



Infection and Insignificance: Pandemic Narratives in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Abstract:

Pandemic fiction emerges as a crucial narrative space that dramatises the ontological ruptures and epistemic uncertainties defining the Anthropocene. Speculative and dystopian texts, such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1991), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), and H. P. Lovecraft's fiction, depict contagion as a force that unsettles humanist frameworks and exposes the fragility of anthropocentric certainties. In these fictions, Lovecraftian "cosmicism" evokes a universe where disease functions not as a moral allegory but as an existential force. It is marked by indifference that challenges the concept of human exceptionalism. Pandemics in literature act as ontological solvents, as posthumanist theory posits, they dissolve boundaries between self and other, life and non-life, narrative, and chaos. While Lovecraft's cosmic dread emphasises insignificance and epistemic collapse, Camus introduces a counterpoint through absurdist ethics rooted in action and solidarity. Shelley's melancholic solitude and King's mythic apocalypticism further expand the affective and philosophical range of pandemic fiction. These texts construct a speculative mode attuned to the Anthropocene. They decentre the human and foreground entanglement, entropy, and existential precarity. Ultimately, pandemic fiction emerges as a literary form uniquely equipped to probe the anxieties of a world where survival itself no longer affirms meaning, but instead reveals the fragile fictions upon which human identity depends.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Posthumanism, Pandemic Fiction, Speculative Literature.

Pandemic narratives have long served as cultural barometers, capturing the anxieties and uncertainties that emerge when the fabric of society begins to unravel. From early plague

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narratives to contemporary accounts of viral apocalypse, these stories often transcend mere biological catastrophe to probe deeper questions about meaning, mortality and human limitation. As real-world pandemics increasingly expose the fragility of global systems and the illusion of human mastery over nature, literature has responded with narratives steeped in existential dread. These works reflect a growing discomfort with traditional anthropocentric perspectives and a dawning awareness of forces beyond human comprehension or control. H. P. Lovecraft's universe of indifferent, incomprehensible forces parallels pandemic narratives that depict humanity as a fragile, marginal presence in an uncaring cosmos. Pandemics serve as existential ruptures, challenging human exceptionalism and blurring the boundaries between order and chaos, life and entropy. Pandemic literature reveals not merely the fear of contagion but also an underlying awareness of cosmic insignificance as captured in Lovecraftian horrorⁱ. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994) presents a vision of total annihilation that strips away notions of progress and divine purpose, while Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1991) grounds itself in existentialist philosophy, echoing the futility and absurdity characteristic of cosmic horror. Spanning historical and contemporary contexts, Shelley's Romantic apocalypticism and Camus's postwar existentialism expose the erosion of human mastery and the collapse of inherited meanings, reflecting a growing disillusionment with the humanist promise of order and progress. Contemporary works like Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) extend these themes into modern terrains, blending post-apocalyptic survival with metaphysical unease. Lovecraftian motifs of indifference, insignificance and the collapse of human-centred worldviews reveal a persistent literary impulse to confront the universe's disregard for human survival. Central to Lovecraft's fiction is "cosmicism", a philosophical stance grounded in the belief that the universe is radically indifferent to human existence. As Lovecraft writes in *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928), "the most merciful thing in the world... is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents."ⁱⁱ (p.159). In Lovecraft's fiction, horror emerges not from malice but from ontological collapse as the human is radically decentred in a universe governed by incomprehensible forces. According to S. T. Joshi and Graham Harmanⁱⁱⁱ Lovecraft's 'cosmicism' radically breaks itself from Gothic traditions and eventually locates horror in epistemic collapse rather than monstrosity. The terror in Lovecraft's work does not stem from monsters alone but from the collapse of human epistemology when confronted with the vast and incomprehensible forces of the cosmos (Joshi 2001). Ontological vertigo or the disorientation provoked by confronting a chaotic, indifferent universe, animates pandemic fiction where disease ceases to be moral or allegorical and instead functions as a reminder of human inconsequence. While Lovecraft's nihilism envisions a universe governed by incomprehensible forces that render human life insignificant, existentialist thinkers such as Albert Camus respond to a similar void not with despair but with defiance. He argues that meaning must be constructed rather than discovered. In *The Plague* (1991), Camus stages a world where suffering is arbitrary and heroism is grounded not in divine reward but in human solidarity. He presents it as an allegory of resistance and moral endurance in the face of absurdity. Thus, the tension between cosmic dread and ethical action underlies the philosophical stakes of pandemic fiction. Lovecraft evokes dread and disintegration whereas Camus affirms resistance despite absurdity (Camus, 1991). These narratives depict the human as one node in a mesh of ecological and technological entanglements, echoing posthumanist rejections of anthropocentric sovereignty. Rosi Braidotti (2013), Cary Wolfe (2010) and Donna Haraway (2016) propose post-anthropocentric frameworks that foreground human entanglement with nonhuman life, technology and planetary systems, creating an especially urgent shift in the context of the Anthropocene. Rosi Braidotti (2013) argues for a "critical posthumanism" that decentres the liberal humanist subject, foregrounding interspecies entanglements and ecological vulnerability.^{iv} Cary Wolfe (2010) similarly critiques the foundational assumptions of human exceptionalism^v. In *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), Eugene Thacker introduces the "world-without-us," framing horror literature as a mode of engaging the unthinkable, an ontological void beyond human comprehension. In pandemic

narratives, the virus emerges as an agentless, non-conscious force capable of destroying entire civilisations. Sigmund Freud's (1920) concept of the death drive or the compulsion toward repetition, decay and a return to the inorganic, parallels the logic of contagion in pandemic fiction where dissolution becomes an unconscious drive. Julia Kristeva (1982), through her concept of abjection, reads the infected or decaying body as a site of horror and transgression where identity unravels as boundaries between self and other, life and death. According to her, the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order," (Kristeva, 1982) and in pandemic narratives it manifests in the leaky, contaminated body that threatens to undo social and biological coherence. Priscilla Wald's seminal work *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008) traces the evolution of the "outbreak narrative" in popular media, arguing that such stories reinforce national and immunological boundaries while dramatising global vulnerability. This interplay between medical crises and cultural anxiety is further explored in Mark Honigsbaum's *The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris* (2019), which situates outbreaks within modernity's existential uncertainties. Similarly, Barbara Creed (1993) and Steven Shaviro (1993) have extended this discourse into horror cinema, demonstrating that these narratives also manifest collective anxieties about bodily permeability and social disintegration^{vi}. In Lovecraft's fiction terror emerges not from malevolence but from indifference. His monsters are not driven by hatred or vengeance, as reflected in the projection of the ancient beings in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936). They exist on a scale of power and perception that makes human lives seem negligible. The hybrid Deep Ones, with their alien biology and immortality, embody a destabilising truth that humanity is neither exceptional nor central to the universe. Their presence threatens not just physical obliteration but an ontological collapse, that is, a breakdown of the very categories that define selfhood and reality. As the protagonist confronts entities that defy comprehension, he also discovers his biological contamination, therefore suggesting towards a loss of human purity or distinctiveness. This results in a gradual and terrifying descent into the 'Other', where the boundary between self and alien dissolves, creating an unstable and permeable sense of identity. Lovecraft's fiction embodies the horror of Thanatos, where revelation does not empower but annihilates. The horror lies in the realisation that the boundaries of the human are fragile, porous and cosmically insignificant. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994) is one of the earliest pandemic novels, where a mysterious plague systematically extinguishes all of humanity. In the novel, the pandemic operates as both a literal and metaphorical end. It signifies the failure of humanist ambition, the suspension of historical continuity and the reduction of civilisation to an isolated observer without the prospect of recovery. Lionel Verney, the titular "last man," is not a heroic survivor but a mournful relic, wandering through ruins with no audience, no purpose and no future. Shelley's vision^{vii} anticipates Lovecraftian "cosmicism" in that it confronts the reader with a post-human world stripped of divine order or teleological meaning. Unlike Lovecraft's metamorphic horror, Shelley's Verney embodies passive survival, highlighting the futility of Enlightenment progress myths. Anne Mellor^{viii} connects this to Shelley's critique of Romantic idealism in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (1988). Camus, however, strikes a dissonant chord in this existential triad. In *The Plague* (1991), the bacillus is equally indifferent, yet Camus resists the nihilism of Lovecraft and the despair of Shelley by anchoring meaning in human action itself. Dr. Rieux, the protagonist, rejects both religious fatalism and existential despair, acting not out of hope for victory but from a refusal to yield to absurdity. Unlike Lovecraft's protagonists, who collapse before the void or Shelley's who are consumed by grief, Camus's characters embrace the Sisyphean task of enduring. Camus stages an ethics of engagement, where meaning is not imposed by the universe but created through action despite its indifference^{ix}. (Camus, 1991)

Pandemics, whether depicted as slow apocalypses or sudden ruptures destabilise boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, the living and the inanimate. As both a metaphor and a material phenomenon, viral contagion operates as an ontological flush. It destabilises the categorical distinctions and the boundaries sustaining Western ideas of

subjectivity and community. Here, the infection is rarely just biological; it consistently manifests as epistemic rupture, unravelling the metaphysical coherence of the human itself. In Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994), Lionel Verney's paradoxical survival marks not triumph but estrangement. His continued existence after the death of all others underscores the impossibility of selfhood without intersubjective relations. His body marks the threshold between biological survival and species extinction and between historical memory and complete oblivion, embodying Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist claim in *The Posthuman* that "the boundaries of the human are neither fixed nor impermeable" (p. 82). Verney thus inhabits a state of liminality, functioning as a "human residue" amid a world emptied of the human. His unresolved narrative arc materialises what posthuman theorists term the "death of man," framed not as a catastrophe but as an ontological transformation. Lovecraft's *The Colour Out of Space* (1927) radicalises this theme of dissolution, replacing violence with ontological unmaking. Lovecraftian horror here is not rooted in violence but in metamorphosis; plants wilt into grotesque shapes, animals deform, and human characters lose form, coherence, and volition. Significantly, the "colour" defies conventional monstrous attributes and it lacks intentionality and perceptible structure. The infected are not killed but unmade, reduced to formlessness. And the very unknowability of this horror violates the epistemic boundaries upon which human exceptionalism depends. In *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, the viral outbreak decimates society and leads to moral polarisation but also generates a world where the boundaries between life, death and the supernatural blur. The virus emerges as a nonhuman agent that reorders life, morality and meaning, rather than serving as a mere antagonist. Braidotti challenges the anthropocentric frameworks by foregrounding non-human agency, suggesting that viruses, animals, machines and environments are not passive backdrops but actors in complex interspecies entanglements. In pandemic literature, the virus itself often emerges as a silent protagonist not as a villain but as a force that reorganises relations and redefines survival as in Lovecraft's *The Colour Out of Space* (1927), where an incomprehensible "colour" infects the land and bodies, acting as a formless viral agent that unravels the very categories of coherence. As Braidotti (2013) asserts, "The posthuman condition urges us to think beyond individualism, beyond the liberal subject, and human exceptionalism" (p. 2). The corporeal unmaking depicted across these texts, whether through Lovecraftian metamorphosis, Shelleyan melancholic isolation, or King's supernatural epidemiology, all testify to the dissolution of what Julia Kristeva calls the 'abject body'.^x Pandemic fiction systematically dismantles the illusion of what she asserts as the "clean and proper body," exposing human corporeality as fundamentally porous and unstable, its susceptibility not just to death, but to dissolution.

The psychoanalytic concept of Thanatos, as outlined by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), exposes a paradox in human subjectivity where resistance to dissolution coexists with an unconscious drive toward it. Pandemic narratives often oscillate between the survival instinct or Eros and what might be termed an "apocalyptic imaginary."^{xi} In Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), the Antarctic expedition uncovers remnants of an ancient alien civilisation, the Elder Things whose technological grandeur and biological complexity predate and surpass humanity. Yet rather than inspire awe or aspiration, these discoveries incite existential dread. The story ends not with human triumph but with a warning against pursuing knowledge that exposes the species' insignificance. The landscape becomes a tomb, a static monument to civilisations undone by their creations. Within Lovecraft's framework of cosmic pessimism, survival holds no inherent meaning and functions only as a temporary deferral of humanity's inevitable decline. The narrative embodies the death drive^{xii}. As a recursive confrontation with extinction, the impulse to understand only deepens the horror of the ontological fragility. In Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), for example, the dialectical tension of the death drive materialises through the novel's depiction of a post-plague world that embodies both catastrophic collapse and regenerative potential. The characters face annihilation that paradoxically enables moral renewal, suggesting a latent fantasy of world reset

that is both apocalyptic and utopian. The Captain Trips pandemic functions as a thanatic purge, creating narrative space for what could be interpreted as a neoliberal fantasy of rebirth through destruction^{xiii}. The death drive surfaces not merely as a psychological motif but as a narrative engine in pandemic fiction, cycling between destruction and rebirth as the plague here is not only a disaster but it also becomes a structure for meaning. Similarly, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994) presents a more radical engagement with thanatic impulses. Verney's transformation from survivor to chronicler to "last man" enacts what Freud (1917) identified as melancholia's paradoxical structure - the internalisation of loss so complete that it becomes constitutive of identity itself. Verney's solitude becomes a form of self-erasure^{xiv}. As his mourning fixates on loss and it blurs the boundary between self and other, along with ego and death. Unlike King's narrative, which ultimately reaffirms social bonds, Shelley's vision proposes that pandemic survival may entail not community but the existential solitude of being, a state that resonates with Blanchot's (1982) formulation of subjectivity as fundamentally alienated. The plague in Shelley's novel functions not only as a biological catastrophe but as an epistemological rupture that dismantles Enlightenment ideals of progress and human exceptionalism. It embodies an internal logic, a psychic unravelling in which desire collapses into abjection and the body becomes the locus of dissolution. The infected subject exists in what Agamben (1998) terms a zone of indistinction; neither fully alive nor properly dead, human or Other. Lovecraft's *The Thing on the Doorstep* (1937) or *The Outsider* (1926) demonstrates this horror of bodily instability, where protagonists merge with or become the monstrous other, unable to distinguish self from contamination. As Julia Kristeva (1982) notes, the abject "disturbs identity, system, order," and in pandemic literature, it embodies the fear that one's body is no longer one's own. This corporeal instability reaches its narrative apotheosis in pandemic fiction where, as Shildrick (2002) observes, "the leaky, permeable body threatens the fiction of autonomous selfhood" (p. 5). The diseased or hybrid body^{xv} Resists symbolic containment, destabilising identity, and provoking both horror and morbid fascination. Pandemic literature wavers between rejecting humanism through cosmic indifference and reaffirming it through acts of solidarity, leaving its ethical position unsettled and contested. On one hand, works like Lovecraft's evoke a post-anthropocentric cosmos that renders human agency laughably insignificant. The unknowable Other, alien, viral, elemental, operates on a scale and logic beyond moral or narrative resolution. On the other hand, texts such as *The Plague* (1991) and *The Stand* (1978) reinvest in humanism, not as mastery over nature but as an ethical commitment to solidarity, memory and meaning-making within a diminished sphere of control. Thacker, in his *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), introduces the concept of the "unhuman", explaining forces that operate beyond anthropocentric paradigms, revealing that viral agents in these narratives function not merely as plot devices but as metaphysical challenges. Pandemic fiction frequently flirts with this perspective, staging the collapse of not only bodies and systems but of narrative coherence itself. Yet even amid dissolution, there remains an insistence however tentative on the possibility of meaning beyond mastery. As Freud (1920) suggests, the death drive is not merely destructive; it is repetitive, cyclical, and inescapably bound to life itself. The death drive in pandemic fiction thus emerges not simply as a psychological mechanism but as what Fisher (2014) identified as the "slow cancellation of the future^{xvi}," under late capitalism's temporal regimes. The virus, the plague, the inexplicable contagion, these are agents of the posthuman, indifferent to individual meaning and resistant to narrative closure. These are forces that undermine not only life but the very frameworks through which life is interpreted. Pandemic fiction stages the psyche's confrontation with its boundaries, oscillating between dread, mourning and resistance. Pandemic literature captures the existential and ontological rupture caused by ecological collapse, biopolitical control and the destabilisation of temporal experience under late capitalism^{xvii}. These narratives interrogate systemic failures, portraying the pandemic as both a literal event and an interruption of rationalist discourse. By foregrounding the fragility of anthropocentric worldviews such texts dismantle Enlightenment-era fantasies of human

mastery and progress, confronting readers with a cosmos that resists comprehension as fiercely as it resists meaning. Unlike conventional disaster narratives that seek resolution or catharsis, pandemic fiction sustains what might be termed ‘narrative abjection’, a refusal of closure that mirrors the indeterminacy of contagion itself. These stories persist as open wounds, zones of liminality where identity, temporality and ethical frameworks remain perpetually unsettled. By refusing resolution, pandemic fiction embodies the ‘slow cancellation of the future,’ mirroring the erosion of teleological certainty. The logic of contagion in these narratives infiltrates epistemology itself, corroding the foundational binaries between human/non-human, self/other, life/death that have traditionally structured Western thought. From the cosmic nihilism of Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) to the elegiac solitude of Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1994) and the Sisyphean resistance of Camus’s *The Plague* (1991), pandemic fiction maps a spectrum of responses to ontological precarity. What unites these texts is their shared insistence on confronting rather than resolving, the disquieting realities of a posthuman condition. In doing so, they expose not only the vulnerability of the human body but the tenuousness of the narratives that sustain collective meaning. Pandemic fiction renders visible the unthinkable. It creates a world where the human is no longer the protagonist but part of vast, entangled systems. Pandemic literature reflects the anxieties of the Anthropocene and cautions against illusions of human autonomy. Its narratives do not offer consolation but demand reckoning with the limits of humanism, the illusion of autonomy and the radical interdependence of life in a universe indifferent to its inhabitants. These narratives exceed conventional storytelling by interrogating^{xviii}. The ontological and ethical assumptions of humanism itself. Survival is reimagined not as mastery or redemption but as a condition that demands we dwell in uncertainty and embrace entanglement. Pandemic fiction compels a reckoning with ecological entanglement and existential precarity, rejecting the comforts of escapism.

Notes:

1. Lovecraftian horror, also known as cosmic horror, originates from his work and is characterised by the insignificance of humanity in the face of incomprehensible, ancient cosmic entities. Unlike traditional horror, which often centres on gore or psychological fear, Lovecraftian horror invokes dread through themes of existential insignificance, forbidden knowledge, and the fragility of sanity. Key elements include unknowable beings like Cthulhu, the Necronomicon, and settings where the laws of nature break down.
2. See H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, *Weird Tales*, vol. 11, no. 2 (February 1928), and S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, 1996).
3. See S. T. Joshi’s *The Weird Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1990) and *The Modern Weird Tale* (McFarland, 2001), where he analyses Lovecraft’s philosophical horror as distinct from traditional supernatural fiction. Also see Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012), which argues that Lovecraft’s work anticipates object-oriented ontology by portraying a universe fundamentally indifferent to human comprehension.
4. Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013), proposes a framework of “critical posthumanism” that challenges the centrality of the liberal humanist subject; autonomous, rational, and male by emphasising the fluidity of boundaries between human and non-human, organic and technological. She foregrounds ecological vulnerability, embodied subjectivity, and interspecies entanglements as key dimensions of a post-anthropocentric ethics suited to the Anthropocene. See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), pp. 1–44.
5. Cary Wolfe, in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010) critiques the foundational assumptions of human exceptionalism that underlie liberal humanist thought. He argues that the posthuman condition requires a rethinking of subjectivity that considers systems theory, animal studies, and biopolitics, challenging the anthropocentric privileging of the human as ontologically distinct and morally superior. Wolfe’s work is foundational to posthumanist discourse, particularly in its call to decentre the human within ethical and philosophical frameworks. See

Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. xv–xxiv, 99–122.

6. Scholars such as Barbara Creed and Steven Shaviro have expanded upon Kristeva's concept of abjection to explore how horror cinema stages the collapse of bodily and social boundaries. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), Creed draws on psychoanalytic theory to argue that female-coded monstrosity in horror films often embodies fears of maternal power, contamination, and the abject. Similarly, Steven Shaviro, in *The Cinematic Body* (1993), emphasises how horror cinema makes visible the visceral, affective experience of bodily dissolution, portraying contagion as a metaphor for collective anxieties about identity, sexuality, and societal breakdown. See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993); and Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

7. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1994) envisions a post-human future devoid of divine order or redemptive purpose, prefiguring the philosophical contours of Lovecraftian cosmicism. While separated by genre and historical context, both Shelley and Lovecraft dismantle anthropocentric narratives by presenting a universe in which human life holds no inherent meaning or privileged position. For Lovecraft's articulation of cosmicism, see "The Call of Cthulhu" and *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (2012).

8. Anne Mellor discusses Mary Shelley's depiction of Lionel Verney in *The Last Man* (1994) as embodying passive survival rather than transformative agency, contrasting Enlightenment optimism with post-apocalyptic despair and critiquing Romantic idealism. See Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. pp. 179-181.

9. While Camus's ethics of engagement foregrounds human agency as a defiant response to cosmic indifference, posthumanist critiques expose its latent anthropocentrism. Rosi Braidotti argues that such frameworks "presume a posture of human exceptionalism and mastery," neglecting the agency of nonhuman actants, such as viruses, algorithms, and ecological systems, that shape life and politics in the Anthropocene (*The Posthuman*, 2013, p. 45). This shift reframes resistance not as an exclusively human endeavour, but as a distributed, multispecies ethics responsive to planetary interdependence.

10. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982. Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules?"

11. The term "apocalyptic imaginary" refers to the symbolic and affective structures through which societies envision the end of the world or radical collapse. It encompasses religious, ecological, and speculative motifs that shape our understanding of catastrophe and renewal. In the context of pandemic narratives, this imaginary often functions as a cultural framework for processing collective fear, mortality, and the limits of human control. See Teresa Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (University of Toronto Press, 2008), and Elizabeth Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lexington Books, 2008) for key analyses of apocalyptic thought in literature and culture.

12. Freud's concept of the 'death drive' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) involves a compulsion to repeat destructive patterns, reflecting an unconscious drive towards nonexistence. Lacan, in *Seminar VII*, reinterprets this drive as symbolic, rooted in the subject's entry into the order of language and law, where the drive toward death represents a return to the unspoken Real. In contrast, Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) critiques the conventional association of the death drive with cultural or reproductive futurism, arguing for a queer theoretical embrace of the death drive as a rejection of normative, future-oriented values.

13. While Stephen King denies a deliberate political intent behind *The Stand* in *Danse Macabre* (1981), framing the pandemic as a thematic exploration rather than a critique, the narrative can be read as engaging with post-1970s neoliberal discourses of crisis and renewal. As Wegner argues in *Life Between Two Deaths* (2009), the apocalyptic narrative of the late

20th century often reflects neoliberal fantasies of societal rebirth through the purging of the old order, highlighting the tension between catastrophic destruction and the promise of regeneration in the aftermath.

14. Verney's descent into solitude evokes Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, where unresolved loss turns inward, leading to a diminished sense of self (*Mourning and Melancholia*, 1917). However, feminist critics such as Anne Mellor argue that Verney's melancholic passivity resists the Romantic ideal of the autonomous, heroic male subject, instead embodying a critique of masculine individualism (Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, 1988).

15. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) frames abjection as a process by which the body resists symbolic containment, marking the boundaries between self and other, life and death. In contrast, Judith Butler's theory of performative abjection in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) highlights how the body's identity is constituted through repeated acts of exclusion and incorporation, suggesting a more fluid, performative understanding of abjection (p. 8). Shildrick's *Leaky Bodies* (2002) expands this analysis by focusing on the bodies of disabled individuals, whose fluidity and perceived "leakiness" challenge normative bodily boundaries and reinforce the instability of the symbolic order.

16. Mark Fisher's concept of the "slow cancellation of the future" describes a cultural condition under late capitalism in which the imagination of alternative futures has stalled, leaving only the recycling of past forms. In *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), he frames this stasis through Derrida's notion of *hauntology*, where the spectres of lost futures linger in the cultural imaginary. While Fisher sees this as symptomatic of neoliberalism's grip on cultural production, Fredric Jameson's earlier critique in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992) attributes the temporal collapse to the logic of postmodernity itself, where historical depth is flattened into pastiche rather than haunted by unrealised futures.

17. Pandemic fiction in the Anthropocene often allegorises ecological collapse, but the framework itself is not without critique. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2009), highlights the Anthropocene's Eurocentric assumptions, particularly its universalising of human agency and historical responsibility. Donna Haraway proposes the *Chthulucene* (2016) as an alternative, a multispecies, entangled epoch that emphasises co-becoming and relational survival over apocalyptic rupture.

18. As Cary Wolfe argues in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), the genre participates in the "nonhuman turn," displacing the human as the central locus of meaning and ethics (p. xv). By imagining survival beyond the human, it opens space for philosophical inquiry into being, agency, and extinction. However, critics like Andreas Malm caution that posthumanist discourse can veer toward political quietism, neglecting the structural drivers of ecological crisis. In *The Progress of This Storm* (2018), Malm argues for reasserting human agency and political economy in climate discourse, rather than dissolving responsibility into ontological flattening.

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Bio-note

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