nomadic searches for safety and shelter. In this it resembled many other similar texts and led to the criticism by viewers that in its early stages every episode seemed to be about three men in a land rover with a gun. Tensions between writers and producers offscreen were mirrored in a narrative tension between nomadism and settlement that led, by the second half of the first series and the whole of the second series, into a quite different drama – one no longer about men in land rovers with guns, but about long-term planning, food production, craft development, community building and all the other concerns of the self-sufficiency movement. Here was a post-apocalyptic drama where people enjoyed themselves, where life was purposeful and fulfilling, where celebration and play were featured, where, it seemed, the sun shone more. The *Survivors* still have to scratch an unstable life from the soil, they still contend with disease and the weather and hostile neighbours, they still inhabit essentially the same diegesis as post-apocalyptic survivors in many other texts and yet the discourse of the self-sufficiency movement has transformed this from a nightmarish future to something really rather novel: a post-apocalyptic happy ending. At a time when we are being forced to consider a coming world without cheap oil, transport, power and the advantages of our recent decades, the influence of *Survivors* and the self-sufficiency movement should remind us not only that the future could potentially be rather less progressive than we tend to assume but that if a return to a more

traditional, agricultural way of life is forced upon us, it may not necessarily be the nightmare we might fear.