

CONCLUSION

CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEAR AS SUBJECT OR OBJECT

HYWEL DIX

The Social History of Fear

Joanna Bourke has demonstrated lucidly that fear, like any emotion, has a history that is both social and cultural. Fears arise at that point where an individual's perception of the world intersect with cultural constructions of it. Without those preceding constructions, the psyche of the individual would effectively be a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet, with little or no knowledge of what there is to be feared. Without such knowledge, therefore, there can be no fear. This is fear's primary characteristic. Given this outward-looking, social orientation it goes without saying that what is constructed as "fearful" is both culturally specific and historically variably. What a society collectively fears, that is, what gets constructed as the predominant object of fear in a given society at a particular time, differs from what that society fears during radically different periods in its history. It differs also from what a separate society fears during the same period. After all, beyond the most primal fears such as fear of the darkness, fear of the cold, fear of starvation or fear of being hunted, what human societies have most feared for the majority of their histories has been each other.

By implication (though admittedly not by systematisation) the chapters collected here have mapped some of the social history of fear in Western societies in the twenty-first century. What emerges is a series of accounts of the close imbrication of fear with the dominant ideology of those societies. Thus, for example, Yola Gómez and Paddy Farr's discussion in Chapter One of zombie films as a response to the experience of the global Coronavirus pandemic speaks to the daily fears experienced by millions during the years of the pandemic just as Elvan Karaman Mez's analysis of the threat of nuclear war in Howard Brenton's play *The Genius* (1983) in

Chapter Eight is clearly related to the wider ideology of Cold War politics and the existential threat of war with a deeply entrenched ideological enemy; and Gómez and Farr's discussion of black poetics in the opening chapter is partly a response to hierarchies of race that developed during the imperial period as a result of cultural constructions of otherness that took place during that period. Indeed, the ramifications of those practices still live with us today in the shape of continuing experiences of iniquity and inequality between different races, as demonstrated by Mustafa Güneş's comparison of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) and Hakan Gunday's *The Few* (2011) in Chapter Eleven and Hira Naz's overview of Pakistani Literature in the wake of the worldwide polarisation between Islamic and Non-Islamic societies following the 9/11 attacks in New York in Chapter Twelve. However, if discourses of race and otherness are still with us, there has also been a shift in the dominant ideology of Western societies since the end of the colonial period, which is now more about the effective management of global capitalism than about nation, race or empire.

Owing to this shift, where Gómez and Farr partly included a discussion of zombie horror films as an aspect of the discourse of racial othering, Adelheid Rundholz maps out a broader history of the horror genre in Chapter Two, using the films of George Romero and Edgar Wright as well as the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-22) to show that the horror genre, which once was believed to consist chiefly of cautionary tales and hence was seen as innately conservative in its unspoken ratification of the social order, has more recently been mobilised as a critique of that order. To put this another way, where once the horror genre could be seen as warning its viewers about what happens when social structures break down, thus tacitly inviting them to observe and accept the social order of their own world off-screen, the more recent manifestations of the genre have begun with the assumption of an unequal world in which systems of care, welfare, education and governance are already broken, thus encouraging their viewers to adopt a sceptical attitude with regards to the political and industrial leaders who have broken it.

This dichotomy between apocalyptic films as a way of policing the social order in order to reinforce it and apocalyptic films as a way of critiquing the agents of the social order in order to subvert it is also the theme of Chapter Three, where Mahinur Gözde Kasurka uses it to illuminate her discussion of apocalyptic fiction by Sarah Hall and Megan Hunter. In the process, Kasurka also draws on Ulrich Beck's concept of the risk society to explore how global capitalism actively accentuates cultural constructions of fear as a means of reinforcing its own dominant ideology. But although Beck's work is a major touchstone for the volume as a whole chiefly

because it can be read as a historical materialist account of the emergence of fear as a political factor, Kasurka ultimately reads Hall's *Carhullan Army* (2007) and Hunter's *End We Start From* (2017) as political alternatives to the risk society that Beck diagnosed.

In its essence, the logic of the risk society is a consumerist one based on the identification and exploitation of new commercial markets. The goal of the risk society is to identify and exaggerate potential threats to our safety, security, home, welfare and family while at the same time offering us solutions to those threats, solutions which of course come at a price. These often come in the form of physical, technological equipment such as security cameras outside our homes, dashboard cameras in our cars, and baby monitors for our children but they also include intangible financial products such as extended warranties (against the threat that one of the other pieces of equipment will break down), insurances and payment protection schemes. Zinnie Harris's portrayal in the play *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) of a female academic wandering across an economically collapsing Europe and continually turning to models of customer behaviour and to self-help books to guide her, discussed by Mert Güçlü in Chapter Nine, can be considered a manifestation of the risk society, as can the construction of the family unit as a precarious community constantly in danger of being torn apart by a combination of internal and external pressures that Buket Doğan finds in her reading of Rachel Cusk's novel *In the Fold* (2005) in Chapter Ten. But it is the combination of new technology with big business that is really at the heart of the risk society. This combination is explored in various ways in Yağmur Sönmez Demir's discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro's portrayal of human cloning and artificial intelligence in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021) in Chapter Four, Elif Toprak Sakiz's analysis of Ian McEwan's portrayal of artificial intelligence in *Machines Like Me* (2019) in Chapter Five and Anastasia Logotheti's comparative discussion of Ishiguro and McEwan in Chapter Six.

In the two of his novels under discussion, Ishiguro astutely portrays the consumerist logic on which the risk society is based: first creating a particular fear, which in turn creates a need for technological solutions and then finally marketizing such solutions. The specific purpose of human cloning in the world portrayed in *Never Let Me Go* is to supply human organs for emergency transplant, while the use of artificial intelligence in *Klara and the Sun* is addressed towards a need for human connection and companionship (as well as the more mundane reality of domestic labour). Fear of needing an organ transplant and not being able to get one and fears of isolation and loneliness are deliberately fostered among the citizens of the societies in question by the big technology companies as a first step

towards securing the ideological consent of the citizenry for their cloning and artificial intelligence operations. But the companies themselves are always submerged in the background, barely visible or accessible to either readers or characters and thereby exactly replicating the lack of transparency and accountability associated with such companies in the empirical world. Perhaps owing to this lack of transparency, the novels implicitly raise ethical questions about these entire processes so that in effect there are two levels of fear at work: the fear (of death, of isolation) that is raised by the market logic of the risk society; and the uneasy fear that the technological solutions proposed might not be as harmonious as they appear from either a technical or a moral perspective. These two different levels of fear are also in evidence in Deniz Kirpikli's reading of Sam Byers's novel *Perfidious Albion* (2018) in Chapter Seven, where right-wing populist politicians in post-Brexit Britain use social media to constantly arouse a fear of the Other among a cowed and subservient population in order to justify an extension of state surveillance and control. As the novel's implicitly critical portrayal shows, what is really to be feared is this deliberate cultivation of fear itself, its uses and abuses.

Fear as a Keyword

Raymond Williams published *Keywords* in 1976 as a vocabulary that could be used to map the emergence and historical variation in meaning of certain commonly occurring and highly emotive terms for the discussion of society and culture. The purpose of doing so was to show that our ideas, our ideologies and our emotions have specific cultural histories and that how we construct them, and the values we associate with them, vary according to the major developments in any society in a given period. As it happens, *fear* was not one of Williams's keywords, and neither does it have an entry in Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris's updated book, *New Keywords* (2005), even though the above summary of the chapters collected here decisively shows that fear itself has a history that is both social and cultural so that it could appropriately be treated as a further instance of such a keyword. Although there is no specific section dedicated to it in *New Keywords*, it does appear prominently eighteen times within the entries for other terms, and this in itself reveals how central it has become to our understanding of the relationship between culture, politics and ideology. Without necessarily deliberately attempting a systematic taxonomy of different kinds of fear, the dispersal of the term across the discussion of so many other important terms and concepts in *New Keywords* adds up to a partial classification of those varieties because in effect each

usage of the term across the other entries identifies a different and specific kind of fear.

Thus the editors speak of specific fears as 1) certain types of phobia (fear of snakes or spiders, for example, or obsessive-compulsive disorders); and psychological fears such as 2) the fear of failure; 3) the fear that our intimate relationships will break down; or 4) the fears we feel for our children; as well as more general fears relating to socio-economic precarity including 5) excessive commodification; 6) fears of homogenization or even Americanization; and more specifically 7) the fear of job loss; and 8) the fear of downward social mobility and impoverishment. These fears about social status and/ or economic insecurity and instability potentially carry with them 9) a fear of becoming subject to excessive state control but this is counter-balanced by 10) a corresponding fear that social systems might break down altogether, enabling the subversion of existing systems of social authority or even by 11) a fear that once excessive power has been checked by revolutionary forces, that the revolution itself might get out of control and take on some of the excesses it had sought to replace.

As noted above, many of the fears that are common in contemporary society relate directly to the uses and abuses to which new and emerging forms of technology have been or might be put. In *New Keywords* these include 12) fears relating to recent advances in genetics and 13) the specific fear that the field of genetics will establish the genetic sequence for a “normal” human genome, thereby allowing for molecular surveillance, discrimination, and/ or normalization which would by definition exclude those whose genomes differed from the purported norm. In turn, these fears have been linked to both 14) concerns regarding the ethical consequences of patenting genetic information, transforming it into intellectual property owned and controlled by major private corporations and 15) perceived dangers in tampering with natural processes of reproduction. These culturally and historically specific forms of fear really express deep-seated anxieties about the particular uses to which technologies that have only emerged in the very recent past have been put, and about who has access to them, who controls them and for what purpose. Such culturally and historically specific kinds of fear clearly differ, for example, from earlier kinds of fear related to 16) “other” cultures and races during the period of the major Western empires as well as 17) historical fears of miscegenation and race-mixing during that period. Finally, although it was suggested above that fear of the racial “other” has ceased to be a dominant ideology in Western societies today, an entry in *New Keywords* for *difference* suggests that there has been a growing resurgence of discourses of difference in the twenty-first century, and that such discourses have increasingly been

appropriated by populist political leaders in order to stir up 18) a fear of the Other, as part of a wider policy of exacerbating cultural differences between specific communities within a given society, including between different races, and thus following a practice of divide and rule.

What this last culturally and politically cultivated fear of the Other points to is a close association between the risk society, the neo-liberal capitalist economic order and the politics of authoritarian populism. Within the political arena, this association closely follows the market logic of the risk society in that it a) creates the perception of a threat to the safety, security and economic wellbeing of the society; before proceeding to b) promise a radical solution to the perceived problem in exchange for c) enhanced forms of power and authority. The appeal of populist politicians is thus directly comparable to the appeal of Ishiguro's fictional human cloning or McEwan's fictional Artificial Intelligence: in each case, a threat (death, loneliness, the "Other") is invented and exaggerated until it can appear great another to warrant some kind of intervention in response and the response once elicited—approval for cloning, or for artificial intelligence, or for highly conservative and repressive political policies—both legitimises and is legitimised by the original fear that was created.

In the case of neo-liberalism and populist politics, one of the most notable features of the discourse of fear is the discrepancy that exists between different definitions of fear. This discrepancy reveals a wider conflict over who has the right to define fear because although in theory everyone has the right to define their own emotions for themselves, in a highly politicised, media-inflected world led by large multinational corporations in practice certain ideologies rapidly come to dominate others and these are particularly affective in setting the parameters of who or what we should be afraid of, both as individuals but more importantly at a collective, social level. What this process obscures by rendering apparently natural and common-sensical is the assumption that we should be afraid to begin with. This is always a hallmark of the most deeply embedded ideologies in a society: the fact that we have ceased to realise that it is so. Having naturalised the assumption of fear as a basic pre-condition for contemporary societies in this way, the forces of neo-liberal society from political parties to media conglomerates and from technology corporations to social media enterprises have then set themselves the task of directing our attention to specific objects to which the emotion of fear should be attached.

But is it natural or even correct to assume that a permanent state of incipient fear is the appropriate way to characterise human society in the twenty-first century? Even if this premise were accepted (and it is a big *if*) it would still be necessary to question whether our potential fears need to be

attached to particular “objects” at all. To do so would require asking whether fear comes from within us or whether it comes from the outside; or asking how far we attach fear to things, and how far the things themselves inherently engender fear in us. To distinguish between *I am afraid of something* and *Something frightens me* is thus to distinguish between fear as an object of our emotions and fear as the subject of them. In some cases, to describe our fears is to say more about ourselves than about what we are afraid of, and in such cases we experience the emotion as generated inside our own psyche. To say *I am frightened of nuclear war* is to render the source of my fear the grammatical object of my emotion in a way that says more about me than about nuclear war and actually limits the agency of the latter. By contrast, it is possible that some things outside myself are inherently frightening as a result of their own innate properties. Where fear is implanted in me by these things I experience fear on the receiving—as opposed to the generating—end of the exchange and external factors automatically come into play. Thus to say that *Nuclear war frightens me* is to establish the source of fear as the subject of the emotion, rather than its object, and the source of fear is assigned much more active agency.

Although some things undoubtedly strike us as frightening in the moment of experiencing them (so that they may be considered subjects), many others need not be cathected as frightening unless or until they are culturally constructed as such. In cases like these, fear is not inherent in the source and is not therefore a grammatical subject but is instead something which happens *to us* so that it may more appropriately be considered an object. Moreover, since the way we experience fear is often cultivated and evolved through the intervention of various intermediary steering media—television news, commercial advertising and, increasingly, social media platforms—it could be even more accurately classified in grammatical terms as an indirect object. In this case, where fear is implanted in me not by its own source (nuclear war) but by intermediary agents in the media it becomes not only something of which I am on the receiving end but also something that is inflicted on me. Thus to say *Nuclear war is frightening to me* is to reduce the human subject (“I”) to an indirect object (“to me”) in the face of various external pressures, some of which are inherent in the source of fear and others of which orchestrate that fear from a position that is neither wholly inside the human subject nor wholly inherent to the source.

It hardly needs saying that the grammatical form that best expresses the forms of fear associated with Beck’s risk society and subsequent conditions of neoliberalism is the third form: the indirect object. In this instance, the fear I feel in the face of certain things is not the result of some inherent fearfulness in the things; but neither is it necessarily an intrinsic part of me.

Instead it comes from that third position which is located outside subject and object, from whence fear is remediated, channelled, constructed and cathected in various complex and indirect ways. In the UK, for example, during years of discussion around Brexit those in favour of remaining inside the European Union were repeatedly accused of generating fear concerning the potential negative consequences of leaving it. Thus leaving could be presented as a courageous and enabling action, so that even though much of the leavers' discourse repeatedly orchestrated fears around immigration and loss of sovereignty the Vote Leave campaign did not present itself as one innately based on fear, instead ascribing this emotion (in its negative guise, cowardice) to its opponents. This message was then reinforced through a well (not to mention, unlawfully) funded campaign in both traditional and new media, with the algorithmic properties of social media playing a particularly prominent part in polarising and exaggerating the differences between leavers and remainers so that the latter could be caricatured as fearful cowards even though the campaign of the former that was primarily based on the commodification of fear. The social media campaign of Vote Leave variously cultivated and orchestrated potential fears either of a small island nation in danger of being swamped by the powerful European other, or of a relatively prosperous Britain being dragged into economic weakness by impoverished European neighbours. It did so from precisely a position of intermediary mediation between the content of those messages and the citizens to whom they were relayed so that the latter were precisely in the position of indirect objects, the position, that is, of having their fears inflicted on them and constructed as fearful to them.

At the time of the Brexit debate it would have been tempting to see Brexit as the main or even the only means by which the commodification of fear played out in British public life. Now that the Brexit debate has for better or worse been settled, we are in a clearer position to see that this is not in fact the case. Although Brexit happens to be a particularly clear instantiation of the conflict over different ways of defining fear outlined above, it is not qualitatively different from many of the other ways in which the neoliberal order has mobilised fear as a political factor in the recent past. Thus radical conservatives who wish to deny the reality of man-made climate change for their own pernicious ends typically accuse climate activists of engaging in "Project Fear" as a way of de-legitimising them. Or as another example, Donald Trump repeatedly based his populist appeal on the assertion that he would not be afraid to make America great again. These two examples both illustrate the ways in which discourses of fear can be silencing discourses that seek to pre-empt and deny legitimacy to

expressions of opposition or dissent, while also leaving their own ideological framework unexamined.

Fear as the dominant ideological discourse of the neoliberal settlement makes indirect objects of us all. It cultivates particular fears (of the Other; of violence; of disempowerment; of loss of money or status) to justify populist political action aimed at allaying those fears such as the curtailment of human rights; mutual suspicion and hostility between peoples; limitation of access to power and capital; and worsening of the climate emergency as a result of the renewed cycle of production and consumption. In justifying such actions, it directs our fears away from the people who take them so that their own ideologies and motivations remain uninterrogated, however pernicious they may turn out to be. The strength of many of the fictional works that have been discussed in this collection is to be able to dramatize and demonstrate precisely this difference between who should be feared and between two levels of fear. Those by Ishiguro and McEwan in particular invite us ask which we should be more afraid of: that advanced technologies will result in increased inequalities between human beings; or that certain large corporations will allow this to happen as a deliberate economic strategy?

This discussion of two different levels of fear and the question *What should we be afraid of?* brings us back to the starting point: the social history of fear. It is clear that we are living in a period where fear as a commodity has become incorporated into the dominant ideology of capitalist societies in very deep, powerful and complicated ways. But to ask what we should be afraid of is to name our fears and thereby to take control of them—which in some cases might actually minimise them. If for example I say as an indirect object, *sharks are frightening to me*, even though marine biologists tell us that sharks are not inherently dangerous or fearful to human beings, the reason this fear resides in me is not as a result of any innate property of the shark but the result of the myriad cultural constructions that have told me—in defiance of scientific proof—that this should be the case. Because those cultural constructions are so strong, I might find it difficult to allay the fears they produce even in the face of scientific evidence. By contrast, if as a subject I say that *I am afraid of sharks* to some extent I can mitigate this fear simply by avoiding the object, that is by not going to places where sharks live.

Of course not all culturally fostered fears are of such a simple order as examples of this kind, which is really a single-object phobia rather than a culturally engendered fear as such. The fear of the Other, the fear of immigration, the fear of loss of control, the fear of technological dystopias, the fear of climate change and ecological catastrophe—these are all deeply

entrenched and widely disseminated facets of populist politics which, as fears, are of a quite different order. But what the difference between *I am afraid of sharks* and *Sharks are frightening to me* shows is that when we refuse the position of the indirect object, refuse that is the role of passive recipient of fear as an externally cultivated aspect of our own emotions, we begin to take responsibility for our fears which is also to address and allay them. If such a shift could be applied to the populist politics of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century, what would be the outcome?

One possibility is that doing so would also be to refuse to have fears inflicted on us as part of the legitimising narratives of a very hard line authoritarian right-wing politics. Thus to say that immigration is frightening is always to assign both action and responsibility somewhere else, and to provide tacit acceptance of the populist discourses—so prominent in Trump’s America, Brexit Britain and Erdoğan’s Turkey—that tell us this is so. To say, by contrast, that I am afraid of immigration is not passive, it requires active thought and hence active consideration and critique. In other words, to make such a statement is also implicitly to question it and possibly to refute it. That is why to take responsibility for our fears is also to render them less fearful than they might have seemed. To do so in turn is to refuse to acquiesce in the fear-generating discourses of the political right by recognising that fear too can be a choice, one that we can actively choose to accept or reject. By rejecting it we then have the opportunity to reject with it the hate-making assumptions and ideologies of that whole neo-conservative order and to seek out real alternatives. These will not be easy to find, because the agents of neoliberalism have proven again and again not only how many resources they have at their disposal but also how resilient they can be. But if meaningful alternatives to the existing order are not easy to find, they are also not impossible to find. And this finally is why no account of the politics of fear can ever be complete without some consideration of fear’s unspoken correlative: Hope.

Works Cited

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