Introduction

By Anders Kølle

Laurence A. Rickels is Emeritus Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Professor of Art and Theory at the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe, and Sigmund Freud Professor of Media and Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. His highly original and legendary studies include the titles Aberrations of Mourning, The Case of California, and I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick. The selection brought here is from a recent catalogue-study, Wood(s): On Identification with Lost Causes, which was published in connection with the group exhibition, Wood(s), Rickels organized at the Zwinger Galerie, Berlin, in 2013.

Rickels explores the mobilization and technologization of wood(s) through three main trajectories: The advancement of Shakespeare’s Birnam Wood, the Trojan Horse, and the SF writer Wyndham’s walking and carnivorous trees in The Day of the Triffids. Wood turned mobile, nomadic and into war machines offers in Rickels’ compelling work not only a genealogy and exploration of an early techne and an investigation of the marching forests as crowd symbols and military symbol, but partakes also, and perhaps most importantly, in Rickels’ continued psychoanalytical and philosophical research on “unmourning”. The vehicle for his analysis in this case is the itinerary of German science fiction, which owing to the season of its realizations in Nazi Germany, underwent repression during the Cold War. His newly published work SPECTRE (Anti-Oedipus Press, Indiana, 2013) extracts the posttraumatic reception of the Nazi era from between the lines of the Cold War adventures of James Bond. A new version of the excerpt brought here will appear in Rickels’ coming publication, also with Anti-Oedipus Press: Germany. A Science Fiction.
Laurence Rickels

Trees Walking

Are the walking trees inheriting the earth in John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* another fulfillment of the prophecy of the witches in *Macbeth*? If it is conceded it is not by direct citation but by non sequitur. In response to the evidence of the post-Apocalyptic spread of untended nature – and in the very place where the development of instant neighborhoods not so long ago was criticized for erasing the natural setting – the protagonist-narrator, William Mason, touches on the notion of revenge and then spills the blood in the *Macbeth* citation, but as uncanny harbinger of survival, regrowth, and other return engagements. “The countryside is having its revenge all right,” I said. “Nature seemed about finished then – ‘Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?’” (202). The vengeful return of defeated, finished nature overflows from the murdered father’s unstoppable lifeblood. The walking trees are the advance guard of this development.

Like the Martian tripod-like war machine in *War of the Worlds*, a triffid advances by the limping, lurching momentum of its three-pronged root that otherwise rests in the earth but can also move above ground: “When it ‘walked’ it moved rather like a man on crutches. Two of the blunt ‘legs’ slid forward, then the whole thing lurched as the rear one drew almost level with them, then the two in front slid forward again” (27). The mobile forest of injured father figures can be stopped, if only for the time being, by electricity or fire. And yet triffids also continuously rub their front twigs together or against the stem, which produces not sparks, however, but a kind of communication among them.

A triffid packs a tendril it whips out to sting its victim with a dose of poison. It turns out that triffids belong to the sideshow of plants that eat flesh. They sting not to protect themselves but to hunt their quarry, which you can follow and understand as consequence of the stinging only if you wait and watch as long as they do around the victims. “The stinging tendril did not have the muscular power to tear firm flesh, but it had strength enough to pull shreds from a decomposing body and lift them to the cup on its stem” (31).

The triffids make short shrift of the evidence of an end that is final, which reaches the narrator as stench at once unforgettable and indescribable. “When I woke to it that morning it convinced me beyond doubt that the end had come. Death is just the shocking end of animation; it is dissolution that is final” (125). The triffids administer a return to nature that proceeds more swiftly than history to lift the depressive effect from the sites of the end. “And, curiously, as the living things increasingly took charge, the effect of the place became less oppressive. As it passed beyond the scope of any magic wand, most of the ghosts were going with it, withdrawing slowly into history” (192).

Mason was one of the lucky few to survive a triffid’s sting, which struck his eyes. He was in the hospital with his eyes covered up for treatment on the night that was the night almost everyone else watched a bright cloud of comet debris fill the sky, the light show that left them by the next morning blind. Mankind is largely wiped out by the consequences of general blindness. The triffids benefit by the evolutionary advantage they now hold. Mason, too, benefits. The catastrophe has turned around his schizoid retirement from life toward a new opening:

*My way of life, my plans, ambitions, every expectation I had had, they were all wiped out at a stroke, along with the conditions that had formed them. I suppose that had I had any relatives or close attachments to mourn I should have felt suicidally derelict at that moment. But what had seemed at times a rather empty existence turned out now to be lucky. My mother and father were dead, my one attempt to marry had miscarried some years before, and there was no particular person dependent upon me. And, curiously, what I found that I did feel – with a consciousness that it was against what I ought to be feeling – was release…. (46)*

The three dots that follow the “release” introduce into the open ending, the uncontainment of his illicit feeling, the three-pronged advance of the triffids. But they can also be connected up with the other series of reversals leading to the protagonist’s own triangulation. In the new world order Mason finds that he has changed places with everyone else who can still see his way to
survival. “Curiously I realized that in all this I had met no other person who was searching for someone else. Every one of them had been ... snapped clean away from friends or relatives to link them with the past, and was beginning a new life with people who were strangers. Only I, as far as I could see, had promptly formed a new link” (163-4).

Before the end of the world Mason thought of loneliness as a negative that could be supplied as something temporary, like the absence of company.

That day I learned that it was much more. It was something which could press and oppress, could distort the ordinary and play tricks with the mind. Something which lurked inimically all around, stretching the nerves and twanging them with alarms, never letting one forget that there was no one to help, no one to care. It showed one as an atom adrift in vastness, and it waited all the time its chance to frighten and frighten horribly (169-70).

This drifting atom is the bouncing ball to follow in the reception or interpretation of the disaster, which entails a key elision. The speech of hope another seeing-eye leader delivers to his pack, which reiterates the survivor ideology that is the consensus by the end of the novel, that the catastrophe at least – at last! – spared the earth the traumatic history (or rather the ongoing prospect) of nuclear warfare, fits a timeline of denial:

From August 6, 1945, the margin of survival has narrowed appallingly. Indeed, two days ago it was narrower than it is at this moment. If you need to dramatize, you could well take for your material the years succeeding 1945, when the path of safety started to shrink to a tightrope along which we had to walk with our eyes deliberately closed to the depths beneath us. (95-96)

In a 1951 novel in which the future seems no more remote or timeless than the next day, the evacuation of German science fiction and the history of its realizations in the course of WWII is particularly pressing. There is one explicit reference to WWII as part of the novel’s prehistory, which is embedded in Mason’s one intact souvenir of his own past, specifically of his father: “My father once told me that before Hitler’s war he used to go round London with his eyes more widely open than ever before, seeing the beauties of buildings that he had never noticed before – and saying good-by to them” (70). But then when he next admits that he has a similar feeling Mason abruptly interrupts himself and, by the force of the catastrophe upon his world now, subsumes and displaces his father’s earlier forecast as premature. “Much more than anyone could have hoped for had survived that war – but this was an enemy they would not survive. It was not wanton smashing and willful burning that they waited for this time: it was simply the long, slow, inevitable course of decay and collapse” (ibid.).

The paternal tour of London in anticipation of destruction is revisited and erased by the son’s later London visit on a mission to remember the past, which concludes this loop of exclusion of the traumatic history of WWII.

Once – not that year, not the next, but later on – I stood in Piccadilly Circus again, looking round at the desolation and trying to re-create in my mind’s eye the crowds that once swarmed there. I could no longer do it. Even in my memory they lacked reality. There was no tincture of them now. They had become as much a back cloth of history as the audiences in the Roman Colosseum or the army of the Assyrians, and, somehow, just as far removed from me. (192)

The reversal of the relationship to the recent past, to one’s dead, folds inside the back cloth a reference not only to the “poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage” but also to photographic practice. The satellites orbiting the future world on the eve of blindness convey photography of a new POV that isn’t human. The Whole Earth Catalog promoted the ecological identification with the earth, the rescue of nature from the prospect of earth’s nuclear devastation, as effect of or afterthought to the first satellite photo of the “whole earth,” which was the catalog’s first and iconic cover. Before proceeding with the product placement of ecological consumerism as new mode of adaptation to the alternate prospect of the end of the world, Stewart Brand mounted a public campaign to get NASA to confirm by its release the rumor of this SF POV. The encyclopedic catalog looked forward to the Web; but it also projected a half-empty frontier zone, presumably post-Apocalyptic, in which pioneers were starting over from scratch, ecologically, but with the help of a handbook. The inspiration for Star Trek was the Western, which was to be projected onto the conquest of space.
In *The Day of the Triffids* the interception of the rocket by the satellite, which reroutes the evil in human history, already blocks reception of the Nazi era. “Sustained research in rocketry had at last succeeded in attaining one of its objectives. It had sent up a missile, which stayed up. It was, in fact, possible to fire a rocket far enough up for it to fall into an orbit” (22). It was known as early as 1945, when Arthur C. Clarke published “Extra-Terrestrial Relays” in *Wireless World*, that communications satellites were technically possible. Beginning in 1951 Clark’s science fiction made the attainment of the Outer Space perspective upon the earth the precondition for contact between earthlings and sentient beings from other planets.

In 1957 the first successfully launched satellite, *Sputnik 1*, escalated the space race as Cold War exclusive. But that only the rocket to the moon counted as ultimate victory reaches back into the prehistory of Nazi German realization of German science fiction. Science fiction as the positing of hypotheses in advance of their possible realization came to an end with the takeoff of the V2 rocket, which drew a Before and After line through SF reckoning. Henceforward the future address of science fiction would bear relation by denial and integration to the Nazi era of realization of first contact.

The 1962 film adaptation, *The Day of the Triffids*, keeps WWII close: survival is secured through an alliance between a French woman and the American protagonist, Bill Masen, who has to abandon London to get to the turning point. He addresses his French partner’s depressed mood following the loss of her fellow survivors. Yes, he knows: “You survive: Why?” He knows all about it: “from the war.” For Masen, an American Naval officer who by the end helps his group join by submarine waiting at Gibraltar the greater group of the sighted, the path to survival is across the sea.

With Masen in London, we witness the consequence of the morning blindness as a series of interruptions of the ability to bring voyage by machines to a successful close. A ship is lost at sea, doubly so without 24-7 radio assistance. A plane’s blind pilot and co-pilot can’t be guided down for emergency landing by the abandoned tower. At closer range the scene of botched arrival at the end station shows a train entering without slowing down or stopping – like the legendary film shot of a train moving toward the camera and thus into the audience. According to these scenes of catastrophic nonarrival, it is the coupling of eyesight as system that has been withdrawn by the general blindness. The few remaining eye witnesses must restore the system of coupled sight.

While en route the loner Masen acquires by the selection process of catastrophic shock and aftershocks a prefab family of French woman and English girl. At the train station, Masen saved the girl from a blind man’s attempt to use her as his seeing-eye slave or prosthesis. Together they cross the sea to France, where they encounter a community of the “See French.” Masen wants to keep moving – to yet another naval base – but the woman in charge wants to keep her group in place and intact. But then a sighted group on another plane of reaction to trauma party-crashes the community from on high, driving all boundaries apart, until all that remains is at the disposal of the triffids. Only the woman in charge gets away with the Anglo-American unit. The members of this new family unit fall into place without tension or complication.

To make it to the rescue by submarine the best weapon against the triffids turns out to be diversion. Masen tries gunfire, electrification of the fence, then flame throwing. The little girl figures out that the ambulatory wood follows the sound of the generator. Sound, according to the final strategy, can lead the triffids far away, “like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.” They get this far because the girl can identify with the triffids. While the wood is off advancing to the bait of the sound like the lost children of Hamelin, the family system gets away.

The couple’s therapy/theory Wyndham inherited from H.G. Wells is limited in the film adaptation to a couple of scientists, who through the epidemic blindness end up stranded on an island. Ensconced within their research lab in the crypt of a tower they missed the blinding night lightshow. Now the husband’s science gets a restart and the marriage is saved through the struggle to survive the locally proliferating carnivorous trees. The triffids are ready for their close-up around and inside the *Frankenstein*-style research tower. The scientist kills a specimen for lab experimentation. Nothing seems to destroy the tissue samples cut out of the tree that otherwise lacks circulatory and nervous systems. When the cut-up dead tree on the gurney is briefly left unattended it reanimates, reattaches its severed parts, and gets away to rally
the wood for the final assault on the couple inside the tower. But when the triffids corner the couple, the scientist in hopeless desperation aims seawater at them from the emergency hose. But he thus scores a first victory. Triffids cannot withstand contact with seawater, indeed they go up in smoke as might fire put out by water, a roundabout reference to the UK as emergency island, over which the first postponement of the German Blitz was secured.

Before the meteorite-sparked blindness takes over, Masen, who is bound to see, exchanges goodbye with his doctor: “See you in the morning, I hope.” “I hope so.” The first blind man Masen encounters next morning is the doctor, who asks his healed patient to test his eyes for any reflex at all, any hope. That’s a negative. Then the doctor asks Masen to get the black bag from the office next door. While he is alone he chooses death by defenestration. This Latin term isn’t used. That there is no other word in English for crashing and falling through the window to death below has to do with its relatively recent coinage. It originated like the golem-as-superhero in Prague and around that time to describe specific murders leading to the Thirty Years War. It was this devastating war as civil or sibling conflict that launched, not only according to Philip K. Dick in The Transmigration of Timothy Archer, the modern German chapter of the history of loss reversal. For Dick there was a black hole in history through which the Thirty Years War and WWII were in direct communication.

In the movie’s carefully mapped setting of Allies-only survival the advance of the triffids carries forward a certain modern German compulsion to roll over losses into reversal or denial of the end as “final victory.” Salty see-water also signifies tears of grief, which, though they may not reverse blindness, bring down the triffids, otherwise the unbeatable prospect of a lost cause not given up as lost.

REFERENCES