

Countries of the Blind:
Blindness and the Creation of Other Worlds in
“The Country of the Blind”, “The Black
Grippe” and *The Day of the Triffids*.

by

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A thesis
submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in English

Victoria University of Wellington

2014

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: The Country of the Blind	17
Chapter 2: The Black Grippe	43
Chapter 3: The Day of the Triffids	65
Conclusion.....	100
Works Cited.....	108

Abstract

This thesis examines the depiction of mass blindness in three works: H.G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind", Edgar Wallace's "The Black Grippe" and John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. In their description of a near-universal impairment, blindness, these texts challenge the typical portrayal of disability in fiction, as an affliction affecting an individual. They reflect how society has been constructed around particular assumptions of ability and how that might be different in another society, be it an isolated village or a world changed by infection or Cold War era weapons. In their depictions of the sighted people in these worlds, they highlight the distinction between disability and impairment, including in one case a sighted man disabled by a society constructed for and by blind people. I place these texts in a context of the time of writing and argue that they themselves give context to more recent discussions of disability – and diversity generally – in speculative fiction. They demonstrate the unique potential of speculative fiction to move beyond an individualised representation of disability by the creation of new worlds.

Acknowledgements

This journey has marked by discussions and words of encouragement too numerous to detail. My thanks go to all those who, in various ways, supported my exploration of the wider topic of disability in speculative fiction, to those who have (over far more than the past two years) shown me the potential in imagined worlds, and to those who have helped me to grow my understanding of disability and to realise how powerful such an understanding can be.

I would particularly like to thank my supervisors, Anna Jackson and Harry Ricketts, for their invaluable guidance and patient feedback.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of members of the Critical Diagnosis Network, both directly in their comments on my topic, but also in introducing me to wider research in related areas.

I am grateful to the staff at the University of Liverpool Special Collections Archive who facilitated my use of the John Wyndham Archive, and for the assistance of a Faculty Research Grant in accessing the collection.

Thank you to Lee and Celine for an extraordinarily fast piece of translation and to Anita, Cara, Emma, Grace, and Katrina for proofreading and reference-wrangling. Thank you also to those at my workplaces who granted me time, flexibility, support, and tolerance of the ever-growing stacks of books behind my desk.

Lastly, thank you to Kelly, not only for the provision of proofreading, caffeine, and clean socks, but also the kind of support that anyone would be incredibly lucky to have. I put the Oxford comma in the previous sentence just for you.

Introduction

*"You'll learn," the blind man answered. "There is much to learn in the world."
"Has no-one told you, 'In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed man is king'?"
"What is blind?" asked the blind man carelessly over his shoulder.*

— H. G. Wells, "The Country of the Blind"

"And do you expect me," he asked with acerbity, "to go to the Prime Minister of England and tell him that in fourteen days the whole of the world is going blind? My dear good man, if you published that sort of story you would scare the people to death and set back the practice of medicine a hundred years! Why, we should all be discredited!"

— Edgar Wallace, "The Black Grippe"

Granted that they do have intelligence, then that would leave us with only one important superiority – sight. We can see and they can't. Take away our vision and the superiority is gone. Worse than that – our position becomes inferior to theirs because they are adapted to a sightless existence, and we are not.

— John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids*

If, as many have suggested, eyesight is the most important and most fundamental of the human senses, then imagining a world without it is inevitably going to be a significant departure from our own world. Works such as H. G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind", Edgar Wallace's "The Black Grippe" and John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, where blindness becomes the majority state across a society, offer an opportunity for a new approach to examining the portrayal of disability in fiction and for reflection back onto our own world.

A focus on such creations of new worlds and societies is in contrast to most analyses of disability in literature which focus on an individual disabled character (or a number of such characters), assessing the extent to which their portrayal is realistic, the characters' level of agency, whether problematic stereotypes are employed, and so on. Examples relating to the subject of this thesis, blindness, include J.L. Langworthy's 1930 article, "Blindness in Fiction: A Study of the Attitude of Authors Towards Their Blind Characters" which divides the most common portrayals into four categories (idealised, repugnant, extremely clever, and normal) and a 1989 article "Shackled Imagination – Literary Illusions about Blindness", in which Deborah Kent cites work by blind authors as the significant exception to the usual motif of blindness as tragedy (149–150). David Bolt's 2006 article, "Beneficial Blindness: Literary Representation and the So-Called Positive Stereotyping of People with Impaired Vision", further explores some of the conceptions noted by Langworthy, arguing against the use of apparently positive, as well as negative, stereotypes.

The importance of the portrayal of disabled people in media goes beyond abstract discussion. In *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994), Joseph P. Shapiro connects changes in the fictional portrayal of disabled characters with the disability rights movement (32–37). The representation of disabled fictional characters has been a cause for disabled activists (with the US National Federation of the Blind being a strong player). Actions have included their use of media presence to highlight the ableist stereotypes of the movie *Mr Magoo* (Gabias) and a letter writing campaign against the portrayal of an "oblivious, socially inept, clumsy blind person" in the sitcom *Good and Evil* (Pierce). These stereotypes are considered not only damaging to society as a whole, but as having a specific effect on policy and service delivery. Michael Oliver, who first used the term "social model of

disability”, states that “professionals are clearly influenced by cultural images and ideological constructions of disability as an individual, medical and tragic problem” (64). He explicitly draws a causal relationship between the fact that cultural images focus on individual rehabilitation and individual rehabilitation becoming the focus of professional intervention.

This focus on individual characters (alongside accessibility of the work and, in instances where performance is involved, whether the impairment is shared by the person portraying the character) is attributable to a number of factors. Disabled people form a statistical minority in the world (though a larger one than many would assume) and a still smaller one in literature. This is reinforced by the fact that disability encompasses people with a range of impairments, be they physical, sensory, neurological, psychological, or some combination thereof, and that there is inconsistency and some dispute when it comes to application of the term.

However, this focus on individual characters has clear and significant limitations. Oliver argues that “the problem with these cultural images, as with professional constructions, is that they ignore issues of social prejudice and institutional discrimination” (65). Whilst it is certainly possible to focus on an individual character’s experience of prejudice and discrimination within, and from, society, the disabling aspects of our society are so pervasive as to be hard to recognise, with the exception of specific and individual points of difficulty or unfairness. The three works in this thesis, by constructing societies in which the overwhelming majority of people have a specific impairment, absolute blindness, lend themselves to an exploration of disability in our own world. While they are not unique in describing societies in which all people have an impairment, these three texts form a natural group. They are concerned with one specific impairment, were written within fifty years of each other by authors in the south of England, and there is

evidence of influence of one author on another (Wells's influence on Wyndham is particularly well documented). Despite this, and clear similarities in some parts of the texts, they are also very different, differences which can often be attributed to the historical context and the personal experience of the authors.

The first of these is H. G. Wells's 1904 short story "The Country of the Blind" which was later reworked as a novella of the same title, published in 1938. The story challenges the saying "in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king", from which it derives its title, by portraying a sighted mountain climber who comes across a legendary valley inhabited by a people who have for generations been completely without sight, lacking even any concept of such a sense. The protagonist initially believes his sightedness will render him superior in this civilisation, but struggles in a world created according to the needs of blind people, rather than sighted people like himself. This story has most commonly been interpreted as a symbolic representation of a society which oppresses free thought and speech, in which blindness represents ignorance and narrow mindedness. I argue, instead, that one reading of the text places it far ahead of its time in understanding disability as socially constructed, and consider the work in the context of Wells's personal experience of disability.

First published in 1951, John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* was heavily influenced by "The Country of the Blind" – a character specifically references the story, as well as what is perhaps Wells's most famous work, *The War of the Worlds*. Set in what appears in most respects to be 1950s England, but is probably intended to be a decade or two later, the novel tells a story of near-universal, and sudden, blindness. The disintegration of society in the wake of this blindness, caused by what is originally thought to be a meteor but is more likely a satellite-based weapon, facilitates the subsequent rise of the triffids –

walking, carnivorous, possibly sentient plants. Whilst these plants have become by far the best known aspect of the novel, and of Wyndham's work as a whole, I argue that *The Day of the Triffids* is primarily concerned with (dis)ability, evolution, and the connections between environment, bodies, survival, and dominance. In many ways, the depiction of blindness takes a straight forward disability-as-tragedy narrative, depicting both individual devastation and the disintegration of society that results from blindness, though it does challenge the attachment of moral value to sightedness. However, a less literal reading, exploring the idea of the triffids in the context of analyses of disability, indicates a more complex analysis, transforming the novel from a depiction of tragedy to a work which explores and challenges hierarchies and perceptions of ability.

Edgar Wallace's short story "The Black Grippe" is set in London circa 1920 and depicts a temporary and predictable mass blindness. Although less well known than the other main texts discussed in this thesis, "The Black Grippe" is significant as a medical portrayal of blindness which neither individualises disability nor associates it with negative moral judgements. It thus challenges the idea that such a medicalised portrayal is incompatible with one which takes account of social structures and interventions. It is also a probable influence on *The Day of the Triffids* and there are a number of similarities between the texts, including the London setting and the use of those with pre-existing blindness as guides.

Therefore, this thesis explores the portrayal not so much of disabled people, but of societies where an impairment (specifically blindness) is the majority state and is to a greater or lesser extent the norm. All of these works could be classified as speculative fiction, from the overt science fiction of *The Day of the Triffids* to the mythical and magic-realist tones of "The Country of the Blind". Disability in speculative fiction is often discussed in terms of the ability of

technology or magic to provide cures or produce a normative body. However, as I shall discuss further below, speculative fiction also has the potential to create new worlds, whether they be a potential future, or worlds existing in parallel to, or completely independent from, our own.

The social model of disability defines disability (as distinct from impairment) in social rather than medical terms. While an impairment may be physical (in the broader sense, that is, including neurological function) and individual, disability is a social construct, a form of oppression by a society designed for those with normative bodies and neurological makeup. The emergence of the social model is generally traced back to the 1950s and 1960s and the US Civil Rights movement. One of the earliest formal statements of the concept, by an British based political organisation in 1976, described disability as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities” (UPIAS).

In 1983, Michael Oliver coined the term “social model of disability”. It has since become a cornerstone of the disability rights movement and disability studies criticism, arguably viewed as all-encompassing to an extent not envisaged or intended by Oliver. It is particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom (as indicated by the regional preference for terms such as “disabled person” in contrast to the preference for “person-first language” (i.e. use of phrases such as ‘person with a disability’) in the United States). The model has been criticised for failing, in its focus on disability, to take account of the impact of some impairments, particularly those involving pain, and in a 2001 article Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson describe it as having become a “sacred cow”. Whilst not dismissing its importance and usefulness, they argue

that a more complex approach is needed, one taking account of a greater range of circumstances and personal experiences.

If we accept the idea of disability as a social construct, writing about societies in which (almost) all members would be disabled in our own society should produce portraits of worlds where impairments do not necessarily result in disablement – or a person considered non-disabled in our own world could be disabled in a world not designed for them. Such worlds would perhaps include structures, both physical and social, which incorporate what is considered assistive technology in our own world (but could just be “technology” in another). However, the equation of impairment and disability, particularly when it comes to something considered as fundamental as sight, is pervasive in our society, and the potential for such a fundamentally different world is difficult to imagine even by disabled writers. The picture that emerges is, therefore, far more complex, varying according to the writers’ own experiences, the time of writing, the dominant models of disability in that period and whether they considered themselves to be writing about disability at all. The “ideal” of a work of fiction which upholds the idea of disability as a social construct by describing a society which either disables different people to our own or is in fact not disabling at all, is only found in one of the texts I focus on in this thesis (“The Country of the Blind”). Even in this instance, such a reading is by no means definitive. However all the works can be read in relation to such a concept, presenting negation of it in their depiction of failed societies, or role reversals, where the reader is invited to mentally substitute disabled and non-disabled perspectives.

Another, related, area which one would expect speculative fiction to be especially suited to exploring is the impact of technology as an enabler, mitigating some or all of the effects of impairment and making the world easier to navigate for blind people. This is oddly absent in the texts discussed

in this thesis, particularly when you consider the interest in scientific and technological development displayed by two of these authors, and its frequent occurrence in their work. Wells could imagine time machines and alien spacecraft, but the inhabitants of the country of the blind live a basic, though comfortable, existence. Plants may have solved the world's energy needs and advanced weaponry may orbit the earth, but in *The Day of the Triffids* the only assistive technology mentioned is a Braille machine and some never fully discussed plans for "the construction of devices which would enable blind men to do useful work" (182). "The Black Grippe" has a strong focus on science, but in the story science is used to understand the causes of blindness, not to enable blind people. Also largely absent is what can be considered both the extension and the antithesis of assistive technology: cybernetic organisms (more commonly referred to as cyborgs), the fusing of machine and organic bodies. This absence seems surprising given the evident interests in the artificial creation and modification of human bodies expressed by both Wells and Wyndham (as, for example, in Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, based on which Wyndham began a short story, "Vivisection" (Ketterer 304)).

In her 1930 article, blind scholar J. L. Langworthy expressed concern about the depiction of technology:

The use of curious and strange devices to help blind persons get about in familiar places is often found in books, to the great amusement of the blind themselves, who realize that it is not by such extraneous aids that they learn to move about, but by means of hearing, touch, facial perception, and all that goes to make up good orientation. Some blind persons acquire excellent orientation and others seem to have little sense of direction. Cannot all of us go about familiar places in the dark? Surely a person permanently in the dark can do the same, and indeed many blind persons through habit and training become exceedingly, sometimes uncannily, skilful in it, and even learn to steer their way successfully in unfamiliar situations. (273)

Langworthy's view is sometimes reflected in more recent speculative fiction. For example, Elizabeth Moon's 2002 novel *The Speed of Dark* depicts both cheap, low tech changes which make a genuine difference, alongside experimental, futuristic technology which holds a sinister purpose. This prioritisation of social changes and technologically simple equipment has a political dimension on multiple levels. A key factor in building support for the provision of accommodations in workplaces and educational environments has been that they are simple and low cost. Improvised, seemingly basic, personal solutions have also historically been more likely to have been developed by disabled people themselves, based on their own assessments of their needs, rather than what their needs are perceived to be by others.

Despite this, the reaction of disabled people to advanced assistive technology in speculative fiction has, certainly anecdotally, become more positive, perhaps as a result of being given increasing (if insufficient) input into the design of assistive technology, because of the ubiquity and the ever-changing advancement of technology in our daily lives, or because of the nature of the technology itself – it is easy, for example, to see why an iPad may be more attractive than the type of contraptions Langworthy refers to. In a recent essay entitled "The Future Imperfect", Sarah Einstein reflects on the place of technology in a friend's life and how this might be explored by science fiction:

As I sit here, surrounded by technologies that did not exist when I was born – cell phones, e-readers, email – it's impossible not to notice that I'm living in a world that contains more technological wonders than [Anne] McCaffrey had imagined. The protagonists in the story would have been much helped, for instance, by a secure communications channel and a GPS system, both of which I have in my battered old car. But most of all, the heroine of this book would have been helped by a future shaped by the actions of today's disability activists.

Given these perspectives, then, is the low level of technology a failure of the authors to see its usefulness to disabled people, at the same time equating them with simplicity? Alternatively, is it consistent with many of the arguments and experiences put forth by disabled people themselves that this excessive dependence on technology in the mind of the author bears little resemblance to how they do – or want to – live their lives? When technology appears, is it in terms of the ways a disabling world can be changed, in terms of the autonomy of disabled people finding ways to live in that world? Or does it erase the complexities of the experiences of disabled people, portraying disability as tolerable only with advanced technological compensations for any impairment?

There is another way in which these works take place in another world, and that is that aspects of all of them can be read on a metaphorical or symbolic level. Compared to some other works of fiction which take blindness as a central concern but emphasize, for example, the links to a spiritual dimension blind people have often been thought to possess, these three texts are reasonably firmly grounded in *a* material reality even if it is not *our* reality. All have a strong sense of a sequence of events and make at least some attempt to rationalize or provide a scientific explanation for the seemingly fantastical happenings which make up the story, even if it fails to adhere to known scientific principles. However, “The Country of the Blind” in particular lends itself to non-literal readings. It has been suggested that the entire country itself is the delusion of an injured climber (Gaudet 196) but even less extreme readings cannot ignore intimations of magic and otherworldliness contained therein, nor the strong potential for it to be read as a metaphor for freedom and individuality. The strong focus on science and historical events in “The Black Grippe” serves, almost paradoxically, to capture the sense of a pandemic as alien and otherworldly. Even *The Day of the Triffids* which, despite departing

in significant ways from the real world, has a largely linear and straightforward plot, allows for the *triffids* themselves to be read as symbolic, as I will discuss in the relevant chapter.

This idea of a non-literal reading is particularly significant when looking at novels about blindness. English is peppered with words and expressions related to blindness which refer in fact to something other than the literal fact of blindness (Grigely 227–238) – “blind alley”, “the blind leading the blind” and “to turn a blind eye”, to name but a few – mentions of blindness, therefore, invite the reader to take the reference as being to something other than literal visual impairment. Naomi Schor describes bodily metaphors as “difficult to extirpate” (77) because many are examples of *catachresis* or, in other words, “a necessary trope, an obligatory metaphor, to which language offers no alternative” (77). She suggests, therefore, that metaphors relating to disability and illness are particularly pervasive and ingrained.

The use of disability as a metaphor has attracted strong criticism from many disabled activists and writers. Much of this centres on the fact that these metaphors are so often negative (for instance, blindness as a metaphor for lack of understanding or independent thought), something which is often, as Carrie Sandahl argues, seen as having implications far outside the fictional exploration of that metaphor:

... it is not possible to use physical disability as a metaphor for something else without reflecting back on people – including men – who actually have physical disabilities ... But it is asking too much to say to one identified with this meaning-full metaphor that physical disability means emotional cripple, but it only means that in art, so don't take it personally. My body is personal, and as feminism has recognized, the personal is political. (13)

The criticism of blindness as a metaphor is also a reaction against the appropriation of disability by (usually) non-disabled people to describe their own experiences, ideology or creations, and in doing so ignoring the real, lived experience of disabled people. Much of this relates to the pervasiveness of these metaphorical explorations when compared to literal depiction, as further discussed by Sandahl:

A spate of recent essays, academic articles, and artistic productions by and about people with disabilities reveals a pervasive concern with metaphors. Thomson contends that “[b]ecause disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have of their own or others’ disabilities”. (13)

Once again, this is not simply an abstract discussion, but one which impacts on the lives of disabled people, as their own identities and experiences are used as metaphors for other things entirely. One blogger describes the disconnect between real experiences and the simplification of metaphors:

Using it for an analogy appropriates the experience of being disabled. It takes the experience without permission or proper respect and only in part, meaning everything gets skewed. This sort of thing tends to leave out either the dimension of social oppression ... or the impairment (the ‘we’re all disabled’ example). And it’s always used to say something negative: it’s setting up disability as the go-to reference for bad things. In short, using ‘disability’ for an analogy shows a lack of connection with disabled people’s experiences of disability. (Chally)

Given this “pervasive concern with metaphors”, does this mean that all writing about disability that deviates from the literal is inherently problematic? Or can we condemn the sledgehammer use of simple equations between impairment and negative facets, whilst at the same time acknowledging more complex ways of writing about disability? As there is a strong tendency to read disability as a metaphor, even when not intended as

such, the creation of societies which deviate from realism is particularly likely to invoke such metaphorical readings, and this is something I intend to take into account when discussing such fictional societies.

I will now look in detail at these three texts ("The Country of the Blind", "The Black Grippe", and *The Day of the Triffids*), not primarily for their depiction of disabled people, but for their exploration of societies that disable people with impairments in different ways to our own or not at all, therefore exploring the social construction of disability – and blindness in particular – as expressed in fiction. Oliver states that "disability does not appear as an individual, tragic and medical problem in all societies that have existed historically nor in some that exist currently" (132). Whilst Oliver is referring to real societies, past and present, I will examine the potential for fictional societies to convey a similar diversity of social structures and, in doing so, to provide a critique of the nature of disability.

Chapter 1: The Country of the Blind

Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind" tells the story of an injured climber who accidentally stumbles upon a fabled valley in which all the inhabitants have been totally blind for generations, no longer having a concept of vision. The climber, Nuñez, is confident of the superiority his sight offers him, but finds that his description of it is considered irrational, effectively symptomatic of a mental illness, by the inhabitants. They propose the surgical removal of his eyes as treatment, insisting they need to be removed if he is ever to be cured. Despite his growing romantic interest in a local woman, Medina-saroté, Nuñez makes a final, desperate, attempt at escape.

The story has been subject to multiple readings since its initial publication in 1904, readings that are often deeply embedded in the politics and concerns of their time. In this chapter, I will discuss the primary reading of the story as a parable of ignorance and individual freedom, later post-colonial interpretations, and lastly consider it as a work which explores the structural nature of disability.

The most common reading of the story casts the sighted protagonist, Nuñez, as a free-thinking, non-conformist hero in an oppressive world where all others are metaphorically as well as literally blind. That is, they are depicted as ignorant, unable or unwilling to understand anything outside their immediate experience. In "'I Come from the Great World': Imperialism as Theme in Wells's 'The Country of the Blind'" (2004), Terry W. Thompson surveys various interpretations and states:

Most of the popular readings posit some variation upon the theme that Nuñez, the lost climber, is a heroic figure, and admirable symbol of stubborn resistance to authority as he rejects the stagnant regimentation of the valley people, preferring martyrdom in the end rather than

surrender his individual freedom to a coercive, inflexible and intolerant majority. (66)

This is a reading centred on the closed community of the valley. Although Nuñez is an outsider, which strongly informs his attitude and actions, he is positioned as *inside* the community, and subjected to oppression within its confines. As the reason for this oppression is only indirectly and/or metaphorically Nuñez's eyesight, the fact that he is from a far-off – and seeing – society is of less relevance. Rather the focus of this reading is on his challenging of accepted wisdom and his thinking for himself against the direction of the community and its elders. The real-world parallel brought to mind is less the adventurer, the coloniser, or the clash of two cultures, and more the dissident at odds with their own society and government.

This view of Nuñez as the hero against an oppressive society both corresponds with Wells's own political concerns and is a common theme in readings throughout the twentieth century, including Arnold Bennett (1909), Bernard Bergonzi (1961), Frank McConnell (1981), and J.R. Hammond (1992). At its simplest, this reading relies on three factors: firstly, the heroism and non-conformist ideals of Nuñez; secondly, the portrayal of the valley as a closed-minded, ignorant civilisation (that is, embodying the common negative metaphorical understanding of the word "blindness"); and, thirdly, the oppressive actions of that society towards Nuñez.

Perhaps oddly, it is the first of these factors that seems to be most clearly and overtly stated by many critics, expressing an arguably undeserved sympathy for Nuñez. This sympathy is reinforced by the fact that most readers are likely to identify with Nuñez as sighted. The fact that the story is told from his perspective makes him the most fully developed character. McConnell, for example, writing in 1981, argues that "our sympathies and our identification

are with the individual figure, the isolated hero rather than with the group” (119).

There is potential for Nuñez to be read as a partially autobiographical representation of Wells,¹ both in his conception of himself as a rebel and freethinker, and the high value he places on knowledge. In any case, the values attributed to Nuñez in this interpretation of the story have a strong similarity to those espoused by Wells. As just one example, biographer Michael Foot notes that Wells wrote:

To this day ... I will confess I dislike this restriction and distortion of knowledge as I dislike nothing else on earth. In the modern world, it is, I hold, second only to murder to starve and cripple the mind of a child. (Wells, qtd in Foot 5)

Thompson cites another example of this view of Nuñez, both linking him and placing him in opposition to the society in which he ends up:

Hammond argues that “the story is a parable on conformity: Nuñez is the rebel who refuses to conform with a rigid and narrow-minded social order”, and so his courageous struggle to maintain his individuality provides an “eloquent assertion of the invincibility of the human spirit”. (34)

In his 1992 work “H. G. Wells and the Short Story”, Hammond again paints Nuñez in a positive light:

Nuñez is the critical outsider who is ostracised by an insular and bigoted community. In rejecting blindness and opting for sight he is implicitly renouncing intolerance and dogma and embracing insight and imagination. He is the free spirit, the one who dares to question, to challenge orthodoxy. (123)

¹ “The Country of the Blind” is not unique amongst Wells’s fiction in this respect; the protagonist of *The Time Machine* has been widely interpreted as being a version of Wells himself.

The story's title is derived from the saying "in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king". As Nuñez's vision fails to lead to his triumph (except, perhaps, in a moral and individual sense), the story is generally read as a refutation of that saying. Although many critical interpretations are positive towards Nuñez's struggle, they portray him as doomed by an unresponsive audience, and thus the title becomes a criticism of society for its failure to elevate the visionary. Unusually, Bergonzi considers Nuñez to have attained a higher position. The one-eyed man may be king, but, according to Bergonzi, Nuñez is another level up altogether, metaphorically as well as literally "two-eyed", with a direct connection drawn between Nuñez's heroism and intelligence and his (literal) vision:

There is no question that Nuñez is to be regarded favourably; he is a free, active and intelligent spirit; a two-eyed rather than a one eyed man. Wells stresses early on, before Nuñez completes his descent to the valley, that his sense of sight is keenly developed ... (78)

When it comes to the inhabitants of the valley, this reading is reinforced by the association of blindness with mental and moral inferiority. From Nuñez's perspective, he is inherently superior because of his vision, describing himself as being "from the great world – where men have eyes and see" (13) and later "he began to realise that you cannot even fight happily with creatures that stand upon a different mental basis to yourself" (21). Linking blindness to lack of imagination, knowledge, and intellectual openness, he states that "I must come under that roof of rock and stone and darkness, that horrible roof under which your imagination stoops" (29–30). Bennett (1909) refers to the "exquisite blighting of human narrow-mindedness" in the story. Bergonzi both links Nuñez's apparently positive traits with his sightedness and also extends the other side of that metaphor to Nuñez's "captors", arguing that both blindness and sightedness in the story are "to be read metaphorically as well as literally"

(80). He sees Nuñez as elevated in superiority of mind and spirit, rather than in the sense of the king who holds power and authority:

Only very superficially is Nuñez the would-be king of the country of the blind. He is, rather, the man who sees among those who do not see, the open mind among the conformists, a free spirit in a bourgeois world. (80)

Although sightedness is not the norm in the imagined location where the story is set, it is an assumed norm in the story, even outside Nuñez's direct viewpoint. Therefore to lack sight must be the result of something external, in this case a "strange disease" (2), although oddly one which also "made all the children born there ... blind" (2). The fact that the blind inhabitants take Bogota as Nuñez's name (13) also seems to indicate stupidity as well as ignorance. As (somewhat unrealistically) there seems to be little in the way of linguistic barriers, there seems no other reason Bogota should not be understood as a place, even if it is unknown or even considered imaginary.

These traits of inferiority, stupidity, and narrow-mindedness are intrinsically linked with the environment in which they exist. Emily Alder (2008) considers Wells's work as a whole as concerned with "the relationship between human civilisations and their surroundings [which] has always been a preoccupation of the utopian tradition" (114). For Bergonzi, the isolation of the valley is key to the interrelationship between people and their environment as described in "The Country of the Blind":

The valley-dwellers lead, in every sense of the word, an enclosed life, and they cannot even conceive of a world existing outside their valley. Their degree of mental enclosure is apparent in their initial exchange with Nuñez, who expresses himself in the spacious and visual terms appropriate to his nature. (79)

Also focussing on the physical environment, Hammond reads the valley as a metaphor for the (largely built) environment of the modern world, both in Wells's own time, which effectively saw the development of London suburbia, and the late twentieth century period in which Hammond writes. He argues that "the description of the settlement in the valley reads like a parody of suburbia" (121) and that "the civilisation in the valley is a metaphor for urbanity: that man is so immersed in his daily routines, so circumscribed by law and convention, that he is blind to the beauty of the physical world. Man, [Wells] suggests, is indifferent to beauty and the power of the imagination to enrich his life" (122).

The last strand of this reading relates to the portrayal of Nuñez as the victim of oppression at the hands of a closed-minded society. This can also be seen as reflecting Wells's beliefs and interests, especially as his condemnation of oppression often focussed on it inhibiting thought or expression or knowledge. Foot, for example, tells us:

Wherever he went he would honour or defend his own trade as a writer, especially when some of its practitioners were made to suffer from the unthinking intolerance and persecution which the Americans could inflict. (Foot 37)

In the valley, Nuñez's description of eyesight and the world beyond the valley is considered essentially a mental illness or cognitive deficiency. Eventually the elders come to the conclusion that his eyes are the cause of this and must be removed. Both the extent to which their conclusion is so obviously incorrect to the reader, and the horror of the graphic but clinical description of the proposed treatment, effectively a punishment for non-conformity (albeit unintended as such), make it hard not to condemn the society from which it stems. The treatment is described thus:

Those queer things that are called the eyes, and which exist to make an agreeable soft depression in the face, are diseased, in the case of Bogota, in such a way as to affect his brain. They are greatly distended, he has eyelashes, and his eyelids move, and consequently his brain is in a state of constant irritation and distraction ... And I think I may say with reasonable certainty that, in order to cure him completely, all that we need to do is a simple and easy surgical operation – namely to remove those irritating bodies. (Wells 64–65)

This description of an action which seems cruel and terrible from one perspective, and yet rational, even kind, from another, mirrors a judgement in Cyrano's 1657 play *L'Autre Monde* according to Koppenfels:

Cyrano's *jeu d'esprit* consists in turning the tables on the pride of human rationality by inventing a realm of perfect otherness which quite fairly and logically (from the point of view of its avian civilisation) feels obliged to extinguish the representative of mankind on the grounds of his ontological status and in a way that may appear lenient to birds but must seem extremely cruel to human beings ... in his perplexing game of irony, the philosopher Cyrano places the human race as a whole on trial for failing to live up to its potential and ideals. (Koppenfels 159)

When I was exploring texts describing fictional blind societies, it initially appeared that "The Country of the Blind" was the earliest example. However, in researching the chapter on John Wyndham and *The Day of the Triffids* I came across a – probably unpublished – article sent to John Wyndham by William F Temple which indicates a predecessor:

The Country of the Blind is remarkably similar to Remy de Gourmont's *D'un Pays Lointain*, a fact which critic Edward Shanks had earlier drawn attention to. (3)

Although *D'un Pays Lointain* does not appear to have been published in English, and I have been unable to find direct evidence of its influence on "The Country of the Blind", the striking similarity of the prologue (effectively a short story in itself) makes it seem likely that it was, directly or indirectly, an

influence on Wells. This earlier work lends itself to a reading of the blind as an oppressive society, and sightedness as representing individual freedom. In the story told by Gourmont, rather than being born blind, the eyes of babies are removed soon after birth “to make them normal” (8). The purpose of this is to achieve “a peace which is born of a lack of curiosity” (9) and the protagonist, who describes himself – without Nuñez’s overt arrogance – as “intelligent” (11), hides the fact he can see and eventually escapes.²

The explicit connection between blindness and oppression and the lack of intelligence and free thought in *D’un Pays Lointain* could be interpreted as reinforcing the more ambiguous connection in “The Country of the Blind”. However, I would suggest that if, as seems likely, Wells was aware of *D’un Pays Lointain*, the fact he chose to soften that aspect and write a more ambiguous tale is of greater significance.

The argument that the blind society represents oppression and the problems of political leadership in our own world is reinforced by the parallels drawn to *Gulliver’s Travels* by many critics. There, too, a man travels and finds societies in which the inhabitants are physically different to the human norm, and where their built environment and society differ based on these differences. Swift’s novel is widely read as satirising European governments and politics. In “The Country of the Blind”, this satire can work both ways. The valley can be read as an oppressive society of Wells’s time or, alternatively, as discussed below, Nuñez can be read as a traveller or conqueror from such a society. In comparing *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Cyrano’s *L’Autre Monde*, Koppenfels claims that the former, “while retaining Cyrano’s alternating rhythm of adventure story and utopian discourse, sets out to disentangle the paradoxical interplay of utopian and dystopian elements” (159) in the latter. In this respect Wells

² Quotations in this paragraph from unpublished translation by Celine and Lee Murray.

appears to be *re-entangling* both the utopian and the dystopian elements into one, ambiguous, civilisation.

As with *Gulliver's Travels* and other satirical works there is a complex enmeshment of the rational and realist and the fantastic, surreal or mystical elements in "The Country of the Blind". Gaudet argues for a reading that treats the entire valley as a hallucination, a delusion on the part of an injured climber. Rather than treating this simply as a framing device for a story, she argues that it fundamentally changes the nature of the story:

If Nuñez's conception of the Valley of the Blind exists solely in his subconscious, the opening section that introduces the legend acquires a new purpose. If the story began with Nuñez tumbling in and out of consciousness, the valley would assume a hallucinatory, fantastical image from the start, rather than one of a legend from history. Instead, Wells provides a seemingly grounded historical scenario that instils in the reader a set of assumptions that can then be manipulated by the author. Wells deliberately formulates a "realistic depiction" of the country that can be contrasted with Nuñez's psychological fantasy. (Gaudet)

This contrast between the concrete and the fantastic is particularly interesting given the movement in Wells's own writing. One biographer describes the publication of *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* in 1911 as "a reminder of a very different Wells, one who put not realism and discussion but fantasy and symbolism at the heart of his work" (Sherborne 212). Arguably "The Country of the Blind" displays elements of both of these sides of Wells. Given the theme of blindness, this interweaving of realistic and fantastic elements takes on another dimension. In *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Thought* (2001), art historian Moshe Barasch refers to a long history of ambiguity when it comes to portrayals of blindness:

A certain ambiguity or ambivalence characterises the image of the blind. On the one hand, he is the unfortunate creature, deprived of

what is often considered man's most precious gift, the ability to see the world and to find his way without the help of others. On the other hand, he is endowed, however vaguely, with an ability given to no other human being – to be in direct communication with the deity. (157)

In this respect, it is worth noting that, though it may not meet the definition of the genre, "The Country of the Blind" includes strong magic-realist elements in in that the fantastical is represented as the real. The motif of an isolated Latin American community cut off from the rest of the world for generations is common to magic-realist works, notably Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Thus far, I have been exploring the idea that the principal concern of "The Country of the Blind" is a portrayal and defence of individual freedom of thought and expression in an oppressive and closed-minded world. This takes the straightforward form of a heroic, free-thinking individual pitted against a wholly oppressive society, but there is scope for more nuanced interpretations within this basic premise, interpretations which often rest on whether or not Nuñez should be considered a hero.

At the end of the story Nuñez undertakes a perilous journey over the mountains, the final paragraph interpreted by many readers as anticipating his death from exposure. This does much to cast him as a heroic figure, preferring death to giving up – or even feigning to give up – what he knows to be true, and to the prospect of accepting what appears to be both physical and symbolic mutilation and absorption into the society. However, much of his actual behaviour and interaction with the villagers is marked by arrogance. His knowledge may be objectively greater, those he seeks to educate may be ignorant and closed-minded, but he seems to excessively relish his own superiority, taking joy in the idea of proving their ignorance. Sherborne argues that "the detached, ironic narrative – which is scrupulously acknowledging

Nuñez's limitations – never quite allows him to achieve the role of hero" (145) and considers this one of several of Wells's stories in which "a rebel tries to change the world but his real commitment is to a world of imaginative desire that makes his behaviour irrational and self destructive" (187). Thompson goes further in his condemnation of Nuñez and attaches the negative metaphorical associations of blindness to him, rather than the villagers, stating in "I Come from the Great World" that he is "ever the perfect symbol for imperial arrogance, [and] refuses to see the truth. Although physically sighted he is, of course, morally blind" (73).

Thompson is rare in seeing Nuñez as the "king" in the saying from which the story takes its title. Most readings focus on the fact he has not obtained the powerful role he desires or believes himself entitled to, whilst probably the most favourable reading to Nuñez thus far discussed sees him as a free spirit, wanting freedom from – even the absence of – power rather than to hold it. Thompson, however, interprets the story as one concerned with colonialism and political power, describing it as a "subtle parable about the utter futility of European imperialism; all of Nuñez's grandiose dreams of a submissive Andean empire with himself as absolute ruler prove artless and incompetent, foolish and short-sighted" ("I Come from the Great World" 72).

Thompson's analysis sits in the context of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century postcolonial criticism, and he is not alone in reading Wells's work from a postcolonial perspective. In *Post Colonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (2004), Benita Parry states that Wells's "preoccupation with time-travel and exploring extra-terrestrial space is interpreted as transcribing Rhodes's imperial dream of annexing the planets" (108) and notes Stephen Arata's description of *The War of the Worlds* as one of a number of "products of the geopolitical fears of a troubled imperial society" (116). In "Alien Gaze: Postcolonial Vision in *The War of the Worlds*" (2008), Keith Williams describes

The War of the Worlds as “one of the most influential manifestations of the emergence of a critical ‘postcolonial’ vision in the science and culture of the late Victorian period” (49). Parry also discusses Wells’s semi-autobiographical novel *Tono-Bungay* in detail from a post-colonial perspective (148–161), concluding that it “stands apart for narrating the injurious effects of imperialist modernization on the moral and psychic health of the imperial homeland” (161).

Whilst there is potential within a postcolonial reading of “The Country of the Blind” to sympathise with the colonised, as the modern reader may be likely to do, it can also be read as a wholesale condemnation of both sides. Wells’s views on imperialism were typically complex, but he frequently opposed British imperialism (e.g. Foot 256) whilst advocating a “world state” (as explored in his 1933 novel *The Shape of Things to Come*) in which the dominance of European/Anglo culture was taken as a given. Renfroe explores this contradiction with reference to *The War of the Worlds*:

Though the narrator criticizes imperialism and witnesses its ravages first-hand, he continues to support the idea of humanity united under one empire. *The War of the Worlds* exemplifies the complex relationship between Wells's argument against the excesses of one nation/world conquering another and his solution to this problem in the form of a world/galactic empire.

A condemnation of both sides, therefore, has some consistency with Wells’s stated views; he was not necessarily opposed to the *idea* of colonialism, but to the way it was being perpetuated. This reading of “The Country of the Blind” indicates some similarities with Kipling’s 1888 novella *The Man Who Would Be King*, which describes the ultimately disastrous attempts of two British men in Afghanistan to be recognised as kings. Kipling’s novella made a clear impression on Wells – the central character in Wells’s 1910 novel *The Sleeper Awakens* describes it as “one of the best stories in the world” (Ch. 7).

John Huntington (1982) similarly reads “The Country of the Blind” partly in terms of European imperialism. He highlights the legitimacy of the culture and society created in the valley, an emphasis which is also important to the disability-related reading of the story which I shall discuss shortly:

Nuñez’s realm of kingship is a selfish fantasy that both ignores the happiness the blind people enjoy and condescends to the adjustment they have made. In the tradition of European imperialism, he aims to exploit a culture he does not appreciate, and Wells takes a certain pleasure in thwarting him. The blind, working together, unawed by a sense which they cannot comprehend, subdue Nuñez and force him to conform to their way of life. (126)

The readings I have considered so far “The Country of the Blind” foreground Nuñez, either as a non-conformist, free-thinking hero or as an arrogant, colonialist oppressor. At the heart of both of these is an analysis of power structures, with the blindness signifying either closed-mindedness or the depth of distinctions between an imperialist and an indigenous culture.

Taking the blindness more literally, and drawing on both the power dynamics explored in the “non-conformist hero” reading of the story and the attention placed on the culture and legitimacy of the valley settlement in the post-colonial reading, “The Country of the Blind” can be read in terms of the inter-relation between disability, physical and sensory difference, and society.

Indeed, “The Country of the Blind” offers a rare example of a fictional society that illustrates how disability is socially constructed. In our own world, whilst individuals may have impairments (for example, limited eyesight), it is society which *disables* them, establishing an environment which is difficult or impossible for them to operate in, given their impairment; it is society itself which excludes them from many aspects of their society. In “The Country of the Blind”, this correlation between visual impairment and disability is reversed. I will therefore explore firstly how blindness is in many ways not

disabling within the valley, and then, further, that it is possible to see Nuñez – who is not disabled within his own society – as disabled in this new environment.

The natural environment of the valley is described in positive and welcoming terms. It is stated that “life was very easy in that snow-rimmed basin ... with neither thorns nor briars, with food upon the bushes in its season” (3). This seems to imply that blind people have been able to survive there because things are easy, and the environment is naturally hospitable, but Nuñez has a very different experience:

He stayed outside the wall of the valley of the blind for two nights and days without food or shelter and meditated upon the unexpected ... He tried also to find food among the pine trees, to be comfortable under pine boughs while the frost fell at night and – with less confidence – to catch a llama by artifice in order to kill it, perhaps by hammering it with a stone – and so, finally, perhaps, to eat some of it. But the llamas had a doubt of him and regarded him with distrustful brown eyes, and spat when he drew near. Fear came on him the second day, and fits of shivering. (23–4)³

Therefore, whilst survival and prosperity are explicitly linked to the environment, it is not sufficient to view the blind villagers as passive beneficiaries of a hospitable environment. Rather they have adapted to, and changed, this environment. This process is aided by the fact that, unlike in the other two works I will discuss in this thesis, the blindness occurred slowly, giving their ancestors time to adapt:

³ Alder notes such a contradiction throughout Wells’s portrayal of urban wilderness environments, arguing that “dwellings often represent the success of the ‘ethically best’, while the wild environment represents the ‘tenacious and powerful enemy’ of ‘cosmic nature’” (115) but also pointing to ideas of a tamed, ordered natural world, or garden, as an antidote or balance to the degeneracy of the cities.

The first generation had become purblind so gradually that they scarcely noted their loss. They guided the sightless youngsters who followed them hither and thither until they knew the whole valley marvellously, and when at last sight died out altogether among them, the race lived on. They had even time to adapt themselves to the blind control of fire, which they made carefully in stoves of stone. (Wells 3–4)

Compensatory use of other senses is key to this adaptation, and to the survival of the villagers. For example:

Their senses had become marvellously acute; they could hear and judge the slightest gesture of a man a dozen paces away, could hear the very beating of his heart. Intonation had long replaced expression with them, and touches gesture, and their work with hoe and spade was as free and confident as garden work could be. Their sense of smell was extraordinarily fine; they could distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can. (18)

“The Country of the Blind” can therefore be read as a relatively positive portrayal of blind people, in stark contrast to many earlier readings which position them as symbolic of a narrow-minded and oppressive society. The villagers are portrayed as displaying competence and the ability to adapt themselves to their blindness and their environment. In the revised version of the story, which I will later discuss in more detail, Wells actively dismisses the idea of blindness as a moral judgement, portraying it as outdated and unscientific by commenting that “in those days, in such cases, men did not think of germs and infections but of sins” (10). Further, I would argue that the settlement has been created by and for blind people, and thus is disabling not to them but to the sighted. In other words, it portrays disability not as an innate quality of the body or the individual, but socially constructed, something done *to* a person by the society in which they live. Wells describes this construction of an environment built by and for its inhabitants:

Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities of path and meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedure arose naturally from their special needs. (18)

Therefore, this is not a simple matter of a hospitable environment, or even adaptation on an individual level, but the intentional creation of a physical and social environment built according to the needs and abilities of its blind inhabitants. In her 1930 article on blindness in fiction, Langworthy (herself blind) paints "The Country of the Blind" in a rare positive light compared to the other works she considers, and also refers to the construction of this environment and society, stating:

It has been remarked that the greatest difficulties of the blind arise from the fact that the world as constituted was made "by the seeing for the seeing". This story tries to reverse this order and construct a world on the basis of four senses. (280)

This environment is not simply well built for its inhabitants. Sara Deutch Schotland (2011) describes "The Country of the Blind" as envisioning the "theoretical possibility that a disabled community could attain hegemonic status" (19). While it is true that such a status has been reached by the blind villagers, the society constructed in the valley has ceased to disable them. Though the population undoubtedly has no vision, indeed, physically has no eyes, blindness has lost its meaning: "'What is blind?' asked the blind man carelessly over his shoulder" (17).

The person who is obviously disabled by this society is Nuñez, despite (or because of) there being no indication that he would be disabled in his hometown of Bogota. He struggles to walk upright, find his way through the village and communicate with the villagers. He is asked if he cannot "hear the

path" (17) as he walks, and Correa later reports that "He stumbled ... stumbled twice as we came hither" (13). When he meets the elders, he is relying entirely on his sight and so falls down in the dark room (54). On his first encounter with the inhabitants of the valley, he "gesticulated with freedom" (9), i.e. used the communication form he is used to as most appropriate in such a circumstance, but it proves to be useless in this environment as "they did not appear to see him for all his gestures"(9). Thompson describes Nuñez as struggling with both the cultural mores of the valley, and the biological facts of its inhabitants:

[Nuñez is] the young outsider, the very incarnation of careless, clumsy imperialism, [who] has committed his first violation of local etiquette: in the country of the blind, any loud talking, especially shouting, is considered a serious faux pas because their supersensitive ears have grown used to soft and soothing voices – learned from centuries of polite conversation and subdued intonation. ("I Come from the Great World" 69)

If we consider Nuñez as disabled, his experiences in the valley become not the oppression of the free-thinker at the hands of a blind mob (and thus a negative perception of blind people) but can be read as a story about the treatment of disabled people in our own society. Certainly, some attitudes displayed towards Nuñez mirror those displayed towards disabled people in the real world. Correa infantilises Nuñez by describing him as "but newly formed. He stumbles as he walks and mingles words that mean nothing with his speech" (14). In showing Nuñez's need for tools ("it grew clear to him that no practicable way was possible. He had no weapons, and now it would be hard to get one" (24)), Wells mirrors a common modern argument by disability movements – that assistive technology is only labelled as such when used by disabled people (i.e. when it differs from the norm). Whilst we may notice the changes blind people make and the tools they use, the tools used by the

majority may be equivalent but are merely considered “normal”. Sherborne describes Nuñez as being treated “as mentally disabled” (163). This hints not only at Nuñez as disabled, but at questions regarding how intelligence is measured, and a history of treating communication differences/impairments (and disability generally) as indicative of a lack of intelligence.

The attempt of the elders to remove Nuñez’s eyes may seem hard to place in this context, given the extremity of the action. It certainly can be interpreted as a portrayal of the blind society as stupid, superstitious, and even malevolent, but it also exists in the context of a long (real world) history of mistaken (as well as malicious) medical procedures against disabled people. If we are to read “The Country of the Blind” as being in part an inverted commentary on the real world, highlighting how what we take as absolute truth may be a social construction (and a problematic one at that), such an extreme example could be considered necessary to enable the reader to make the leap from their deeply ingrained perspective.

When discussing disability in “The Country of the Blind”, it is worth considering Wells as a disabled writer himself. From “when he was seven years old [and] he broke his leg or his hip and was confined for months to his bed” (Foot 4), a series of injuries and illnesses affected him throughout his life. He used a wheelchair at some points, and health concerns were partially responsible for ending his teaching career. Oddly, given the attention to non-normative bodies in much of his work, and the fact his injuries and illnesses are well documented, I found only two discussions describing him as disabled, both quite informal online postings. Perhaps this is because of changing definitions of the nature of disability, or because his beliefs about eugenics (both reported and actual) tainted anything else in his writing related to disability. Yet, it is relevant when considering the placement of his

sympathies, particularly in light of his concern for, and identification with, those excluded from or marginalised in society, as described here by his son:

It was the effect that scientific progress would have on the world, and the way in which people would react to the coming wonders that was of the greatest importance. In *The Invisible Man* [Wells] goes even deeper by studying the effect on the individual. He restates the sad and relentless cruelty of the mob to the unusual, to the hunchback, to the cross-eyed, the monster or the pathetic simpleton. He lays before us the despair and loneliness of the mob's victim, the schism between the desperate, frightened individual, out of joint, and the close unthinking mutually protective herd. (Wells, Frank, qtd in Foot 37)

This would in many ways seem to support the earlier interpretation of Nuñez as the free-spirited individual oppressed by a conformist and totalitarian world. However, it is significant that this description of Wells's views explicitly ties being the victim of such cruelty to disability (if not exactly using such terminology) and suggests that disability is, at least partly, the oppression he is concerned with.

The significance of considering Wells as a disabled writer goes beyond him expressing sympathy with disabled people. Rather, the extent to which it impacted his life doubtlessly informed the connections between ability and the environment which are explored in "The Country of the Blind". This is indicated by his commissioning of the design and building of a new home (Spade House) near Folkestone around 1900:

[Wells] decided to get [a house] built to his own specifications, a particularly appealing strategy, as he feared he might have to spend much of his remaining life in a wheelchair and it would enable him to incorporate the facilities he would need. (Sherborne 139)⁴

⁴ Floor plans of Spade House are included in Smith, facing page 137.

Spade House differed in various ways from what might be expected in a house of the time, differences which Wells argued with the architect over, and crucially these aspects of the house differed because they were designed for needs considered to be non-standard. The “bedrooms and living rooms [were] placed together on the ground floor in case Wells became a fulltime wheelchair user” (Sherborne 145) and the door handles were larger and lower than standard to make access through the house easier for his young sons. A location was chosen where they might have “extensive grounds where the invalid could spend warm and sunny days” (Smith 136).

Whilst it may be too much to argue that Wells’s intention in writing “The Country of the Blind” was to argue for an analysis of disability as socially constructed, these decisions about his house provide clear evidence that in the years leading up to the writing of “The Country of the Blind”, he was thinking about the impact of one’s environment in disabling and enabling those that inhabit. The leap in thought is not from the absence of steps between key rooms (as found in Spade House) to notches in kerbing or angles of pathways, but from such designs in one house built for one individual and his family, to these being the norm throughout a society.

These connections between disability and the environment, both societal and physical, are supported by the story’s firm attention to location and geographical isolation. Blindness is linked to place, in the sense of both the location of the settlement and intentionally created environments, a link which is indicated by the word “country” in the title and reinforced throughout the story. Hammond places this geographical focus in a literary context:

[The] legend of a lone traveller falling by accident into a lost valley of the unsighted is one of the most potent ‘lost race’ myths in the English language and has spawned numerous derivations. (16)

I have discussed the idea of Nuñez as disabled, especially by him being sighted in a world designed for those who are blind. It can be difficult to see exactly where the dividing line is between disability and difficulties caused by cultural differences. One way this has been considered is by viewing the traveller in any circumstance as disabled, an idea Eitan Bar-Yosef discusses in "The 'Deaf Traveller,' the 'Blind Traveller,' and Constructions of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing" (2009):

Far from simply adopting the role of "overcomer," Holman justified his journey by adopting the opposite strategy, namely, by problematizing the very notion of able-bodied travel. Encountering new cultures and locales whose language they did not speak and whose topography they did not master, even able-bodied travellers were often imagined as being disabled. It is this logic that underlines Holman's response to that vexed question, "what is the use of travelling to one who cannot see? I answer, Does every traveller see all that he describes and is not every traveller obliged to depend upon others for a great proportion of the information he collects?" (138–139)

The longer Nuñez spends in the settlement, the more he sees its inhabitants as individuals rather than a homogenised group defined by its lack of vision:

So Nuñez became a citizen of the Country of the Blind, and these people ceased to be a generalised people and became individualities and familiar to him, while the world beyond the mountains became more and more remote and unreal. (25)

So, in this case, emphasising the connections between characters and their environment may be problematic, as it prevents them from being seen as individuals. When Hammond describes the valley as a "metaphor for urbanity" (122), he makes what is actually a detailed creation an archetype, a symbol rather than a settlement with a diverse population and individual culture. Wells goes further than linking blindness to simple geographical location or to culture in this description of Medina-saroté:

She was little esteemed in the world of the blind, because she had a clear-cut face, and lacked the satisfying, glossy smoothness that is the blind man's ideal of feminine beauty; but Nuñez thought her beautiful at first, and presently the most beautiful thing in the whole creation. Her closed eyelids were not sunken and red after the common way of the valley, but lay as though they might open again at any moment; and she had eyelashes, which were considered a grave disfigurement. And her voice was strong, and did not satisfy the acute hearing of the valley swains. So that she had no lover. (25–26)

Here physical characteristics associated with blindness are deemed to be of importance. There are no varied levels of blindness in the valley – all have absolutely no vision – yet some are portrayed as less like blind people than others. In effect, Nuñez composes a series of racial traits associated with blindness, none of which are blindness itself.

In the late 1930s, Wells revised and expanded “The Country of the Blind” to a novella of the same title, published in 1939. Whilst much of this version is very similar to the original, the ending is markedly different. Rather than perishing on the mountain, Nuñez spots a rock-fall. The settlement is destroyed but he and Medina-saroté make a successful escape and live out their lives in Bogota. Instead of placing Nuñez in such polarised opposition to the valley of the blind, the novella describes increased learning and adaptation on his part. As before, Nuñez spends most of the story firmly and obsessively focussed on the superiority of sight. However, at the end, when, seeing the rocks about to fall, he finally finds a situation where his vision provides an advantage, he forgets “his personal distress in a huge solicitude for this little community of which he had become a citizen” (38). Further, he adapts, realising the need to interact with the blind villagers in a way they can understand and accept, and convinces Medina-saroté of the need to flee by drawing attention to the *sound* of the rock fall.

Hammond argues that, in the original story, Wells's decision to abandon Medina-saroté represents personal freedom:

His choice is between conformity or freedom, submission and resignation versus the unfettered imagination. That Nuñez chooses in the end to turn his back on domesticity – as symbolised by the girl and valley – and escape into a wider less hidebound world is entirely characteristic of Wells. (124)

In this revised version, Nuñez appears to achieve both – the freedom of his life in Bogota and yet a domestic setting with his blind wife, and a settled life into old age. Meanwhile, the more absolute and distinct nature of that isolated valley, be it utopia or dystopia or simply the home of an indigenous population thus far untouched by colonialism, proves to be unsustainable. If we go with the most popular reading of the valley as a totalitarian state, it is easy to make a case for this novella being strongly influenced by global events of the time. A few years after its publication, during World War II, Wells discovered he was on the list of those to be imprisoned as a priority by German forces, should they successfully invade England (Sherborne 296). Wells did not specifically know this as a fact at the time of writing the novella, but it can have come as little surprise to him that he would be in danger – and he will have known many who had fled Germany and occupied Europe, often as a result of their beliefs. The revised *Country of the Blind* can, therefore, be seen as a novella for a time of totalitarianism – but also a novella for a time of escapes, and a plea to throw aside ideological concerns against a common enemy, be it fascism or an avalanche.

If, however, the focus is on disability, the portrait of a blind woman living successfully in a sighted world is key. Medina-saroté is described as “a sweet and gentle lady, her basket work and her embroidery are marvellous, though of course she makes no use of colour, and she speaks Spanish with an old-

fashioned accent very pleasant to the ear". This is a far cry from portrayals of blind people as oppressive and ignorant – on the contrary, it is normalising, and shows a potential to function in a sighted society. Though it is marked by passivity and simplicity, this probably owes more to assumptions about gender and age than it does to disability. This portrayal may also be influenced by Wells's own life – he had by this point been diagnosed with diabetes (Sherborne 242), a condition which had been known for some years to be linked to macular degeneration (Kalantzis, Angelou, and Poulakou-Rebelakou 72). As co-founder of the British Diabetic Association (Diabetes UK, "Our History"), Wells is likely to have been aware of this connection. Although I have found no evidence that he experienced visual impairment, it is plausible this possibility made the scenario of a blind person living in a sighted world of concern to him. Whilst in the original version, at least according to Bergonzi, "Nuñez perishes of exhaustion, content to have saved his soul by escaping from the country of the blind; death among the mountains is preferable to a living death among the blind" (83), the novella portrays a blind woman living successfully amongst the sighted.

There are two main, conflicting, ways in which blindness is portrayed in this version when it comes to Medina-saroté. The first is when she and Nuñez are escaping from the valley. Her survival is due in part to her not being able to see rocks falling, and thus having the courage to push on anyway. On the one hand, this is again connecting blindness to ignorance (reinforced by Nuñez's infantilising plea of "Come my darling. Come! Do not question but come!" (42)), but on the other it is showing that blindness can have clear advantages.⁵

⁵ In *Gulliver's Travels* a similar connection between blindness and courage is made, this time in justifying removal of eyes as punishment.

The second portrayal of blindness is Medina-saroté's reported declaration at the end of the novel: "I have never wanted to *see*" (44). On the one hand, this appears to be emphasising the legitimacy of blind existence, that it may not be a terrible tragedy but something she is happy with. On the other, her motivation is a wish to shield herself from the world. She states that "the loveliness of *your* world is a complicated and fearful loveliness and mine is simple and near. I had rather Nuñez saw for me – because he knows nothing of fear" (45). For her, blindness is a weakness – an understandable, even appealing weakness, but a weakness just the same.

As well as the alternative ending of the 1939 novella, a 1990 article by Patrick Parrinder details alternative endings to the original story, written but ultimately discarded by Wells. In one of these:

Nuñez finally flees to the mountains, sits down on a ledge and imagines Medina-saroté waking up in the evening to find him gone. Not understanding how great a sacrifice she was demanding of him, she would necessarily think him a coward for refusing to face the eye surgeons. (72)

He then tearfully laments his vision, turns and heads back to the settlement to face the surgical removal of his eyes, choosing "a sort of honour, a sort of consolation & a soul that stood in need of him" over "solitude, & a fading dream, & a guideless struggle & death" (Wells, qtd. in Parrinder 72). Parrinder views this as symptomatic of the fact that Wells himself was "torn between social responsibility and manic individualism, between acceptance of the Happy Valley of contented (but limited) fulfilment and a desperate, self-destructive need to strike out along imaginary paths for the mountain summits" (75).

I earlier discussed the building of Spade House in relation to the valley of the blind, and it is perhaps telling that a biographer described the building of it as

Wells's quest to "set up a domestic utopia" (Sherborne 134), an attempt to settle down with a relatively conventional family life (despite his advocacy of "free love"). If Spade House is linked with the valley in how it is adapted to its inhabitants, so too might it be in terms of the essential conflict Parrinder outlines. Wells's political and philosophical views, as well as his personal life, were torn between ambitions of a comfortable utopia, and the status of the outsider, true to themselves and constantly challenging society. "The Country of the Blind" is at once the utopia Wells looked to – a society designed for the needs of even those excluded in our own world – and a critique of oppression and exclusion via an inversion of reality and a paean to the free-thinking individual, at odds with and dismissed by society.

Chapter 2: The Black Grippe

The next blind society I shall consider is, on the surface, far less alien than either that of the remote valley of the “Country of the Blind” or the world overrun by a new species depicted in *The Day of the Triffids*. Rather, Edgar Wallace’s 1920 short story has its roots in a real world event – the influenza pandemic (or “Spanish ‘flu”) which swept the world in the years after the First World War. But even that historical event has been described by both modern historians and contemporaries in terms of an alien invasion, an entirely new battlefield for humanity to fight on. To take just one example, in a history of the pandemic, John M. Barry links the influenza to Wells’s earlier science fantasies:

Twenty years before the great influenza pandemic, H. G. Wells published *War of the Worlds*, a novel in which Martians invaded the earth. They loosed upon the world their death ships, and they were indomitable. They began to feed upon humans, sucking the life force from them down to the marrow of the bone. Man, for all his triumphs of the nineteenth century, a century in which his achievements had reordered the world, had become suddenly impotent. No force known to mankind, no technology or strategy or effort or heroism that any nation or person on earth had developed, could stand against the invaders. Wells wrote, “I felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, that oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals ... The fear and empire of man had passed away.” (369)

Adding a fictional symptom to the virus, universal and absolute blindness, Wallace describes a society that is firmly grounded in the real world (in this case London circa 1920) and yet facing entirely new circumstances. This is in contrast to “The Country of the Blind” where a new, isolated society is constructed, and, as I argued in the previous chapter, used to explore the social construction of disability in the real world.

The social model of disability is generally counterpoised against the medical model, one which views disability in medical and individual terms. Although the social model has become central to disability studies and activism, it has also been viewed as overly simplistic, and failing to take sufficient account of individual experiences of the body and of impairment. Shakespeare and Watson describe the social model as having become “a sacred cow, an ideology which could not easily be challenged” (11), and set out five points for a “more sophisticated model” (22). One of these points focuses on the importance of the inclusion of a partially medical approach, whilst maintaining a primary focus on social and environmental change:

It remains vital to distinguish between the different levels of intervention, as Oliver also argues (1996, 36). Sometimes it is most appropriate to intervene at the medical or individual level. For example, a newly spinal-injured person will almost inevitably require spinal stabilisation, rehabilitation, and possibly counselling. Yet subsequently, alterations to their personal environment will [be] important. In a broader sense, anti-discrimination measures will be vital to their future quality of life. Intervention at physical, psychological, environmental and socio-political levels is the key to progressive change, yet one cannot be a substitute for the other. Social change remains the most expedient measure to remove the problems presented by impairment and its consequences: this emphasis encapsulates the distinction between disability studies and medical sociology. (23)

“The Black Grippe” is interesting in that it places the emphasis on biology, science, and medicine, but avoids a negative, individualist analysis and has a clear social context. The story does not portray disability as socially constructed, but describes the intersection of social/political and medical/biological aspects in its portrayal of a pandemic. The public health aspects of the story also have a clear historical context; “The Black Grippe” was written and set during a time of increasing government responsibility for health in Britain. The Liberal welfare reforms of 1906–14 included (limited)

compulsory health insurance, access to free medical care for some children, and the introduction of paid sick leave and maternity leave. The 1920 Dawson report recommended the centralisation of medical services under one authority.

To summarise, “The Black Grippe” tells the story of the effects of a ‘flu-type illness which comes in three distinct stages. The first consists of conventional ‘flu symptoms, the second uncontrollable crying and the third, the subject of this story, five days of blindness. The protagonist, Dr Hereford Bevan, discovers this third stage in advance via experimentation on rabbits. He calls on a prominent American bacteriologist, Professor Van der Bergh, but their attempts to warn the Prime Minister are stalled by an unresponsive bureaucracy and closed hierarchy. Though the blindness does happen as predicted, and has some significant negative impacts, it is not truly catastrophic, and the story ends with society being restored to its prior level of functioning.

Fiction portraying the pandemic, even in an indirect sense, is itself a rarity, as Caroline Hovanec notes:

Alfred W. Crosby points out its conspicuous absence from modern history textbooks and from the oeuvres of the great American writers in the 1920s. John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway – none of these authors treated the flu in any detail in their work. “It is especially puzzling,” says Crosby dryly, “that among those Americans who let the pandemic slip their minds were many members of that group of supposedly hypersensitive young people who were to create some of the greatest masterpieces of American literature, i.e. ‘the lost generation’ for so many of whom World War I, the other great killer of the era, was the central experience of their lives”. In his account, by the end of the decade, the pandemic seemed destined to become a mere footnote in literary history. (161)

Hovanec also notes that the periods when an interest was taken were influenced by scientific knowledge, and increased awareness of viruses. In the 1930s this interest was attributable to “new developments in virology and influenza research” (162) and then the “first decade of the twenty-first century [saw] another wave of renewed fascination with the Spanish flu” (163) as concern about Avian flu was growing.

Wallace was writing much closer to the pandemic, and it is possible his personal interest in medicine spurred his interest. He had some medical training, beginning in his youth and continuing during his time in the army. Biographer Margaret Lane describes this early training:

[A] source of interest and amusement was the St. John Ambulance Brigade, with which they spent one evening a week learning to roll bandages and set splints. It was good enough fun at the time, and something to do, but for Dick [Edgar Wallace] at least this amateur training was to prove important. Several years later, bored with the heavy routine of army life, he was to remember his own deftness with splints and bandages and the flattering approval of the St. John Ambulance instructor, and apply for a transfer that permanently affected his life. (39)

She then goes on to credit it for Wallace’s later decision to join the Medical Staff Corps:

He remembered the old days of the St. John Ambulance, when rolling bandages and setting splints had been as skilful and entertaining as a game, and decided that to take up these gentlemanly pursuits professionally would in itself be a kind of promotion. Undaunted by his barrack-room friends’ contempt for soldiers who mixed poultices, he applied for permission to transfer to the Medical Staff Corps, and to his pleased surprise was quickly drafted to the M.S.C. depot at Aldershot. (65)

Of course, this training was limited – Wallace was certainly no doctor or scientist like his protagonist, despite his assertion in his autobiography, *People*

(1926), that those in the Medical Staff Corps “grew terribly important as [they] progressed from knowledge to knowledge” and “ceased to be entirely military [but] became scientists” (69). But this experience and interest likely played a part in the medical focus of “The Black Grippe”. This comes alongside a clear description of, and approval of, the scientific method. The science described, whilst clearly fictional, is presented with the detail needed to make it almost believable. Take, for example, this description of Bevan’s experiments:

“I made a culture,” said Bevan, “and infected six South African rabbits. In an hour they developed the first symptoms. Their eyes watered for the prescribed time, their temperature rose six hours later, and in the morning they were all well.”
“Why South African rabbits?” asked Van der Bergh, curiously.
“Because they develop secondary symptoms of any disease at twice the rate of a human being – at least that has been my experience,” explained Bevan. “I found it by accident whilst I was in Grahamstown, in South Africa, and it has been a very useful piece of knowledge to me. When I wired to you I had no idea there were going to be any further developments. I merely wanted to make you acquainted with the bug.”
(248)

This focus on the scientific and medical aspects of blindness is significant, given the long history of blindness being portrayed in moral and mystical terms. Towards the end of his work on the portrayal of blindness in art, Barasch refers to the “disenchantment of blindness” (147–157) – that is, the movement of blindness from the moral, religious, and mythical spheres into that of the rational, where it is a physical or neurological impairment like any other:

Diderot ... tried to show that in richness of mental imagery the blind person is not inferior to the seeing and that his mind works in the same way as the mind of the seeing. Second, by showing that the functioning of the blind person’s mind can be rationally analysed and studied no less than that of the seeing, he brings about the disenchantment of blindness. It is the close of a tradition that had prevailed for almost the whole duration of European culture. (157)

Whilst the main works discussed in this thesis were written some time after the period Barasch describes, the old ideas and associations lingered (and continue to do so) perhaps longer than he gives them credit for. “The Black Grippe” is the work which most clearly places blindness in scientific terms, the one that most demystifies it. In doing so, it sheds many of the negative associations of, if not blindness, at least blind people. Blindness is not a divine judgement or demonic possession, but the result of some identifiable virus and, in this case, one which is universal in its effect. In the description of the blind South African rabbit, the animal’s normality is emphasised, and this later extends to blind people as well:

With his long ears pricked, his sensitive nostrils quivering – he was used to the man-smell of Hereford Bevan by now – and his big black eyes staring unwinkingly ahead, there was little in the appearance of the rabbit to suggest abnormal condition. (244)⁶

Both the focus on scientific development and the rejection of superstitious causes reflect some of the approaches to the 1918/19 pandemic. Johnson points to some of the research taken into influenza:

In Britain the MRC, under Walter Fletcher, had drawn up a list of influenza research aims and a survey of what work was “already arranged for investigation” by Armistice Day. The research was to investigate the clinical and bacteriological features of both uncomplicated influenza and complicated cases, along with the pathological anatomy of these complicated cases and investigations of the transmission of the disease. (ch. 5)

Further, Johnson discusses the attitude of churches to the pandemic, arguing that they did not, in general, contradict scientific attitudes or development:

⁶ This is a marked contrast to Wallace’s 1924 novel *The Dark Eyes of London* in which the blind character is a disfigured, brutish murderer.

By the time of the flu pandemic, the British churches were similar to the “modernist” churches of South Africa and Australia in that they did not see God as having a direct role in the pandemic and they were trying to reconcile modern views of science and medicine with religion. In Britain the public discussion of the pandemic played out in the newspapers was almost devoid of any religious dimension or contribution. (ch. 5)

This disenchantment, or demystification, occurs not only in its depiction of science in the laboratory sense, but in the fact that, in many ways, “The Black Grippe” is firmly related to historical reality. I have already mentioned that the Spanish ‘flu pandemic was a clear inspiration for the work (Quinn describes a similar demystification of influenza (13–16)), but the similarities are far more than both being a widespread flu-like illness. Take, for example, the portrayal of the Grippe having three distinct waves of symptoms. Whilst this does not, of course, match the reality of the flu pandemic, it is almost certainly a reaction of the waves of the pandemic, as later described by Barry:

The 1918 Influenza pandemic, like many other influenza pandemics, came in waves. The first spring wave killed few, but the second wave would be lethal. (176)

Similarly Johnson notes that the influenza “came upon the British in these three waves” (ch. 3). “The Black Grippe” reflects Barry’s description of the flu as lurking, hidden, but ready to strike:

The virus had not disappeared. It had only gone underground, like a forest fire left burning in the roots, swarming and mutating, adapting, honing itself, watching and waiting, waiting to burst into flame. (175)

While the Spanish ‘flu did not cause mass, total, blindness, it did have a significant effect on vision. Quinn describes “temporary blindness” (144) as a symptom and Johnson notes that many were left “temporarily forgetful, deaf, blind or bald” (ch. 1). Barry describes this impact on vision in more detail:

The headaches throbbed deep in the skull, victims feeling as if their heads would literally split open, as if a sledgehammer were driving a wedge not into the head but from inside the head out. The pain seemed to locate particularly behind the eye orbit and could be nearly unbearable when patients moved their eyes. There were areas of lost vision, areas where the normal frame of sight went black. Some paralysis of ocular muscles was frequently recorded, and German medical literature noted eye involvement with special frequency, sometimes in 25 percent of influenza cases. (236)

Further, whilst the word “Black” in the title no doubt refers to lack of vision, there was another sense in which the (real) epidemic was described as black, as noted again by Barry:

The world looked black. Cyanosis turned it black. Patients might have few other symptoms at first, but if nurses and doctors noted cyanosis they began to treat such patients as terminal, as the walking dead. (236)

This cyanosis made a definite impression, with Johnson describing it as “the most striking and memorable feature of the pandemic as it impressed itself upon many of those treating the ill” (ch. 20) and Quinn as “the most bizarre thing about the latter stages of the new illness” (132). It was this as well as the severity that led the pandemic sometimes to be known as the “black plague” (Johnson ch. 6). In some descriptions the colour took on a racial connotation, as in the use of the term “kaffersiekte” (Johnson ch. 6) in South Africa, or in Catherine Belling’s description of cyanosis in “Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918” (2009):

These symptoms include bleeding from nose, ears, and eyes; sodden blood-filled lungs; and the characteristic cyanosis that Roy and his fictional counterpart both note with a particular kind of horror as threatening even the racial identity of the patient. Although Mullen does not quote the letter directly, his description closely approximates Roy’s actual document: “Victims became cyanotic, starved of oxygen- parts or all of their bodies turned blue, sometimes such a dark hue that

the corpses of white men were indistinguishable from those of coloreds.” (63)

Thus blindness is demystified or “disenchanted” by both the scientific focus of the story, and its relationship to real world events. A third way in which this disenchantment happens is that the blindness lasts only for a defined and predicted short period of time. Surveying artistic depictions of blindness, Barasch points to the fact that blindness has traditionally been considered to always be permanent. This, he argues, is one of the reasons it has often been viewed as, or related to, some spiritual or mystical force, considered outside the realm of humanity and the physical world:

In the original Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament in Christian terminology, the restoring of sight to the blind is perceived as the ultimate miracle, an event that goes beyond what is thinkable in the terrestrial world and in our present life. So utterly utopian appeared the healing of the blind that it was understood as a distinctive mark of the messianic age. (48)

Though they were written in an era considerably more informed about the nature and causes of blindness, both “The Country of the Blind” and *The Day of the Triffids* do not question the fact that the mass blindness is permanent. In the former, there is a very clear basis for this – the people concerned literally have no eyes – whilst in the latter it is assumed (though it is worth noting that there is one case of temporary blindness on the part of the protagonist at the start of the book).

Whilst in “The Black Grippe” the blindness is not cured, simply outlasted, the discovery that the blindness is not permanent is placed clearly in a scientific context. This is not a time in which science has a solution to everything, but it is one in which blindness is rationalised, demystified, and operates in a way similar to other illnesses – and is, in fact, symptomatic of a variant of a known and common illness. Paradoxically, whilst the fact that the blindness is

temporary does in many ways make it stranger, more unusual, it also puts it in the realm of the knowable. Knowable does not equate to known, however, and this scientific approach does not equate to all answers being known, or to the gripe being considered a normal event. On the contrary, it is depicted as new and strange, but something which can be conceived of within the available scientific knowledge. In the following comment by Professor Van der Bergh, he alludes to the strangeness of this event, comparing it to the 1918 pandemic. He rejects the now commonly accepted view of the latter being influenza, but he is clearly approaching it in a scientific manner, as a “disease” not a curse or a conspiracy:

“Well,” said the professor, reflectively, “I don’t wonder. The 1918 epidemic was bad enough. I am not calling it influenza, because I think very few of us are satisfied to affix that wild label to a devastating disease which appeared in the most mysterious fashion, took its toll, and disappeared as rapidly and mysteriously.” (246)

Again, this fictional scientist mirrors historical attitudes, as Quinn describes:

It’s worth noting too that severe attacks of influenza can produce bizarre symptoms that make even expert physicians doubt their diagnosis – many of the world’s top scientists were convinced in 1918, for example, that Spanish flu wasn’t flu at all. (45)

Similarly, in a history of the (real) influenza epidemic, Barry fits attempts to classify and fight it firmly within the context of scientific development, but also as a challenge to how far that development had reached:

[The scientists who studied the virus] also recognised their failures. They had lost their illusions. They had entered the first decades of the twentieth century confident that science, even if its victories remained limited, would triumph. Now Victor Vaughan told a colleague, “Never again allow me to say that medical science is on the verge of conquering disease.” With the contempt one reserves for one’s own

failings, he also said, "Doctors know no more about this flu than 14th century Florentine doctors had known about the Black Death." (ch. 13)

In the following, Barry presents the problem not as one of lack of scientific knowledge, but as a social problem, one of priorities and destructiveness, both concerns which are explored in "The Black Grippe" as it describes both scientific research and political bureaucracy:

By 1918 humankind was fully modern, and fully scientific, but too busy fighting itself to aggress against nature. Nature, however, chooses its own moments. It chose this moment to aggress against man, and it did not do so prodding languidly. For the first time, modern humanity, a humanity practicing the modern scientific method, would confront nature in its fullest rage. (166)

In the previous chapter, I argued that the intergenerational adaptation by blind people of their society and environment to meet their needs was key to the argument that "The Country of the Blind" depicted disability as socially constructed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, "The Black Grippe" seems more concerned with blindness on a biological level, and when we look at the portrayal of society, it seems to be primarily of one which disintegrates and is near collapse in the face of mass blindness:

"All the trains have stopped," the professor went on; "I've been figuring it out in my room this morning just what it means. There are blind men in the signal-boxes and blind men on the engines. All transport has come to a standstill. How are you going to get the food to the people? In a day's time the shops, if the people can reach them, will be sold out and it will be impossible to replenish the local stores. You can neither milk nor reap. All the great power-stations are at a standstill. There is no coal being got out of the mines. Wait, where is your telephone?" (254)

This in itself neither supports nor precludes the idea of disability as socially constructed. It makes sense that a sighted society would not easily cope with

sudden universal blindness – Wells’s country of the blind was able to adapt due to the slow onset of blindness, and the changes created by multiple generations. Indeed, the effect on society is much less dramatic and disastrous than that depicted in the initial days of blindness in *The Day of the Triffids*. The real question is not whether society as it was then constructed could survive the universal loss of sight, but whether any potential society is possible which does not disable blind people. Although this question is beyond the scope of the story, the emphasis on the biological, and on blindness as negative, makes it impossible to read “The Black Grippe” in the same way as I did “The Country of the Blind”. Nevertheless, whilst there is little sign of society or the built environment adapting (though there are some organised changes made to cope with the blindness), there are clear signs of people adapting to living in that society whilst blind. The description of the protagonists’ first reaction to the blindness shows (as in *The Day of the Triffids*) the substitution of another sense – sound:

He searched for his clothes and began to dress. His window was open, yet from outside came no sound of traffic. London was silent – as silent as the grave.

His window looked out upon the busy thoroughfare in which the Jackson Institute was situated, but there was not so much as the clink of a wheel or the sound of a pedestrian’s foot. (252)

The following passage combines both a nightmarish scenario of society collapsing and people adapting in order to survive, if in a relatively basic way:

The days that followed were days of nightmare, days when men groped and stumbled in an unknown world, shrieking for food. On the evening of the second day the water supply failed. The pumping stations had ceased to work. Happily it rained and people were able to collect water in their mackintosh coats. (256)

It is important to note that the focus is on the systems of society failing to cope (e.g. “The pumping stations had ceased to work” rather than “The blind failed

to keep the pumping stations working"). Blindness may have been the *cause* of society's collapse, but there is no emphasis on inherent links between lack of eyesight and a failing society. There is also a rather detached, and objective, lack of blame throughout the story. Although it was written and set in an era of intense paranoia in the aftermath of World War 1 and the 1917 Russian revolution, and does to an extent capture the uncertainties and fears of the time, no minority group or political interest is scapegoated for the blindness and no conspiracies are even portrayed, let alone endorsed. Although the slow response of the government is criticised, there is no indication of moral deficiency or weakness either causing the blindness or causing the failure to keep society functioning.

"The Black Grippe" includes a character, Lillian Selbury, who was blind prior to the infection, perhaps from birth, and has had time to adapt. She is shown as competent where others are not (far more so than the first already-blind character depicted in *The Day of the Triffids*). Her blindness is not portrayed overtly positively; her advantage is more in being more used to blindness than those who were previously sighted, not having an inherent advantage in navigating systems designed for those without sight, as in "The Country of the Blind". But nevertheless she is shown as a functional, intelligent, not to mention desirable, human being, with a hint of romance at the end of the story:

"You'll think I'm horrid if I say I am enjoying this," she said, "and yet I am. It's so lovely to be able to pity others! Of course, it is very dreadful and it is beginning to frighten me a little, and then there's nobody to tell me how pretty I am, because nobody can see. That is rather a drawback, isn't it?" and she laughed again. (257)

The advantage of those previously-blind is applied on a wider, and more structural, scale. It is an idea which has a sinister side in *The Day of the Triffids*, but here it is linked to competence, efficiency, and industry:

“Yes, sir,” said Bevan. “There are a number of blind institutes throughout the country. Get in touch with them and let their trained men organize the business of industry. I think it could be done.” (256)

As well as the historical context, in “Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918” (2009) Belling suggests another reason for the focus on society in fiction depicting the pandemic, that the very nature of the illness made personal, individual experience difficult to recollect or describe:

My expectation when I began work on this essay was to find that historical fiction about the pandemic could somehow work as Mullen hoped his novel would: as an antidote to our collective amnesia. What I have found instead is that the fiction tends to replicate some of the pandemic’s resistance to being recalled and recounted. The social context can be reconstructed and described, with its cities reduced to chaos, its make-shift hospitals and exhausted nurses and proliferation of the dead – but the details of the illness experience itself, of the sick mind and the infected body of 1918, are much harder to find – compared, for example, with accounts of trench warfare or descriptions of being treated in field hospitals and so on. (59)

Belling goes on to argue that such a shift is common to the recounting of mass disasters:

A profound cultural and ethical aspect of all major epidemics (and other mass disasters) is the loss of access to personal narratives. The collective replaces the individual as protagonist, and the health of the public takes precedence over that of the individual, producing a reductionism that elides the particular and the subjective. (55)

What Belling treats as a loss, I suggest in this context constitutes a break from the more common narratives about disability. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that “The Black Grippe”, in its focus on the scientific details of the virus, causes the reader to feel limited empathy with the characters and largely fails in terms of narrative suspense, especially in its anti-climactic end. Though Wallace is not writing directly from personal experience, the difficulty of narrating the experience of illness, as discussed here by Belling, is perhaps partially responsible for this:

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has called the first-person narration of illness experience (as memoir or fiction) an “extreme test case” for narratology, since illness threatens and disrupts embodied experience, making the “disintegrating body” a threat to “the very possibility of narration”. (60)

The focus on society is also important in the context of a pandemic which occurred at a time when, in Britain and in a number of other countries, the state was taking on more social responsibility. Detailing many of the reforms of the 1906–1914 Liberal government, including around healthcare, pensions, education, and welfare, Johnson also places the pandemic in a clear social context (ch. 5). Specifically, he connects this to medical and scientific progress, stating that “The change in focus from the punitive to the provident, aided by arguments about national efficiency (in light of both the South African and First World Wars) that included elements of poverty, nutrition and health was accompanied by the rise of scientific medical professionalism.” And also that “influenza, as a social disease can be linked to sanitation, and the connection between the pandemic, sanitation, national efficiency and the ‘fitness’ of the population was certainly being discussed” (ch. 5). Not only this, but Quinn considers the pandemic a *cause* of this increased move from individual to societal responsibility:

One of the good things to come out of the 1918 pandemic was an increased awareness of the terrible conditions in which most of the world's population lived. The incomprehensible scale of death reminded people – just as cholera outbreaks in London had reminded politicians in the 19th century – that ultimately the ill health of the masses would impact on everyone, rich and poor alike ... the disaster of the flu pandemic of 1918 made governments realize they had to take more responsibility for the health of their citizens. (152)

While Wallace does not critique society and government for their disabling of blind people, as Wells arguably does, he pays attention to the efficacy of society and its ability to respond in a crisis. This focus on the response to a crisis seems unusual in fiction depicting this pandemic. In reference to John O'Hara's 1935 short story "The Doctor's Son", Hovanec states that the story "opens with a scene that demonstrates how in the pandemic climate, social codes break down under the weight of survivalist impulses" (175). Further, she argues that "influenza serves as a trope for the dehumanizing, denaturalizing, and disjunctive forces of modernity, forces that elicit conflicted responses from modernist writers" (178). Similarly, two later works describing mass blindness – *The Day of the Triffids*, discussed in the next chapter, and José Saramago's *Blindness* – are more concerned with societal collapse than societal maintenance and continuation.

In Wallace's story, the inclusion of an American character in a British setting is used to highlight this focus on the efficacy of response to crisis. In particular, the British political hierarchy is shown to be a hindrance, dismissive of scientific knowledge and of anyone without the right connections. Once again, this attitude has a historical basis: medical historian Chris Lawrence, quoted in Johnson, describes the fact that medicine was led by a "patrician elite that harked back to an imagined Great Tradition in British (specifically English) medicine" (ch. 5). In their attempt to warn of the coming blindness, Bevan and

Van der Bergh have to approach a contact (i.e. they have no method of direct communication), who proves to be less than helpful:

“He is the medical gentleman who has the ear of the Government,” he said, “but he is rather an impossible person. He’s one of the old school–”

“I know that school,” said the professor, grimly, “it’s a school where you learn nothing and forget nothing. Still, it’s your duty to warn him”. (249)

In this case, the dismissal is attributed directly to anti-American sentiment, rather than the quality of the science involved or the skills or credentials of the professor:

“I really cannot allow an American person to teach me my business,” he said. “I have nothing to say against American medicines or American surgery, and there are some very charming people in America – I am sure this must be the case. And now, doctor, if you will excuse –” (251)

Continuing this theme of British institutions being inept and stifling any attempt to mitigate the effect of the blindness, a police constable is depicted as being almost comically inhibited by the blindness, responding “I’m not likely to meet anybody ... I’ve been standing here hardly daring to move since it came” (255). The view of the British government and institutions is in direct contrast to the portrayal of the American government as efficient and responsive. Professor Van der Bergh states that “My Embassy has wired the particulars to Washington ... and Washington takes a very serious view of your discovery. They are making whatever preparations they can” (251).

When it comes to the main characters, both are portrayed positively. In the case of Van der Bergh, this comes across as almost excessive:

Professor Van der Bergh was one of those elderly men who never grow old. His blue eye was as clear as it had been on his twentieth birthday, his sensitive mouth was as ready to smile as ever it had been in the

flower of his youth. A professor of pathology, a great anatomist, and one of the foremost bacteriologists in the United States ... (245)

Hereford Bevan is also depicted as very scientifically competent, forward-thinking, and well-connected. And yet his name suggests Wales and provincial England more than it does the London setting of the story, and his manner comes across as far more that of a country doctor than of a scientific researcher. Whilst I think this predominantly relates to criticism of the hierarchical and inaccessible nature of the British government, it is also of interest in the context of the growth of American medicine. This context is significant in Barry's analysis of the influenza epidemic. He argues that, despite the change in European medicine in the 19th century, "in research and education especially, American medicine lagged far behind, and that made practice lag as well" (6) but that things had changed significantly by the time "The Black Grippe" was set:

By World War I, the revolution in American medicine led by William Welch had triumphed. That revolution had radically transformed American medicine, forcing its teaching, research, art and practice through the filter of science. (401)

Therefore, the focus on national differences, as well as highlighting concerns about inaccessible and bureaucratic government, also adds to the sense that this is a time when things are changing dramatically, both in terms of medical knowledge, and also in terms of the structures that underpin the development of that knowledge. And despite the negative portrayal of the Establishment, the story ends with a sentimental description of London. This is evident in the concluding paragraph of the story, when sight returns. On the one hand, London has been greatly affected by the blindness, but on the other there's a sense of beauty and deep attachment to the city, and confidence that it carries on regardless:

“Wait, wait!” he said, hoarsely, and gripped the rail with one hand and her arm with the other. Was it imagination? It was still dark, a fine drizzle of rain was falling, but the blackness was dappled with tones of less blackness. There was a dark, straight thing before him, something that seemed to hang in the centre of his eye, and a purple shape beyond, and he knew that he was looking at a London street, at a London lamppost, with eyes that saw. Black London, London devoid of light, London whose streets were packed with motionless vehicles that stood just where they had stopped on the day the darkness fell, London with groping figures half mad with joy, shrieking and sobbing their relief – he drew a long breath. (259)

In a 1998 article, “The Colonial Vision of Edgar Wallace”, Winston Wheeler describes Wallace’s fiction as revealing two distinct attitudes, one upholding and perpetuating colonialism, and the other, far more progressive, challenging and revealing systems of oppression:

Wallace the Colonial exploitationist, a racist and homophobe whose public pronouncements in these areas (as well as in other contested sites of social discourse of the era) were entirely in tune with the “othering” project inherent within British Colonialism; and Wallace the surreptitious social critic, within whose texts one finds surprising endorsements of feminist self-determinism, racial equality, condemnations of socially inequitable structures, and a clear vision of his own limitations as a writer, and as a person of circumscribed social/political self-construction. (122)

Wallace’s disadvantaged childhood and self-education have some similarity to Wells’s background, and there are indications in his work of a similar, though conflicted, sympathy for the underdog. “The Black Grippe” illustrates a conflict similar to that described by Wheeler, at once showing London surviving the blindness as if due to some intrinsic worth or right, and yet being heavily critical of the British bureaucracy.

The social context of the blindness is emphasised not just by differences in national attitudes and political structures, but also in the historical context.

The symptoms of the “grippe” are depicted as occurring in three distinct waves – first a relatively conventional flu, secondly uncontrollable crying, and thirdly blindness. The actual 1918 influenza pandemic also came in waves, and although these were waves of infection rather than symptoms, there is a clear parallel. The idea of symptoms coming in waves also reflects another historical element of the pandemic, the fact that it came in the final stages of, and directly after, the First World War. In its disproportionate affliction of those of combat age and in seemingly good health (those who would normally be expected to be hit hardest would be the very young and old, and those with pre-existing medical conditions), it seemed to function as another wave of death. Though Wallace would not have known it at the time, a further wave of effects was to hit as “the graphs for encephalitis lethargica notifications and mortality indicated an almost perfect six-year lag from the influenza pandemic” (ch.4). There are other aspects to this symbolic link between the emergence from war and the depiction of the pandemic. Take, for example, Barry’s description of the fight against infection, using not uncommon metaphors when it comes to illness and treatment:

In the days before antibiotics, an infection launched a race to the death between the pathogen and the immune system. Sometimes a victim would become desperately ill; then, suddenly and almost miraculously, the fever would break and the victim would recover. This “resolution by crisis” occurred when the immune system barely won the race, when it counterattacked massively and successfully. But once the body survives an infection, it gains an advantage. For the immune system epitomizes the saying that that which does not kill you makes you stronger. (109)

There are also metaphors relating to WW1 in the second wave of the fictional epidemic, described as follows:

People began to cry – that is to say, their eyes filled with water and they felt extremely uncomfortable for about a quarter of an hour. So far as I

can discover the crying period did not last much more than a quarter of an hour, in some cases a much shorter time. (247)

There are several possible interpretations of this; it could be read as a cleansing, a readjustment in vision, or as a delayed reaction of grief. In any case, it signifies how “The Black Grippe” has a clear relation to the historical setting in both literal and less literal terms.

In Chapter 1 I discussed how “The Country of the Blind” could be viewed in relation to the social model of disability, portraying disability as socially constructed rather than as an inherent attribute of one’s body. In many ways, “The Black Grippe” stands in contrast to that. It portrays blindness (or at least that blindness caused by the flu-like illness) primarily as an affliction, and focuses largely on the scientific and medical aspects – what causes it, how it is transmitted, how it can be predicted, and so on.

Criticisms of the medical model of disability, that which sees disability as an attribute specific to an individual, often involve the fact that resources are (mis)directed to medicine and rehabilitation rather than to inclusionary design and practices – the adaptation of the individual, in other words, rather than of society and of the environment. Its individualised focus can often lead to moral judgements, overt and otherwise, of the individual. However, despite its medical focus, “The Black Grippe” avoids many of these pitfalls. The fact that the blindness is universal lessens the focus on any one individual. This universality, combined with the fact that the blindness has a scientific, rather than a divine or mystical, underpinning, means many of the negative moral connotations and associations are avoided. Rather the emphasis is on public health and how society can be better changed to handle epidemics. Although the scientific focus might lead a reader to think the emphasis will be on finding a cure (and indeed, that would be desirable in the context of this

story), in fact the blindness is treated as inevitable, and the aim is to prepare and maintain society.

Whilst “The Country of the Blind” portrays a society where blindness is the norm, and integral to how society functions, “The Black Grippe” shows a sighted society that can function despite blindness. It is not a story which overtly supports the concept of disability as socially constructed, but it is one where blindness and society are very clearly connected. It is, at its heart, a thoroughly optimistic story, depicting a society that with technology and social processes can overcome what nature throws at it. Mirroring the concern in “The Black Grippe”, Barry writes of the impact of the social, political, and media reaction to the pandemic, arguing that it was primarily those reactions that caused many of the resulting problems in society:

The media and public officials helped create that terror – not by exaggerating the disease but by minimising it, by trying to reassure ... In 1918 the lies of officials and of the press never allowed the terror to condense into the concrete. The public could trust nothing and so they knew nothing. So a terror seeped into the society ... The fear, not the disease, threatened to break the society apart. (Afterword)

Therefore “The Black Grippe”, with its focus on scientific research, does lean towards a medically focussed analysis of disability. Nevertheless, with its firm emphasis on society – how society responds to the blindness, how antiquated social hierarchies and international relations play into this, and how society can survive it – the story largely avoids both the individualised focus of the medical model of disability, and the notions of judgement and inferiority often associated with it.

Chapter 3: The Day of the Triffids

John Wyndham's 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids* is perhaps the best-known of the texts discussed here. The word "triffid" has entered the popular lexicon as a descriptor of oversized and somehow intimidating plants,⁷ and the novel has since spawned two films, a television series, multiple radio adaptations, and a comic. Although the carnivorous, mobile plants of the title may have left the strongest impression on many readers, *The Day of the Triffids* is primarily the story of a world afflicted by sudden, and near universal, blindness. This is not a story of adaptation to blindness over generations, as in "The Country of the Blind", nor is it a short-lived state as in "The Black Grippe". Rather, society quickly collapses, disease spreads, and the triffids begin to take over. More than any text discussed thus far, *The Day of the Triffids* appears to uphold the equation of blindness with catastrophe, on a societal as well as an individual level. In this chapter, I will explore the negative connotations of blindness in such a portrayal, arguing that in this instance they are mitigated by the depiction of adaptation and the prospect of a new society, as well as the absence of moral judgements attached to blindness. The presence of the triffids makes this a novel as much about evolution, biology, and change as one about disaster, and these subjects give rise to ideas about disability more complex than the novel first appears to contain.

⁷ For example, 1970 articles in the *Daily Mail* and *Herts & Cambs Reporter* compared "dreaded Japanese monster exploding rhubarb" and Japanese Knotweed to triffids and in a further indication of the pervasiveness of the image of the triffids, a 1968 local newspaper article reported that "Old copies of the *Skelmersdale Reporter* have been transformed into science fiction monsters [triffids] by children as a St. Helens school (Article, *Skelmersdale Reporter*). Similarly, the extent to which the triffids caught the imagination of readers is indicated in a 1952 letter signed only as "Ben" to Wyndham which states: "Greetings to Molly and Grace, and renewed thanks for the Triffids. I have started spotting some suspicious looking characters in our garden: they are going to get a strong dose of Abol plus D.D.T. at the weekend: do you think that will be effective with seedlings?" (JWA).

Though Wyndham himself was uncomfortable with the term, *The Day of the Triffids* is the text which could most comfortably be described as “science fiction”. Both the triffids and the hypothesised satellite-based weapon are discussed as scientific developments, and they are also far more advanced relative to the time of writing than the scientific exploration in “The Black Grippe”. A scrapbook of articles by Wyndham, held at the John Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool,⁸ indicates his extrapolation from contemporary scientific developments and discussions, including, for example, articles referring to meteors and meteorites, the totality of nuclear war (“War of the Hemispheres”), the need to “search for new forms of energy” (Furnas), work on growth hormones in plants (Article. *Discovery.*), and the fact that experiments on rats show that radiation can cause them to be “born ... not just blind, but without eyes at all” (“The Eagle and the Flea”).

Although this extrapolation of scientific possibilities is integral to *The Day of the Triffids*, at its heart it is a novel concerned with people, and with society. Wells was a strong influence on Wyndham; of particular impact was Wells’s primary concern with people and societal structures, even in fiction ostensibly focused on science. In comparing Wells to Jules Verne, Wyndham highlighted this distinction in the draft of a letter to a reader, Miss Broadbent:

Wells was not in that line of development. He, too, took the logical idea, but where Verne was interested in gadgetry, Wells was interested in its effect on people. (1, JWA)

He expresses a similar opinion in his response to a 1964 survey:

⁸ Many of the sources referenced in this chapter (including correspondence, manuscripts, and unpublished fiction) are held at the John Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool library. Such sources are indicated by “JWA” where referred to in the text from hereon.

Wells I read with devotion – but then he was not ‘in the field’ at all: he put story and characterisation first, ‘the field’ cared for nothing but gadgetry and novelty, and to a great extent still does ... Wells, of course – though, as I have said, he did not write s-f. He wrote novels and stories about people in curious circumstances. What really distinguished his inventive books from his others (and him from the straight novelist who told a tale about people in everyday circumstances, from the modern novelist who tells no tale at all, and the ‘romantic’ novelist who tells the same tale over and over again was his use of extrapolation. Science and socialism happened to be the most obviously pregnant forces around just then, so they were the material he used – that is to say, his interest lay not (as Verne’s did) in scientific marvels, but in the effects they might have on people. (Wyndham, Postal Interview with Sam Moskowitz, JWA)

Wells’s influence is evident in Wyndham’s fiction; the short story “Perfect Creature” is inspired by and directly refers to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (38), also the inspiration for an unfinished story, “Vivisection” (Ketterer 304). As I shall later discuss, “The Country of the Blind” is directly referenced in *The Day of the Triffids*. Wallace is also a probable influence on Wyndham. While I have found no specific evidence that Wyndham read “The Black Grippe”, the fact that Wyndham read extensively in the field (and Wallace was a popular author when Wyndham was growing up), and they wrote both science fiction and detective fiction for pulp magazines in a similar time period, it seems likely. As noted, there are certainly similarities between the two works: the London setting, the use of those with pre-existing blindness as guides, and the suddenness and universality of the blindness. The subject of mass disease is also one which interested Wyndham; as well as plague being a secondary disaster in *The Day of the Triffids*, another, unfinished, story begins:

The important difference between Peter Tramble and 999.9 per thousand of his fellow countrymen was that after he went down with The Fever he got up again. They did not. (Wyndham, Untitled Fragment Archive Reference 7/2/12, JWA)

Not only does this touch on a similar topic to “The Black Grippe”, but both explicitly refer back to the Spanish ‘flu pandemic. The protagonist of this unfinished story “wondered if they were in for an epidemic, something like the 1918 flu, perhaps” (Wyndham Untitled Fragment Archive Reference 7/2/12, JWA).

The most obvious reading of blindness in *The Day of the Triffids* is in relation to loss and catastrophe: loss of sight, loss of lives, and loss of a structured and modern society. The blindness is sudden, unpredictable, and catastrophic: a direct contrast to the slow adaptation to blindness portrayed in “The Country of the Blind”. The phrase “the end of the world” (8) appears on the very first page, and on a more individual level, the first half of the book describes multiple suicides, with the implication that these are a relatively common event in the aftermath. This sense of catastrophe is not unusual in portrayals of blindness; in a general discussion on blindness in fiction, Georgina Kleege states:

Since blindness is understood to be the predominant sense in humans, the loss of sight is assumed to be tantamount to a loss of life, or a loss of a fundamental quality that makes someone human. (113)

This catastrophe is strongly grounded in realistic, straightforward, descriptive terms. In this it closely resembles “The Black Grippe”, in contrast to the almost mythical quality of “The Country of the Blind”. Whilst parts of the setting – especially in the chronological sense – are somewhat vague, it is much more specific than Wells’s story.

Some clues to the date of setting can be found in the original manuscript, removed in the published version; it indicates Masen was a boy in 1949–50, when he found the triffid in his garden, and another section indicates that the novel is set in 1965 (127). This original manuscript has some significantly more

futuristic elements than the published version; it refers to there being “colonies on Mars and Venus, and ships were beginning to venture further” (ch. 2 p.3) and that Umberto discovered the triffids on Venus (10). However, although the precise year is in doubt, aside from some technological developments, the setting at the start of *The Day of the Triffids* is evocative of the time Wyndham was writing; this is, as I shall discuss later, a novel of England in the early Cold War period.

The location is even more specific. Some years before, in a submission letter for the story widely believed to be a predecessor to *The Day of the Triffids*, Wyndham referred to starting to set his work in specific locations:

Hithertoe [sic] I have tried to be non-committal in the location of the stories I have sent you; however, encouraged by your note about the growth in your readers over here, I thought to venture. (Wyndham, Letter to Editor of Wonder Stories, JWA)

This specificity of location is continued in *The Day of the Triffids*, where Wyndham is specific and descriptive about many of the locations, especially in London. Writing in 1954 to a reader, Betty Lou Smalley of Ohio, Wyndham provides an in-depth description of a street about 10 minutes’ walk from Piccadilly, and the surrounding squares, where much of the story is set (1–3, JWA). It is worth noting that Wyndham was based in London, working for the censor’s office, during the blitz, which is a likely influence for his description of the effects of an attack in London. Describing this period in a November 1940 letter to his partner, Grace Wilson, he writes that “an era had shut up its house and gone away, perhaps forever” (JWA), giving a sense of a definite break from the past, as happens in *The Day of the Triffids*.⁹ The following

⁹ The influence of Wyndham’s wartime London experiences on his writing is also displayed in another letter to Wilson dated December 1944, where, in reference to seeing pictures of the V2 he quotes Wells: “the world has become so fantastic as to

passage from his response to an interview questionnaire not only indicates his love of Wells, but also shows Wyndham's tendency to imagine fantastical events in familiar surroundings:

Must have made a very early acquaintance with Mr Wells' work, and has certainly been reading it ever since. Still has a great affection for "The Time Machine", and still thinks of the white marble sphinx from that story as standing on his prep school lawn. (Wyndham, Biography 1, JWA)

Although *The Day of the Triffids* is, on the whole, firmly grounded in an extrapolated future reality, there are some exceptions to this sense of reality and the rational. Whilst religious imagery is rare, Masen does state that scenes resemble "some of Doré's pictures of hell" (8). There are references to an irrational, almost primordial, fear of the dark; Masen describes the feeling that "horrors were lurking in the shadowy corners of the bedroom" (9) and his belief even as an adult that "the elemental fears were still marching along with me, waiting their chance and pretty nearly getting it" (9–10).

The Day of the Triffids is, however, predominantly a quite straightforward picture of blindness. It reports a catastrophic event, with a scientific explanation, in a real place and a time not too distant from the time of writing. Blindness is, as in "The Black Grippe", largely demystified, and stripped of associations with immorality or evil, but also remains almost entirely negatively portrayed. There is little sense that blind people can survive in any significant way; and effectively none that they can live a good life. The end of the novel offers some hope of a future world better than the one which preceded it, but it is undeniably a world for the (sighted) next generation. This detachment of blindness from moral and mystical associations is also reflected

make the writing of fantastic stories impossible by reason of their comparative dullness".

in the fact that although Masen is privileged in many ways, he is portrayed as quite ordinary. In the foreword to the original manuscript, Wyndham states that “William Masen was not a person of any importance in the pre-catastrophe world. He was an ordinary man of his time, reacting as an ordinary man” (Foreword). Similarly, the original manuscript described Masen’s survival as “just a matter of luck, like most survival” (1, JWA). Wyndham linked this interest in reason and chance (as opposed to religion or destiny) to his reading of Wells in a 1968 interview:

The Time Machine will evermore remind him of Derbyshire, and the prep school where he came on Wells, “The humanity in the midst of the fantastic. In my fiction, the unbreakable atom is reasoning capacity. A world that has reason becomes different. Man is an accident, but it’s up to him to make the best of it.” (Pooter, JWA)

Masen’s back story appears to make him the epitome of averageness (25–27). Of his childhood, he concludes that there “was not a lot to distinguish us from the ten or twelve million other people who used to live in and around London in those days” (25). Whilst there are some hints that he is in some ways predestined for the role (his early triffid sting, his employment on a triffid farm and his name perhaps hinting he will be a mason, or builder, of a new society), the overall picture is of someone who avoided blindness not through any strength of character or moral superiority, nor through destiny, but by chance.

This focus on chance is just one way in which what appears to be relatively straightforward documentation of the catastrophic effects of mass blindness is disrupted. Whilst causing catastrophe and disintegration may be the primary function of blindness in the novel, this simplistic picture is challenged nearly as much as it is reinforced, with significant attention paid to more complex themes of adaptability and change. It is easy to read the events of *The Day of*

the Triffids, and the apparent meteor storm which causes the blindness, in particular, as a sudden change which disrupts a mostly static and comfortable situation. Highlighting this distinct contrast between a prosperous post-war world and one which has descended into chaos reinforces the idea of blindness as intrinsically negative. However, there are also indications that the order of things are changing dramatically, if in a slower and more subtle manner. Masen refers to a “swerve of interest from swords to ploughshares” (27) and describes his father’s view that “the world was divided sharply into desk-men who worked with their brains, and non-desk men who didn’t, and got dirty” as “already a century or so out of date” (26). While the blinding can easily be read as a metaphor for the focus of the anxieties of the early Cold War, it is also compared favourably to them. One speaker states that “I, and quite likely many of you, have spent our lives in expectation of something worse” (115). Blindness is not *the* event, but one possible catastrophe in a catastrophic world. Therefore, these indications that blindness is not a singular, unique catastrophe, go some way towards softening the initial reading. The picture is more complex than an intrinsically terrible affliction upon a sighted (and therefore positive) world, with themes of change also prominent in the aftermath, in both a social and biological sense.

In Chapter 1, on “The Country of the Blind”, I discussed how the inhabitants of the valley had, over generations, adapted their surroundings to meet their needs. I argued that this demonstrated a view of disability as socially constructed, that blindness is inherently neither positive nor negative, but its effects are portrayed as based on how society is built and organised. This is not the case in *The Day of the Triffids*, a difference which can partially be attributed to the sudden nature of the blindness. Nevertheless, there certainly are instances of people adapting to, and beginning to change, the new

environment they find themselves in so as to make it more accommodating to them now they have lost their sight.

The most obvious type of adaptation is in the use of other senses to fill the place of eyesight. Even in the short period of planned blindness since his surgery, William Masen does, to an extent, adapt, becoming largely reliant on sound. Therefore, at the beginning of the novel, Wednesday *sounds* like Sunday (7) and he “listened hard and suspiciously” to “a distant clock” (7). He goes on to describe in detail the traffic he can usually hear from his hospital window and the shock of its absence (8–9), and even when he has just removed his bandages he seems more attuned to sound; the emphasis is on the fact he *hears* voices in the corridor, and he uses his hearing to try to ascertain the direction they are coming from (17).

Though limited, there is a growing recognition of the capacity of blind people shown in the novel. This generally arises out of necessity. Coker states that “unless it could somehow be contrived that the blind women should take part of the work off the shoulders of the sighted the whole thing would break down within ten days” (181), although this is within the context of seeing the blind members of the community as a burden, as he goes on to state that “if the vicar’s plan for more blind people to join them should happen to be granted the place would become entirely unworkable” (182). In the original manuscript Dennis is told that anyone who does not like the way the Isle of Wight community operates is free to leave and asks in response “Has a blind man much choice?” The leader of the community replies “He has as much as the rest. There are blind men on Jersey too” (327, JWA). Whilst this response may be unsympathetic, it also recognises competency. The fact that “it was far from easy for blind men to carry and manoeuvre heavy cases out of the place and load them on handcarts ... but practice began to give them a knack with it” (137) indicates that whilst blindness does present an inherent difficulty, a

significant part of the associated difficulties are due to not being used to blindness. Or, in other words, adaptation is possible. Though expressed in a demeaning way, this is also indicated by the plan of “teaching both the present blind there, and the sighted children they’ll have later on” (205).

There is also some description of the use of tools and technology specifically to accommodate blindness. Coker, for example, develops a scheme to “begin the construction of devices which would enable blind men to do useful work” (182) and Dennis is described as being “anxious for books in Braille” (225) which Masen brings, along with a “writing machine” (231) back from his trip to London. As Stock points out, adaptation is necessary amongst the sighted as well, and this is demonstrated by others who might stereotypically be seen as ill-equipped for survival, in this case a young girl:

Through her caution, intelligence and intuition, Susan is ideally capable of adapting to the new triffid-dominated world. As she grows up to become one of the many strong female characters who populate Wyndham’s postwar fiction, Susan takes an instrumental, social scientific attitude towards the study of triffid behaviour (ostensibly linked back to the death of Tommy). “I always watch them. I hate them,” she tells Masen. Far from turning away from the world, for the human qua subject to survive she must become more concerned with herself and her relationship to the surrounding world. (218)

Another way in which *The Day of the Triffids* highlights the potential for adaptation, and challenges the dominant narrative of blindness as inherently disastrous, is in its portrayal of those who were blind before the catastrophe. Thus, Masen notes that the man he encounters on his way through London is “more neatly dressed than any other [he] had seen that morning” (55), and Josella says of a bus arriving with blind girls from “some institution” that the reason they had been brought here was because “being blind before this

happened they had been trained to do work of some kind" (121).¹⁰ Masen directly references "The Country of the Blind", stating that "Wells imagined a people who had adapted themselves to blindness. I don't think that's going to happen here" (81). As I have shown, Masen's prediction is largely correct. Some individuals are able to adapt, but in essence the only hope is to survive long enough to raise a new – sighted – generation.

Whilst I have thus far equated the concept of blindness as catastrophic with a view that it is wholly and inherently negative, a closer examination of exactly what that catastrophe consists of reveals a more complicated picture. The idea of blindness as inherently catastrophic is challenged by Masen's relief at his encounter with a man who was already blind, whom he describes as "normally blind" (51). The suicide of the doctor is triggered not, directly, by his discovery that he is blind but by his inability to reach anyone by telephone. Wyndham confirms the centrality of the failure of the telephone system in a 1951 letter to a reader, Mrs Margaret D. Lowe:

On the suddenness and completeness of the collapse, I'm not altogether sure. The crux there, of course, is the early failure of the telephone system. Had it remained in working order, various authorities would have been able at least to communicate with one another – though it is difficult to see that they could have done very much – but, without it, they were all isolated and helpless. (Opinions seem to vary as to how long the automatic telegraph system might be expected to keep going if left entirely unattended, though they were surprisingly short. And the longest estimate that anyone would give me for an unattended power-station was, with a great deal more luck than could reasonably be expected, perhaps six hours). But, granting that there is a great deal of selflessness in the various services, what could the poor chaps do if they could none of them find one another? I imagine the first thing they do when they find that the telephone won't work is to go out in search

¹⁰ However Josella does note that they are "all girls", that is, capable of producing sighted babies. In the eyes of those who brought them in, their worth is centred on them being tools to achieve the resurgence of a sighted population.

of one another, which means that no-one else can find them, and they themselves are soon lost. (1–2, JWA)

Therefore the disaster is predominantly the collapse of society, rather than specifically blindness. Whilst I previously presented the phrase “the end of the world” in support of an analysis of blindness as catastrophe, Masen clarifies that he is referring to “the end of the world [he] had known for close on thirty years” (8). The “elemental fears” Masen describes at the beginning of the novel nearly got their chance not only because of the fact that his “eyes were bandaged” but also because “the traffic had stopped” (10), as Michael Douglas Green discusses in his thesis titled “Social Critique in the Major Novels of John Wyndham: Civilization’s Secrets and Nature’s Truths”:

In essence, Wyndham suggests here that it is not so much reason as it is the trappings of civilisation that free us from the fear of the dark. When Masen says, “things could steal quietly upon me”, his terminology implies not a reasoned fear of triffids, bandits, or wild animals, but rather an irrational fear of unknown “*things*,” and it is not reason which frees us of this fear, but electric lights – the fragile fruits of science. (52–53)

Therefore, although it might be tempting to conclude that the key difference in the attitude to blindness of *The Day of the Triffids* and “The Country of the Blind” is that the former portrays blindness as inherently negative, the fact is that what makes the blindness in *The Day of the Triffids* horrifying is that a society constructed for sighted people collapses. Wyndham does not go as far as Wells in imagining what a society constructed for *blind* people might look like, but there is strong evidence here that he also has an interest in the relationship between disability and how society is constructed. Indeed, as previously discussed, relationships and people, more than science and biology, are arguably at the heart of the novel. Both readers and Wyndham himself viewed the make-up of social structures as particularly important in

The Day of the Triffids. One reader cited the novel as vividly showing “the continuance of the state of interdependence of the members of society long after the nomadic” (Wansborough 799, JWA). In a response to a 1952 letter to reader Donald Crawford, enquiring as to what happened after the novel concluded, Wyndham reinforced the success of the colony:

While I appreciate your interest in knowing how the colony on the Isle of Wight developed and the researches that eventually produced a parasite fatal to Triffids, so that the Colonists were at last able to start the work of reclaiming the mainland from them, I am sorry to have to tell you that the publication of Elspeth Cary’s *History* had to be postponed through lack of the necessary materials, and even its title is still a matter for argument. (1, JWA)

Whereas Wells constructed two societies in “*The Country of the Blind*”, using each to highlight aspects of the other, Wyndham effectively constructs three: the pre-catastrophe world, the collapsing society, and the new world being built on the Isle of Wight. Seven pages of the original manuscript (later deleted) are dedicated to social and political discussion of what a new society might look like. In these, Ivan states:

We’re not interested in *rebuilding* and *reconstruction*. The past for us is dead and we consider it desirable that many of its aspects should not only not be revived but should, if necessary, be actively repressed. (322, JWA)

That radical societal change is such a concern in Wyndham’s fiction may seem surprising; after all, he did not share Wells’s socialist beliefs. Stock attempts to reconcile this focus on change with Wyndham’s politics:

Indeed, one reason for the prevalence of catastrophe and negativity in Wyndham’s work may be the negative influence of the later Wells’s utopias and their highly didactic tone. Yet Wyndham was a firm (if sometimes despairing) believer in the English liberal tradition that

stretched back through the social reforms of Asquith and Lloyd George and ultimately as far as J.S. Mill. There is evidence of Wyndham's belief in a liberal teleology of progress in all his fiction. Indeed, the catastrophic disasters that befall the world in *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Kraken Wakes*, *The Outward Urge* and *The Chrysalids* are all chances for renewal and the revealing of the path to a better organized, more productive and socially cohesive society and in this sense Wyndham is a dystopian-apocalypse writing utopist. (258)

Whilst Wyndham's politics as described here provide an explanation for his looking towards a brighter future, they do not explain the tendency for such sudden and dramatic change. Some indications of that can be found in the historical context, which is one of a world full of contradictions and changes.

The Day of the Triffids sits in the context of early Cold War science fiction, which M. Keith Booker, in "Science Fiction and the Cold War", classifies primarily in terms of both utopian and dystopian visions and "alien invasion and postapocalypse narratives" (171). Many of the examples Booker cites imagine the transition to an actual world war and depict nuclear weapons as the primary cause of destruction. However others imagine a biological aggressor, from the plague in George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) to a number of films (including *Them!* (1954) and *Beginning of the End* (1957)) which centre on attacks by giant mutated bugs. *The Day of the Triffids* includes many of these popular themes: it both portrays a global society and looks forward to a utopian future, as well as combining both more technologically realistic (if imaginary) satellite-based weapons with a fantastical biological antagonist.

The importance of the Cold War in *The Day of the Triffids* is particularly evident when compared with the short story often seen as a precursor, "The Puff-Ball Menace", which also pits humanity against killer plants. However, the scale is much smaller; the plants in question are confined geographically to part of England, and are ultimately defeated. There is no blindness in this story.

Moreover, the “puff-balls” are portrayed as part of an engineered attack by a fictional – but named – country. Whilst there is a hint that that country will attempt another attack, it is a specific problem quite clearly defined in time. Such lines are much less clear in *The Day of the Triffids*. In the early Cold War, the rules have changed, and neither the battlefield, nor the time of the battle, can be conceived as having definitive boundaries.

Of course, key to both the setting and the plot is the literal presence of the Cold War, with the cause of both the blindness and the plague that follows strongly hypothesised as being the sabotage of satellite-based weapons. These Cold War aspects are also present in less literal ways. Take, for example, the following argument expressed in the novel:

From 6 August 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 dramatise, you could well take for your material the years succeeding 1945 when the path of safety started to shrink to a tight-rope along which we had to walk with our eyes deliberately closed to the depths beneath us. (115)

This mirrors an aspect of Cold War thinking: the idea that more destructive power is the greatest defence against destruction¹¹ or, in this case, what is perceived as the end of the world – the blindness – may have prevented the actual end of the world. Along these lines, Masen’s initial, temporary, blindness is what allows him to avoid the actual blindness. This is itself mirrored in Masen’s actions when he was stung – he states that “in one

¹¹ Though the destruction in *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Chrysalids* might lead one to assume Wyndham held an anti-nuclear weapons stance, an unpublished fragment (Untitled Fragment Archive Reference 7/2/13, JWA) tells the story of a Britain in which nuclear weapons have been abolished leaving the country wide open to attack, indicating a possible belief in the success of mutually assured destruction. The emphasis in this story is on the light involved in the explosion (sound comes later), a possible link to *The Day of the Triffids* in which the creation of light is the destructive mechanism used by the weapon.

automatic movement I had my hands over my eyes" (73). Thus, by covering his eyes (temporary blindness) he avoids permanent blindness from the sting. Therefore, it is arguably Masen's early stinging by a triffid that indirectly enables his eventual survival when others are killed by them.

Further, the world seems to be in a state of contradiction. With the "swerve of interest from swords to ploughshares" (27) and the benefits of the triffids removing any concept of a coming oil crisis, the world is both more prosperous and more peaceful than it has ever been – and yet there are satellite weapons orbiting the earth, making it more at risk than ever before. The catastrophe the world faces seems an almost inevitable result of an unsustainable contradiction. The end of the novel, and the Isle of Wight colony, are at once both utopian and yet, with the plan to retake Britain from the channel, rely on imagery more associated with World War II, suggesting if not a desire for a world in which conflicts have clearly defined aggressors and territories, then at least that this is a more natural and sustainable state.

Therefore, not only can individuals adapt to the blindness, but its context in society is more complex than first appears – it is not simply an outside aberration, but intrinsically linked to a changing world. That is not to say it is presented positively, far from it, but it does not preclude a sense of optimism, which an Ohio-based reader, Betty Lou Smalley, remarked on in 1954 in a letter to Wyndham:

I particularly like your books because they not only created a crisis and carried it through to the end, but you take your characters out of the mess they're in in a practical and realistic manner that I like. You show your characters always ended by looking toward a dawn of new hope, that kind of optimism and faith in the human race I greatly admire in the modern writer of today. (1, JWA)

I have thus far looked at adaptation in terms of changes in society and in the behaviour of individuals. Another strong theme in Wyndham's work is adaptation in a biological or evolutionary sense. Stock connects this to the postwar period in which Wyndham was writing:

For a student of Wells like John Wyndham, writing in the postwar era, the question of evolutionary struggle in the aftermath of the destruction caused by a radical, and perverted, social Darwinism was one that could never be left alone – from the later 1940s he returned to it repeatedly. (230)

Perhaps the most overt discussion of these concerns in Wyndham's fiction is in the 1949 short story "Adaptation" in which a character states:

It's conditions that count. When we produce a new life, it is something plastic. Independent. We can't do more than to see that it has the best conditions to shape it the way we like best. If the conditions are in some way beyond our control, one of two things happens; either it becomes adapted to the conditions it finds – or that it fails to adapt, which means that it dies. (147)

"Adaptation" highlights humans adapting to the environment, rather than the other way round:

We talk airily about conquering this or that natural obstacle – but look at what we really do and you'll find that more often than not it is ourselves we are adapting. (147)

Like Wells, Wyndham had a conflicted and often contradictory interest in eugenics. Reading Wyndham from a disability-focused point of view, his concentration on biological evolution is of course problematic, and whilst his interest in eugenics was significantly less pronounced than Wells's, it is still a thread through his work. On the one hand, Wyndham explores a diversity of bodies, and connects both the experience of those with non-normative bodies and the biological development of those bodies to the environment and society

in which they exist. On the other hand, quite aside from the more obvious impact of eugenics, he often creates a rank of superior and inferior bodies (though he does challenge our assumptions about which may fit into which category). This can be seen, for example, in his later novel *The Chrysalids*, which portrays a society in which any genetic difference results in exile or death, and tells the story of a group of children who have developed telepathic ability. Its sympathetic portrayal of the children advocates the acceptance of difference and the need for diversity, but in painting these telepathic individuals as a new, more advanced stage in the evolution of humanity, it falls back on ideas of inherent superiority.¹² *The Midwich Cuckoos* is a science-fictional interpretation of the changeling myth, often seen as a metaphor for developmental disability. The alien “cuckoos” are superior in their abilities, but ultimately need to be destroyed. *Chocky*, the story of a non-corporeal alien which takes up residence inside a child’s mind, can be read as a metaphor for mental illness – and mental illness is literally suspected by the child’s parents. The novel conjures a sympathetic portrait of the child and his father, but at the same time the resolution of the story involves the alien leaving. The sympathy is therefore dependent on both the situation being temporary, and it having an external cause, however farfetched.

¹² Similarities can be found here to Wells’s *The Time Machine*, which can be read as a very biologically determinist novel of a future where humanity has evolved into two groups, defined by intrinsic characteristics which are very much related to their respective habitats. However, the narrator’s criticism of the passivity of the Eloi is arguably stronger than his horror at the cannibalism of the Morlocks. If the goal of eugenics was to determine a perfect human and strive to achieve that, Wells is showing the limitations of such an ambition. He places the ability of humanity to change its own environment and society, just as the blind inhabitants of the isolated valley in “The Country of the Blind” changed theirs, far above human biological evolution.

Often social and biological classifications become confused, and operate as metaphors for each other, as in this description from a November 1944 letter to Grace Wilson:

[It would not be possible to] regard the Germans as a normal people to be treated as a people beaten in war is normally treated. They have become a psychopathic case – as the Aztecs were before them – and already they have spread a dangerously infectious atavism in the world. The greatest future peril lies in non-recognition of the infectious quality. (3, JWA)

Rather than being concerned with the protection of a particular racial type, or about racial contamination, Wyndham's primary fear was stagnation, that humanity would stop evolving. This appears to be much more significant in his thinking than categorisations of superiority or inferiority. A 1962 article titled "Monsters May Be Real!" offers some insight into his thinking about catastrophes in evolutionary terms:

Thus [humanity's] discovery of agents which affect heredity could be the natural means of shaking him out of his pause and setting his evolution on the move again.

For my part, I do not think the active agent will be The Bomb – we fear it too much on the scale necessary for it to be effective. (9, JWA)

When asked in a 1959 survey by Kingsley Amis what he considered to be the function of science fiction, aside from its qualities as entertainment and/or literature, Wyndham emphasised this danger of stagnation, arguing that science fiction had a part to play in not just portraying but avoiding it:

To modify the natural conservatism of the creature. To keep on reminding it that developments will take place, and that they will not take care of themselves. That the future should not be dismissed as nobody's business. (Wyndham, Postal Interview with Kingsley Amis, JWA)

Stock considers Wyndham's conflictedness and contradictions regarding this subject as a strength:

He was certainly a thoroughly middle-class SF writer who consciously wrote in what he saw as the tradition of Wells, and as such the fantastic elements in Wyndham's texts follow logical patterns of behaviour. But these patterns point to the truly radical aspect of his work: Wyndham's fearless engagement with theories of evolution and biological competition ... As a middle class liberal, with one eye particularly on the events of World War II, he questioned the role and limits of ethical action. If all creatures must on some level engage with the struggle for survival within the natural economy, then forever lurking behind the traumatic experience of war is the thorny question of whether liberal humanist values are viable in a world apparently governed more by forces of nature than by the political creeds of man. (211)

The Day of the Triffids is significant for its use of dual themes: mass blindness and the triffids. These arise from its origins as two separate stories, one concerned with each theme, and despite the dual themes being considered necessary by Wyndham, the combination has also led to criticism from some critics:

[Wyndham] had another rejected story, about some mobile vegetables. "But I thought, they're slow-moving and easily dealt with. Where's the plot coming from?" It came from that other discard, about blind people. The critics crashed down on *The Day of the Triffids*. They invoked Wells's ruling that readers could only be asked to accept one fantastic thing. (Pooter, JWA)

Despite the triffids having a more minor role in the story in terms of content, they have become widely known, probably due to the strong visual imagery and the originality of their creation. However, the focus on the triffids was not universal amongst readers – for Lionel Gough, Senior English Master at Marlborough College, quoted here in a 1954 letter to Wyndham, it is the blindness which has captured the imagination of him and his colleagues, with the triffids a mere afterthought:

From time to time, over a whisky and soda, some of my colleagues and I sit up talking about what we'd do if we woke up and found everyone was blind – quite apart from Triffids. (1, JWA)

Other readers questioned whether the triffids were necessary at all. In a 1953 letter to Wyndham, Phyllis Brampton posed this very question:

The thing that puzzles me is “was your triffid really necessary?” – in this book at any rate. There seems a very good theme in the reactions of a few sighted people to a world gone blind. Did this, your device for securing credibility, prove in fact your chief and most moving theme? (1, JWA)

Wyndham himself also seems to give primacy to the blindness, and describes his decision to combine the themes in mostly practical terms – that is, he saw the need to combine them from the point of view of successful storytelling, but did not appear to see them as intrinsically linked. He describes the process of combining the themes as follows:

I exhumed a story about general blindness, and one about triffids and put them together – that accounts for the double theme form for which I still get reproached – and sent it to be typed. I knew the ending was no good, so I told the typist to lay off for a bit while I thought of another. About eighteen months later I remembered that it was still lying there unfinished, and managed to contrive a conclusion, of a sort. (Wyndham, Postal Interview with Sam Moskowitz, JWA)¹³

In his response to Lionel Gough (1954), Wyndham credits the inclusion of the triffids more to his concerns regarding the mood of the novel:

I like to feel that in your pondering of the matter that you may have come to the same conclusion I did: that general blindness would have

¹³ It is likely that the story described as “about triffids” is “The Puff-Ball Menace”, not strictly a story about triffids, but another destructive plant. Certainly “The Puff-Ball Menace” is widely regarded as a precursor to *The Day of the Triffids*.

been too negative (as well as too horrible) as an unsupported theme – there had to be another element, even if it did not do much more than lurk with menace, to provide more activity and prevent too much concentration on the former. (1, JWA)

It might be expected, therefore, for an examination of blindness in *The Day of the Triffids* to largely disregard the triffids themselves. They could be regarded as a mostly separate component of the novel, with the themes intertwined only to serve the construction of plot and mood. However, by examining the triffids themselves, a much more complex consideration of (dis)ability and bodies becomes evident.

I have thus far examined themes of adaptation in terms of, firstly, people adapting to their environment and their new impairment – blindness – and, secondly, adapting their environment to them. I have argued that there is evidence of both of these happening on a small level, which challenges narratives of blindness as wholly catastrophic. These are, however, small compared to the portrayal of adaptation in “The Country of the Blind” which challenges conceptions of blindness as an innate disadvantage or inferiority, portraying survival and success as being a result of how the environment and society is constructed, and how this fits together with one’s body.

The presence of the triffids in this story, however, opens up the potential for a more radical conclusion. They adapt themselves to the environment, with Masen referring to the fact that “the weakness [of humanity] lay in the triffids’ apparent ability to learn, at least in a limited way, from experience” (240). It is not conclusively stated how the triffids came into existence, though Masen’s theory of bioengineering in the USSR is given prominence. Whilst this may not imply adaptation to the environment in the way a more natural evolution would, it was worth noting that in the original manuscript the triffids are of

Venusian origin, and described as changing dramatically depending on the planet on which they are located:

[Their height] contrasted favourably with the Venusian originals which for reasons of climate, lesser gravity or different soil constituents frequently grew to forty or even fifty feet. (21A, JWA)

More significant than the evolution and adaptation of their physical form is the extent to which the triffids' changes in position and dominance are a result of the change in the world around them. Before the apparent meteor shower, they are kept well controlled, farmed for human needs and physically altered (via removal of the stinger) to limit their impact and danger. There are certainly some cases in which they can be dangerous, but these are isolated instances which do not challenge the superiority of humanity. Prophetically, Masen's friend and colleague Walter Lucknor describes eyesight as humanity's "one important superiority" (49). In an environment without significant numbers of sighted humans, where the systems which have kept them contained have collapsed, they grow significantly in both numbers and strength. This indicates that those (i.e. the triffids) who were previously at a disadvantage, can become at an advantage due to changes in society, without their own bodies or innate abilities changing.

This potential for different species to obtain superiority depending on their environment is reliant on blindness correlating with lack of ability and it does not, therefore, support a conception of disability as socially constructed as is portrayed in "The Country of the Blind". But, nevertheless, it is one example of how the triffids demonstrate complex ideas about the interaction between bodies, the environment, society, and ability. Stock views this battle between triffids and humans as one of humanity against nature:

As a threatening image, then to adapt Iago's words, the triffid is the green eyeless "monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on", precisely because its meat is also its uncomprehending creator. This relation cuts both ways: just as triffids can feed upon decomposing corpses, humans can use them as "cattle feed" or even, in desperation, boil and mash them for their own nutrition (as Torrence instructs the Shirnings Farm group to use them). The battle against triffids is a battle against nature, which having been transformed by man now stands over him once again: as with *The Chysalids* [sic], humankind has returned to living in early-modern frontier societies of bounded polities built to keep nature out. (146)

With similar implications, in an introduction to John Christopher's novel *The Death of Grass*, Robert Macfarlane places *The Day of the Triffids* alongside other tales of vegetation gone wrong:

One way to understand *The Death of Grass* is as belonging to a mid-century sci-fi tradition of what might be called 'floral apocalypse', which began in 1947 when an American writer, Ward Moore, published *Greener than You Think ...* [Ward's novel is] anxious at the uncontrolled use of chemicals; he was writing at a time when pesticides, herbicides and artificial fertilisers were being employed in rising quantities ... Similar concerns at human interventions in the natural order motivate John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* ... *The Death of Grass* came six years later; five years after that Thomas Disch – one of the new sci-fi writers published in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* magazine – made his mark with *The Genocides* in which the Earth is overrun by a species of alien flora known only as "The Plants".¹⁴ (vii)

Whilst drawing similarities between people and triffids, this conception is one which emphasises the triffids are plants. However, their human-like qualities open up the possibility for another level of analysis on disability in *The Day of the Triffids*.

¹⁴ Wyndham was at least acquainted with Christopher; a 1962 letter to Wyndham from Maurice Temple Smith states "I believe you know 'John Christopher' personally, and indeed I seem to remember seeing you both drinking in the same pub one day a long time ago". (1, JWA)

Triffids are, of course, literally blind, and they are described as walking like a “man on crutches” (40). As mentioned above, they are literally disabled – that is, have their ability to sting and walk removed – to make them safe. These details hint at the potential for them to be read as a metaphor for, or at least encapsulating ideas concerning, disabled people. Further, the brief history of the origins and growth of the truffids portrays them as, at various points, useful and exploitable, dangerous monsters, curiosities for the middle class, and ultimately fighting back. Parallels with the portrayals and/or actual positions of disabled people can be found in all of these portrayals of the truffids, as exploited workers, curiosities in freak shows, dangerous monsters, and fighting back in a movement yet to come into its own at the time *The Day of the Triffids* was written.¹⁵

Masen and his colleague discuss the possibility that the truffids may be talking, or at least communicating in some way, and thus have some form of intelligence, despite the lack of anything resembling a brain in the usual sense. Although Masen expresses scepticism (“you don’t really mean you think they’re talking?” (46)), there is a recognition that communication and intelligence can exist while being outside of our understood norms or not being immediately recognisable. This has obvious parallels to those with sensory or communication impairments being considered to lack intelligence and their communication methods going unrecognised. This idea of the form of communication being thought of as more important than the content is expressed by Coker, though more in reference to class than disability:

If you talk tough and quote Shelley they think you’re cute, like a performing monkey or something, but they don’t pay attention to what you say. You have to talk the kind of lingo they’re accustomed to taking seriously. And it works the other way too. (162)

¹⁵ Perhaps relevant here is the fact that Huntington considers “The Country of the Blind” in the context of Wells’s descriptions of aliens and “strange creatures” (58).

These themes, if fully carried across into Wyndham's portrayal of blind people, would imply a society in which the blind population adapts to their environment, in which disability is portrayed as socially constructed, in which certain environments allow the blind population to thrive *and that those environments would be created*. It would explore the idea that the sighted are insufficiently equipped, but also unwilling, to understand the experience of long-term blindness. As they are, I would suggest these themes are symptomatic of a world with changing conceptions of these ideas, and display a consideration which is more overtly evident in Wyndham's later works.

Considering the triffids as in some way metaphorical representations of blind people is, of course, fraught with all the problems one might expect to be associated with comparing a consistently dehumanised category of people to plants. The counterpart to this is that many of these ideas rely on the triffids being fundamentally different to humans – that is, they would lose their effect if they were, say, a humanoid alien with very little physical or cognitive distinction from humans.¹⁶ Further, one criticism of Wyndham's other work, *The Chrysalids* in particular, is that it only advocates an acceptance of a particular, and narrow, diversity of body types – which the triffids very definitely go beyond. On that subject, whilst that portrayal can easily be interpreted as narrowness in Wyndham's mind, his intentions appear to have been somewhat different, as a 1964 letter to Ronald Kinnoch reveals:

One difficulty I do remember was with the Fringes. Most of the mutations there, even if they could survive, would, of course, be horrid if not revolting. So I decided to cut out the man with a third eye in the top of his head, even, let alone several ghastly plants and malformed persons and animals, and keep to nice clean un- (or only slightly)

¹⁶ It is also worth noting that ideas of "monsters" have undergone a not-insignificant level of reclamation by some disability activists – take, for example, Laura Hershey's poem "Monster Body".

repellent variations. I'm glad that I did. Gruesomeness right on stage, so to speak, seems nearly always to defeat its own object by producing disgust or giggles. The uncertainty of the Fringes with the ominousness of the Black Lands beyond them gave the apprehension – at least I hope it did – without providing giggle-material. (1, JWA)

In Chapter 1, I discussed the blindness in “The Country of the Blind” in terms of role reversals, inversions, and satire. In comparison to “The Black Grippe”, which adopts a more straight forward, realist narrative, *The Day of the Triffids* also makes use of inversions in multiple instances. These serve to further disrupt narratives about bodies and disabilities.

Perhaps the two most wide-ranging, and clearest, inversions are the switch from sightedness to blindness as the majority state, and the switch from the primacy of humans to that of plants. The former is, of course, the thread through all the works discussed in this thesis, and has thus been a significant focus of this chapter so far. I've discussed, in particular, how the once-sighted adapt to being blind, to what extent this inversion constitutes a catastrophe, to what extent it is the cause of a necessary change in society, and to what extent it illustrates change on a more complex level. Some of these complexities are illustrated by how exclusion is portrayed. The world portrayed is still a sighted person's world, and whilst sighted people are now a numerical minority, both the physical environment and the legacies of previous power structures are designed with the needs of the sighted in mind, meaning that the blind majority are frequently excluded. Such exclusion is foreshadowed at the beginning of the book when Masen misses the “meteor shower” due to his temporary blindness:

I began to feel that there was a party for all the world going on, with me as the only person not invited ... The general idea seemed to be to convince me that I was passing up the very thing I was born for. (14)

However, blindness quickly shifts from exclusion from a party to exclusion from the necessities of survival. The flags hoisted on the university tower (98) provide a message and signal deliberately accessible to the sighted only. Susan's success in spotting triffids (a matter of survival) is attributed not just to her sightedness but her "sharp eyes" (214). Exclusion doesn't only apply to physical spaces and resources either. The man who speaks for assisting and including the blind, whilst presenting it as a matter of rights and justice, is appealing only for charitable actions, and does not seem to consider blind people as agents of their own survival (100). Masen follows this assumption that the blind will need to be supported by the sighted, asking "what proportion of semi-disabled people it may be possible for us to support when we come to the end of handy supplies" (103) and equating the life of blind people with one of misery. Those who are blind are therefore excluded from the idea they might make a contribution to society. There is talk of "the three blind ones, still feeling useless and frustrated as they grew older" (259). Masen is told of the number of blind people he can be expected to support, with the implication that they are a burden:

You have a good place here, fully capable of supporting two units. We shall allocate to you seventeen blind persons, making twenty with the three already here – again, of course, plus any children they may have. (265)

Establishment of communities with some sighted, but mostly blind, people, is displayed in further negative terms, not as the grounds for success through adaptation, nor even as essential charity, but as a kind of "feudal seignury" (266) which is later revealed as the first step in a new imperialism (267). Thus they are excluded from both decision-making and knowledge (Masen states "they only know what we tell them" (260)), and from being seen as having intrinsic value.

The portrayal of blindness as the majority state has the effect of drawing attention to the exclusion of the blind. This is in direct contrast to Wells's "The Country of the Blind", in which this reversal leads to the exclusion and disadvantage of the sighted character. Whilst Wells challenges the negative associations of blindness by showing that who is excluded and disadvantaged is based on the environment they find themselves in, Wyndham is arguably showing (if sympathetically) the blind to be always at a disadvantage. Other implications of this inversion provide a more complex picture. The sudden blindness of nearly everyone who was previously sighted provides a small, but significant, opportunity for a character who was already blind to invert and satirise the idea of charity as the automatic response to disability, with the remark that "They'll be needing all their damned patronage for themselves now" (51), a more sarcastic echo of the blind woman in Wallace's "The Black Grippe" who remarks "It's so lovely to be able to pity others" (257).

There are also ambiguous dynamics when it comes to the individual against the crowd. On the one hand, as I have discussed earlier, *The Day of the Triffids* emphasises the need for co-operation, and that the individual cannot survive alone. On the other, the novel depicts a number of collective activities (from the destructive actions of mobs to various flawed attempts at building and governing a new society) which demonstrate a lack of individual thought. In doing so, Wyndham portrays freedom as dangerous, a theme throughout his work, as Green highlights:

What Wyndham warns us against is our atavistic, warlike tendencies which, unchecked, may destroy us prematurely. Certainly his faith in human nature is slim at best. When one considers the number of roving gangs of thugs, looters, and rioters encountered in Wyndham's novels – the blind mobs at the beginning of *The Day of the Triffids*. Torrance's gang (in the same novel), the various, isolated bands of survivalists at the end of *The Kraken Wakes*, the Fringes people in *The Chrysalids*, and the mob that sets out to destroy the Children in *The Midwich Cuckoos* –

and the propensity of society to crumble at the drop of a hat, one would almost characterize him as a disciple of Thomas Hobbes rather than of H. G. Wells. For Wyndham, even life under the social contract proves, more often than not, to be nasty, brutish and short – or obscure, mysterious and constrained. The sheeplike tendency to follow the flock seems to be one of the principal dangers he warns against – above all, the tendency to be lulled into false belief (or blind faith) in science, religion, or any other ideology which takes as its basic premise that Humans are the true, unchallenged inheritors of the earth. (106)

When discussing the theme of exclusion I examined the exclusion of blind people. However, while it is primarily blind people who are excluded by the sighted, there is also a fear amongst the sighted of the “blind mob”, and although there appears to be some level of prejudice at work, Masen’s fears of this mob turn out to be real. His fears are described as follows:

I was uneasy. Fighting with my civilised urge to be of some help to these people was an instinct which told me to keep clear. They were already fast losing their usual restraints. Besides, things had reversed their natural order. The sightless ones were now the normal; it was I who was the freak, and the mob is seldom kind to freaks. So I obeyed by instinct and went on my way with an off feeling that I was hiding from them even as I passed among them. Later I found out how right that instinct was. (60–61)

Key here is that, despite the extent to which he is demonising the blind, in the statement that “things had reversed their natural order. The sightless ones were now the normal” Masen is overtly aware he is in the position blind people were in only days before, and displays a level of sympathy for that position. He considers this not as a matter of the inherent features of either blindness or sightedness – in fact he barely mentions them – but of the group versus the individual (“the mob is seldom kind to freaks”), irrespective of which of those is blind and which is sighted. A similarly conflicted portrayal

of “the mob” is found in Wells’s *The Invisible Man*.¹⁷ On the one hand, the titular character is unlikeable, perhaps psychopathic; on the other there is also a characteristic sympathy for the underdog at the hands of the mob.

Webster, as discussed by Stock, viewed the reversals in the actions and power of the blind mob in more complex terms:

It is, Webster argues, “the spectacle and symbolic power of chaos through blindness, worked out logically and remorselessly, that elevates [Triffids] to the status of a novel of ideas”. One such episode, for him, is the chaining of the sighted protagonist Bill Masen to a scavenging gang of blind people by a humanitarian agitator (Coker): “Here, though virtually unexplored, is one of the key issues of our time: the strange ties that exist between opposing elements – master and servant, oppressor and oppressed ...” (209)

The second of the inversions I earlier referred to, the switch from the primacy of humans to plants, inevitably recalls the Houyhnhnms, the intelligent horses of *Gulliver’s Travels*. The land of the Houyhnhnms has been read as a criticism of ideas of racial superiority, or, in other words, a particular set of baseless hierarchies amongst humans, and arguably a similar dynamic occurs in *The Day of the Triffids*.

I have previously argued that, as in “The Black Grippe”, *The Day of the Triffids* portrays blindness as “demystified”, stripped of moral associations, and defined largely by practicalities. *The Day of the Triffids* is a story not of why (in a moral sense) blindness occurs, but one of what people do when it happens. However, blindness is not presented as entirely free of its moral associations, particularly when it comes to ideas of light, darkness, and the sun. Stock discusses Koppenfels’s description of the “sun of reason” (or in this case, other

¹⁷ Wyndham commented on the problem of portraying a sighted invisible man – logically, he pointed out, an invisible man must also be blind (“Personally Speaking”).

celestial, light-emitting objects) to consider the blindness as a punishment.

Whilst, as Barasch notes, blindness was traditionally thought of as punishment for “offences against the gods [or] transgression against sexual taboos” (25), Stock discusses the idea of blindness as punishment in a more rationalist, secular age:

In Koppenfels’s words, “since the sun of reason appears as the secular avatar of the all-seeing divine eye, blinding is the appropriate sanction for an act of defiance of its authority”. Masen begins the novel stricken by temporary blindness, awaking in “isolation and helplessness” on a hospital ward with bandaged eyes. With the social structures of hospital care removed, Masen’s first act of autonomy is to remove his bandage. By contrast, the “isolated incoherent individuals” around him remain helpless. (247–248)

Paradoxically, therefore, humanity has been punished not for transgressions against a divine being, but for a lack of independent thought – a lack, in a way, of transgression against assumed truths. The following passage, from a letter by Wyndham to a reader, Adam Kelso, raising concerns that the colony portrayed at the end of the novel is atheist, points to the limitations of this post-religious thinking:

So first we lost the hope of Heaven; and now we have lost the hope of Utopia – and yet somehow we retain hope itself, though none of us knows quite what it is hope of.

At present it looks as if we had pinned all our faith on the educability of our people – possibly the noblest and rashest experiment ever made. The first results are not encouraging: superficially the product would seem to be a new hedonistic barbarism; though it is early to judge. But if this great experiment fails, if the people do not take up this tremendous opportunity, then, I think, if we can avoid utter collapse, we shall slide into a new kind of feudalism – a few leaders, and a great herd of docile consumers. The Romans of decadent times valued highly the power of their *curcuses* [sic] to keep the plebs amused and occupied; but the periodical Roman circus was a very puny public drug compared with broadcasting, television, pools, and the popular press,

all of which can work not only on holidays, but day in, night out all the year round. (2, JWA)

Another reversal occurs in the ability of the sighted to see blindness. Just as the invisibility of the world caused by blindness is terrifying, so is the invisibility of blindness. One example of this is in Masen's early encounter with one of the newly-blind, of which he says: "There was nothing to show that he was blind. His eyes were wide open and he was looking straight at me" (18). Masen is also comforted by the dark glasses, not only as an indicator of the already-blind man's blindness, but also a disguise over his blind eyes. Musing over whether to remove his bandages, Masen's fear of the unknown has blindness both as the subject of his fear, but also as the cause of his unsure and thus fearful state: "Suppose that when I took the bandages off I were to find that I still could not see? That would be worse still, a hundred times worse ... " (11).

A further inversion relates to the technological and scientific advancement of the society depicted. Stock argues that by inverting the level of technology, Wyndham is actually drawing attention to it:

Several of Wyndham's novels engage with "the impact of Mechanism" through a kind of via negative, by taking the social structures of Mechanism away. The role of technology is highlighted by the gradual removal of its trappings, especially modern technocratic specialisation. This may occur through the breakdown of society (as in *The Day of the Triffids* or *The Kraken Wakes*) or through the radical transformation of social relations so that they more closely resemble those of a non-scientific age before the colonisation of nature through scientific technologies took place (as in *The Chrysalids*). (207)

Continuing this theme, in reference to the apparent meteor shower, Koppenfels considers *The Day of the Triffids* also as an example of Menippean satire:

The green colour, as well as the general idea and even the title of the book, are taken from Wells's *In the Days of the Comet*, in a process of Menippean rewriting which once more inverts the tendency of the pretext – this time by giving an apocalyptic turn to Wells's wonderfully beneficial celestial body. (167)

In fact, all these inversions of the world (blindness versus sightedness, humans versus plants, technological advancement versus societal collapse, and the moral associations of light and darkness), together with a clear historical context in terms of, amongst other things, the Cold War and the legacy of the holocaust, open up the possibility of reading *The Day of the Triffids* also as a satire. Is it possible, therefore, to read *The Day of the Triffids* as an example of Menippean satire, satirising the ideas around disability in the contemporary world? Koppenfels states of Menippean satire:

It stages paradoxical inversions of normalcy by establishing a heterotopia, or Other Place (to use a term coined by Foucault) from which to cast a fresh and disillusioned eye on the state of the world. (156)

Certainly, the idea of science fiction as satire was in Wyndham's mind. In a 1954 article titled "Roar of Rockets", he identifies four types of science fiction, the fourth, the one with "true potentialities" is the "implicatory story". This, he argues, "can use satire ... amusingly, ... a little sardonically; savagely ... despondently" (2, JWA). However, *The Day of the Triffids* is so clearly *in* the world. Although it describes a world which has changed dramatically, it is an extrapolation from the real world, rather than a different one entirely. Wyndham creates not so much an Other Place as "other persons" – in both the removal of sightedness and, simultaneously, the creation of the triffids as both human in many ways and yet completely non-human, he gives a fresh perspective both on blindness, literal and metaphorical, and on humanity in general.

In conclusion, whilst my predominant readings of “The Country of the Blind” and “The Black Grippe” are, respectively, a portrayal of disability as socially constructed and a demystification of blindness, *The Day of the Triffids* displays on first reading the most negative attitudes towards blindness and the least radical analysis of disability. Blindness is presented as catastrophic, on both a personal and a global level. However, beneath that dominant theme, a more complicated picture emerges. In the extent to which Wyndham imagines the practicalities of blindness, despite the sightedness of his protagonist, he provides portraits of blind people as competent and adaptable. The dual subjects of the novel, triffids as well as blindness, reveal a complex consideration of the diversity of bodies and the limitations of our conceptions of biological superiority and how abilities can be judged. Throughout the novel, blindness is not viewed in isolation or on a predominantly individual level, but in terms of a series of complex – and often contradictory – interactions and associations with the changing structure of society. Lastly, the kinds of inversions and role reversals which I discussed in relation to “The Country of the Blind” occur in various forms throughout *The Day of the Triffids*, adding an extra layer of complexity and shedding light on Wyndham’s ideas of the world in which he lived.

Conclusion

This thesis discusses “The Country of the Blind”, “The Black Grippe”, and *The Day of the Triffids* partly in terms of their historical context, exploring how they relate to and are influenced by the “Spanish ‘flu” pandemic, World War II, the Cold War, and changing ideas of disability, genetics, civil rights, and the place of public health. More than sixty years after the publication of the most recent of these works, I suggest they sit in a new context, one of increasing attention to diversity in speculative fiction.

The discussion of the need for increased representation of minority identities has frequently been informal, taking place on authors’ – and readers’ – blogs and in online discussion. Multiple publishers and magazines now include text in their submission guidelines emphasising the desirability of characters and authors of diverse backgrounds and identities. *The Outer Alliance* was founded in 2009 as “a group of SF/F writers who have come together as allies for the advocacy of LGBT issues in literature”. 2013 saw the publication of Kathryn Allan’s *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, and “Diversity in Speculative Fiction” has been selected as the theme of the academic stream of the 2014 World Science Fiction Convention. These are but a few examples indicating a growing trend.

I am not suggesting that the works discussed in this thesis should be held up as positive examples of this type of diversity. As I have discussed, all of them contain problematic portrayals of blind people, and there is narrowness in their focus: female characters exist primarily as romantic interests for the male protagonist, for example, and there is little or no discussion of race. Rather, I believe they illustrate a context for portrayals of disability and, in their focus on society, an indication of how some of the pitfalls of individualism and tokenism might be avoided. An examination of “The Country of the Blind” in

relation to Wells's personal experience indicates the potential for consideration of how we identify and respond to disabled writers, especially those who held opinions at odds with modern ideas of disability rights.

The scope of this thesis is necessarily limited. I chose to focus on one specific impairment, blindness, in part because there were a number of works concerned with it, and partly because eyesight is seen as so fundamental to quality of life that works which do not portray it in a wholly negative way are challenging widespread assumptions. The experiences and perspectives of the authors, too, have similarities – all were white, male, and resident in the south of England – and the texts were all written within a 50-year period. Whilst the similarities between both the context and the content of the texts helped highlight the varied ways in which they approach this subject, it would be wrong to view them as an isolated cluster. The sixty years since the publication of *The Day of the Triffids* have seen the publication of several more works of fiction which approach blindness across a society, blindness and the existence of imaginary societies, and the connections between disability and constructed societies in general.

Two works of late twentieth/early twenty-first century fiction in particular continue the theme of the works discussed in this thesis. José Saramago's 1995 novel *Blindness* tells the story of a rapidly spread, contagious disease causing total blindness. It is the story of a group of people, identified by professions or other attributes, rather than names, who are placed in isolation following the spread of the contagion, and the dramatic and brutal breakdown of all semblances of civilisation as they are abandoned by the outside world. Although, like "The Black Grippe", it portrays public health measures, in this case these are driven by panic, and are inhumane and ineffective. Of the works discussed in this thesis, *The Day of the Triffids* arguably has most in common with *Blindness*. In both, though the blindness is portrayed as negative and

catastrophic, it is the collapse of society which is the true horror. Both also contain a literal, but also arguably symbolic, link between temporary or partial visual impairment and the blindness at the heart of the novels, with the initial infection in *Blindness* centred on an ophthalmologist's practice. Although I have discussed magic realist elements in "The Country of the Blind", Saramago's novel takes the sense of surrealism and symbolism to a deeper level, with the end of the novel implying that the blindness may have been psychosomatic, or even only metaphorical.

Alison Sinclair's 2010–2011 *Darkborn* trilogy has stronger fantastical elements than the works discussed in this thesis. The blindness in the trilogy is common but not universal, affecting half of the population, who are fatally sensitive to sunlight and can thus only emerge at night. The other half of the population, the "Lightborn", are similarly sensitive to darkness. In a recent article, "Where Blindness is Not (?) a Disability: Alison Sinclair's *Darkborn* Trilogy", Derek Newman-Stille places this in contrast to the more typical analyses of disability in individual characters/people, both in the real world and in other works of fiction:

Alison Sinclair postulates a world in which blindness is not a disability. She creates a world in which half of the population is blind, thus figuring blindness as normative rather than a minority condition. This world is constructed with the idea of blindness as something central rather than peripheral. Blindness is not something that needs to be worked at accommodating through resistance to majoritarian notions of acceptable environments, but rather is taken for granted as a necessity and part of the regularized built environment. Sinclair provides a contrast from the real world, where disability is treated as an inconvenience by the able-bodied (particularly by policy-makers and those required to provide accommodations), and where the built environment is generally (unless legally regulated) only accessible for the normative-bodied. (45)

Darkborn, like the works discussed in this thesis, challenges the common fictional portrayal of disability as individual and isolated, a point of difference at best in a world where it is neither common nor accommodated. Rather, they construct societies in which a specific impairment – blindness – is the majority state and, to a greater or lesser extent, the norm.

The works this thesis has focussed on, though representing imaginary worlds, generally adhere to plausible scientific principles when it comes to blindness, and take a largely straight-forward, realist narrative approach. However, as previously mentioned, blindness has long been associated with a connection to a spiritual dimension, and whilst this is largely beyond the scope of this thesis, examples of this provide a broader context for the portrayal of blindness in fiction. The trope of the blind seer is firmly established – twentieth century examples include Kipling’s 1904 short story “‘They’” which tells the story of a blind woman who lives alongside the spirits or ghosts of deceased children, and a character in Frank Herbert’s *Dune Messiah* (1969) who loses his vision in an assassination attempt, but finds the resulting visions essentially replace it. The trope is sufficiently well known to be subverted and used to humorous effect; an elderly witch in Terry Pratchett’s *Witches Abroad* (1991) is referred to as having a “detached retina in her second-sight” (97). In Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), blindness and spiritual visions affect different members of the same family, both reinforcing and challenging the links between the two.

The works explored in this thesis are significant for their portrayal of societies in which (almost) everyone experiences a specific impairment, and how this relates to a structural understanding of disability. Though unusual, they are not unique in this; several recent works can be interpreted in a similar way. Wyndham, Wallace, and Wells’s works describe either geographically distinct blind and sighted worlds, or the transition from a sighted to a blind world.

Fiction which incorporates travel between multiple worlds – in the following examples, specifically space travel – has the potential to paint an increasingly complex picture. In a 2012 talk, “Changing Capacities, Changing Identities: Disability in Science Fiction”, Ria Cheyne discusses this specifically in relation to varied gravity, noting that “there’s a lot more potential to depict different environmental conditions than in most other types of fiction – including those in which the ‘normal’ human body is ill-adapted”. She cites as examples Arthur C. Clarke’s *Islands in the Sky* (1952) and Amy Thomson’s *Through Alien Eyes* (1999) as examples of “notion[s] of a zero or low gravity environment as a space in which people with disabilities or health conditions might choose to live”. As a converse example consistent with this idea, she cites Rex Gordon’s *No Man Friday* (1956), a novel describing an astronaut stranded on Mars, as an example of texts “in which people we would read as nondisabled are functionally impaired”.

To take an example from television, in a recent thesis, Katie Murphy discusses travel between multiple worlds in the series *Farscape* and how the sentient spaceship at the centre of the series, Moya, becomes a largely accessible environment:

The cast of *Farscape* is comprised of a wide array of characters who must constantly navigate an environment where they (and everyone around them) are the only members of their species. Moya is a truly multicultural environment where numerous grids of intelligibility overlap. Based on their own culturally situated experiences, all the characters have different expectations of one another and different understandings of what is normal ... The biodiverse cast of *Farscape* demonstrates that “disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender” (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” 5) ... Moya, due to housing so many different species with differing

anatomies and physical needs, becomes a highly accessible environment that accepts bodily deviation. (5)

Another space-travel based example, also cited by Cheyne, is C. J. Cherryh's *Chanur* series, told from the perspective of the alien race known as the hani, which describes the disadvantage humans find themselves at whilst they are on board the hani spaceship, another example of those we would not consider as disabled being "functionally impaired":

When a human character joins a hani ship, he is unable to operate the controls for the simple reason that they are recessed, designed to be operated only by beings with claws at the end of their digits, as described in 1986's *The Kif Strike Back* (*The Chanur Saga* 529). To function as part of the crew, he has to use prosthetics, as would any human. This is an environment where all humans are functionally impaired. (Cheyne)

As another example, a writing competition by Redstone SF invited readers to imagine what "a world, or space station, or whatever [looks] like when it has been designed to be accessible to everyone", portraying "disability in a world where universal access is a shared cultural value". Arndt and Van Beuren (2013) suggest C.S. Friedman's *This Alien Shore* (1998) combines aspects of both the social and medical models to create an example of what has been termed the complexly embodied model of disability (99). The protagonist, Jamisia, both becomes aware of the oppressive nature of her own world and finds alternatives but also, significantly, gains an understanding of herself and her multiple personalities:

The first line of *This Alien Shore* is "the voices woke her up" (3). They certainly did—Jamisia woke to an awareness of herself as having multiple personalities, of Earth as a limiting and damaging community that used her as a tool for its own gain, and to a world that embraced her cognitive difference. In this journey she and Masada detail what it might be like to be fully supported and provided opportunities to maximize their talents and differences. Friedman's future world shows

how borders can widen and expand to include cognitive differences.
(103)

Fiction which depicts new and alternative worlds has a unique place in the discussion of disability. As Sinclair argues (specifically about fantasy, but this statement can be taken more broadly):

It has the potential to postulate different worlds in which our world's limited notions of difference can be deconstructed and contrasted with a constructed "other option." Fantasy can explore ideas that are taken as "natural" assumptions and contrast them with their appearances as not natural in an alternate world – illustrating that our "real" world is as constructed as a world of fantastic fiction, that both worlds are abstractions of (contrasting) social ideologies.

Explanations of the social model of disability imply extrapolations from our own world and the creation of new ones. The idea that disability is socially constructed allows the potential for societies to construct it differently, or not at all. Speculative fiction can take these from the hypothetical to the concrete, exploring the details of what such societies could look like. And just as the idea of different societies is crucial to our understanding of disability, the reverse is also true. Screenwriter Jane Espenson, in a 2011 interview with SheWired online magazine, states that diversity is not just important, but integral to the creation of fictional worlds:

If we can't write diversity into sci-fi, then what's the point? You don't create new worlds to give them all the same limits of the old ones.

My intention with this thesis is to show that the creation of new worlds without the limits of the old does not simply allow more diverse representation, or the creation of more imaginative fiction, important though those aims are. Rather, the works discussed in this thesis explore the make-up of our own world, challenging the associations we make between

communication, intelligence, normative bodies, and power (Wyndham), the associations of medicalised blindness with individuality and moral condemnation (Wallace) and, ultimately, the extent to which our society is formed around particular forms of ability, the disabling effects of this construction, and what a world constructed on different principles could look like (Wells). The creation of these new worlds allows us to gain a clearer view of the social and ideological constructions which uphold elements of our own world we might see as fixed or take for granted. The portrayal of blindness in other worlds encourages us to re-examine our own.

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