

**‘A chilling story from today’s headlines:’ Community, Maritime Apocalypse and Discourses of Eco-Dystopia’s in *Doomwatch* (1972)**

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Climate change, eco-fear, environmental catastrophe, and everything that is subsumed within multiple discourses of environmentalism are most powerfully expressed through language and imagery. As Julie Doyle suggests, ‘climate change exists as a physical reality and as a range of social and cultural meanings [...] mediated through a range of social and discursive practices’ (2011: 2). The media and cultural industries construct these meanings and scenarios in audio-visual terms, including their logical end-point – environmental apocalypse. Several terms have been extrapolated to describe this phenomenon, including ‘Apocalyptic Horror’ (Pippin 1997) and more recently, and appropriate to this article and collection, ‘Eco-Dystopias’ (Hughes & Wheeler 2013).

*Doomwatch* was released in 1972, the same year that the UN Environment Programme was established at the Environment Conference in Stockholm. In its production, promotion, and reception, the film is self-consciously tied to the burgeoning environmental awareness of the era and represents an early example of ‘eco-dystopia’ – one which is also largely bound to its British production context. The film was a spin-off from a successful BBC TV series (*Doomwatch*, 1970-2) which was more science fact than fiction in tone than the film which relies on generic horror tropes. It has been suggested that *Doomwatch* may be considered a ‘folk horror’ (Scovell, 2017: 88-9) or a ‘hybrid folk horror’ due to its similarities with *The Wicker Man* (1973) and other texts (Keetley, (2019) and its ‘sacrificial’ themes (Keetley, 2023). Yet, what this article argues is that its hybrid status is also related to its complex production context: its relation to the TV series; to its production company, Tigon; to the established tropes of horror previously demonstrated by its director, Peter Sasdy and most significantly, to the rising awareness of environmentalism in the early 1970s.

This article will focus on the interrelationship between the TV series, its inspiration in the headlines of the day and the marketing, reception, and fluid generic qualities of the subsequent film (the process of making, releasing, and receiving the film as the ‘discursive’ process, as they are in conversation with each other). *Doomwatch* thus exists in a rarefied atmosphere of environmental awareness, but also in a symbiotic relationship with contemporary culture whereby the blurring of distinction between fact and fiction is somewhat incestuous. The film’s interrelationship with media reception is significant in

understanding how environmental awareness is constructed in the media through the complicated intersection of fact and fiction, and how this can be also expressed within a national context. This article will analyse the discursive process of creating the environmental horror film *Doomwatch*, placing it in discussion with the series it evolved from and the media discourses of climate change in the 1970s.

The article will discuss the film's themes, contextualised within this cultural atmosphere of evolving attitudes to the natural environment. These revolve around the despoliation of the natural environment by chemical effluent and big business, the effects of pollution on community and identity, the destruction of an ancient way of life, and thus how an important cultural nexus is formed around climate fear. An added poignancy is configured by the focus on the site of despoliation – the sea off the British coast which traditionally has been an indexical link to security (a drawbridge and a moat) and supremacy (the might of the Royal and merchant navies). Therefore, *Doomwatch* is an important text as it conflates its scenes of environmental apocalypse with an elegiac national lament for the abdication of control over the environment around it, at the same time as it expands its importance in giving visual and lexicographical expression to the unfolding corporeal eco-dystopia it is in a reciprocal relationship with.

### **Environmental Movements and Contexts**

Fears of environmental catastrophe in the twentieth century began appearing between the first and second world wars. In Britain, smog caused by rapid Industrialisation gave rise to several Public Health Acts to combat excess pollution, such as in 1956 and 1968 to reduce the effects of burning coal. Yet it was the release of American marine biologist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 which is often cited as a driving force behind the nascent environmental movement in the United States and Europe. In it, Carson poetically and scientifically details the effect of chemical pollution on the natural world. *Silent Spring* appeared in the same year as the Cuban missile crisis, and it was perhaps inevitable that the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament found common aims with a movement which was also campaigning to save the planet. This became increasingly obvious as the decade wore on and the 'counter-culture' became entwined with anti-Vietnam protests, Civil Rights movements, and female emancipation. Thus, to this day, environmental and conservation movements are associated with left-wing activism or those that claim to speak for minorities and the economically marginalised, something that will be addressed in relation to *Doomwatch*.

Environmentalism was also a transatlantic movement, with both *Friends of the Earth* and *Greenpeace* established between 1969 and 1971 as co-operative movements between the US and Europe (and Britain in particular). This was evidenced in 1972, the year that *Doomwatch* was released, by the creation of the UN Environment Programme at the UN conference on the environment in Stockholm. Newspaper reports of the time began to reflect the warnings inherent within these movements. One such article appeared in *The Guardian* in December 1970, 'Nature's Balance Upset,' which typified this reporting. Quoting Carson as raising the 'alarm,' it suggests 'the need has been obvious not simply to conserve nature but to conserve ourselves' (*The Guardian*, 1970). In the 10 years since *Silent Spring* and the release of *Doomwatch*, not only was the environmental movement growing exponentially but it had also begun to influence global policy-making. It is no surprise therefore, that the creative cultural industries similarly began reflecting its influence in texts like *Doomwatch*.

### ***Doomwatch* TV Series (1970–72)**

The BBC series *Doomwatch* was devised by television writer and producer Gerry Davis and scientist Kit Pedler. They met when they worked together on the BBC documentary programme *Horizon* (1964–), and then they worked on *Dr Who* (1963–1989, 2005–), inventing apocalyptic villains the Cybermen (in themselves an embodiment of techno-fear). *Doomwatch* ran for three series between 1970 and 1972 (and was briefly resurrected as a one-off drama in 2010). It coincided with increased press coverage of contemporary environmental catastrophe, meaning that it was either remarkably prescient in predicting forthcoming events or that the line between fact and fiction was marginal.

The series followed a specific group of scientists working for a government department under the name *Doomwatch*, who investigated any strange and disturbing occurrences often caused by excessive human activity, including pollution and climatic disaster. Specifically, they were 'The Department for the Observation and Measurement of Scientific Research' (*Doomwatch*, 1970–2). Each of the three series focused on one main scientist: Doctor Spencer Quist (John Paul), John Ridge (Simon Oates), and Tobias Wren (Robert Powell). As a partially lost TV series and one that fits largely within the science fiction bracket, the series has been overlooked by scholars and remembered by audiences with the fondness but historical distance of 'cult' television. This was despite its success at the time – at times being watched by roughly a quarter of the British population (*D'Arcy*, 1972: 32; Clark, 2018, online). One exception is scholar Lez Cooke who suggests that it transcended its generic boundaries:

The subversive credentials of *Doomwatch* were confirmed at the end of the series when what was to be the final episode, provocatively titled ‘Sex and Violence,’ was banned following the inclusion of scenes of a real military execution. This act of BBC internal censorship, coming three years before the more celebrated censorship cases of the mid-1970s, set the seal on the programme’s progressive reputation proving ‘that *Doomwatch* – a series that could, at its best, illuminate the deepest fears of the British public – never quite lost its power to shock’. (Cooke, 2015: 135)

Although ostensibly science fiction, its timeliness, suspicion of government and industry, and its genuinely provocative tone alongside how its ‘fiction’ sat uncomfortably close to scientific fact means it should be considered outside of this discrete category. This can be seen in some of the series’ critical reception, which is infused with conspiratorial and mildly paranoid language and a suggestion that the topicality of the series is a cause for concern. Many of these critics mentioned the proximity to one of the series’ storylines and a recent contemporary event. In a review of the episode *The Islanders* from *The Sun* in 1971, entitled ‘Uncanny Hints of Disaster,’ it mentions that ‘there is something creepy about the way *Doomwatch* keeps on being right about disasters in advance’ (*The Sun*, 1971). It states that the script has ‘anticipated real life by predicting with uncanny accuracy, the finding of poison in deep sea fish.’ It then quotes David Buck, the actor in the episode as stating, “‘shortly after we finished, all this business about the tuna started to come up’.” This refers to reports only the previous month of mercury appearing in canned tuna fish (‘Nature’s Balance Upset’ *The Guardian*, 1970). *The Daily Sketch* talked about the show’s realistic proximity to the ‘hazards of our science-dominated world’ before linking it with a recent speech by then Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the US about pollution, also describing it as ‘a fashionable political topic in the United States’ (‘Wendy, a girl to take three girls’ place’ 1970).

Concomitantly, Nancy Banks-Smith, writing in *The Guardian*, described it on its debut as ‘Sci-fact not sci-fic’ with ‘great immediacy and veracity.’ She also surmised that the ‘mass appeal’ drama series was perhaps a better format for getting across a ‘serious’ subject, and perhaps more explicitly asserting that ‘Horror is here and now in the newspaper clippings’ (‘*Doomwatch*’ 1970: 8). There is a suggestion here, therefore, that the concept of horror is closely linked to contemporary societal concerns, ‘graphic and compelling’ in its linking of climate terror to the everyday.

Peter Black, writing in the *Daily Mail*, also suggested that, ‘The realism, which some viewers find sufficiently disturbing to complain about, it [sic] what gives *Doomwatch* its

edge. The subjects are frightening because they are probable' (Black, 1970). Black goes on to cite another recent alarmist report from a 'genuine' scientist who spoke about the possibility of all ocean life becoming extinct by 1979: 'No scriptwriter's imagination could top that' he posits, perhaps incorrectly (as will be explored in the film version). This was also noted by co-creator Kit Pedler who insisted, 'Doomwatch is not science fiction [...] we go to great lengths to check our scientific facts' (cited in Clarke 2018: online). Likewise, Davis told the *Daily Mail* that it was 'a staggering coincidence that many of the programmes we put out turn into reality a few days later. Of course, we do our research in scientific journals but that does not explain everything' (cited in Sandbrook 2010: 204). In fact, the *Daily Mirror* even established its own *Doomwatch* division to probe environmental aberrations, exhorting its readers to send in examples for investigation – a clear example of how important *Doomwatch* had become in articulating climate fear (Sandbrook 2010: 204).

George Melly, writing for *The Observer*, also suggested that the series traded on sensationalist horror: 'I do wish they'd do without that weekly horror shot' (Melly 1970: 36), referencing the tendency for unflinching and graphic depiction, in this case the denouement of Episode 1:4, *Tomorrow the Rat*, which showed the flayed corpse of a female scientist who was responsible (under government orders) of developing human flesh-eating rats. She is scapegoated by her superiors before the rats devour her. Horror, in its many iterations and conceptions here, is both implicit and explicit and coalesces with corporeal instances of rodent infestations visible from several 1970s refuse collectors' strikes (Sandbrook 2010: 203).

To affirm the anti-establishment and 'subversive' strain mentioned earlier, many reviews point out the relatively detrimental depiction of government ministers in the series, including Melly, who describes 'glory-seeking politicians in alliance with irresponsible boffins' (1970: 36). *The Morning Star*, perhaps inevitably (as a communist-sympathetic newspaper), describes them as 'smooth, oily buck passers, whose primary concern is always to keep things under wraps to protect their own position' (Lane 1970). It then mentions recent discussions about CS gas before conspiratorially asking 'what was the official reason given for all the dead seabirds last year?' (Lane 1970). Again, this refers to a number of incidents reported on in 1969 of birds dying unexpectedly and without obvious cause. To indicate the confusion at the time, *The Times*' headlines reported on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1969 that 'weather killed 2,000 birds,' followed on 18<sup>th</sup> October by 'war dump may be bird killer' (Wright 1969: 1), three days later with 'bird killer may be a virus' (Wright 1969: 4), and the next day that it may be influenza (Wright 1969: 10). It is unsurprising therefore that we see a flurry of

dramatic media reporting which fingers the military and industry for environmental catastrophe, whilst being suspicious of politicians. This subsequently seeped into the creative cultural industries and then into the critical reception of programmes like *Doomwatch* (see also Fryers 2014 and Wilson 2018).

It was not just reviews that signalled the synergy between the series and everyday life, the show's title became shorthand for all matters relating to environmental fear. Just as the second series was coming to the end of its run, an article appeared in *The Observer* on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1971 reporting on the anxieties of Suffolk villagers and fishermen over potentially dangerous electrical waves from a Ministry of Defence Research station, and was titled after a quote from one of the affected villagers: 'It's getting a bit like Doomwatch around here' (Wilby 1971: 6). Similarly, *The Guardian* reported on a 'Global War on Pollution' (1971: 17) and the possibility of setting up a global 'Doomwatch Agency' at the next year's Stockholm conference, while *The Times* (1972) further reported that 'Minister seeks talks with 'doomwatch' scientists', quoting then Secretary of the Environment Peter Walker as commenting "'I don't dismiss the doomwatch type of warning out of hand – I am not complacent about this sort of thing'" (Aldous, 1972: 14).

The series certainly captured a type of zeitgeist surrounding environmental concerns, a fact reflected in its scheduling. *The Times* Broadcasting section (5<sup>th</sup> June 1972) announced the return of the show at 9.20pm on BBC1, whilst on rival ITV it lists *Only One Earth*, part of a series of programmes related to the aforementioned Stockholm conference. However, these strange and initially fortuitous simulacra began to inculcate a certain fatigue. Writing in *The Observer*, Mary Holland lamented 'the trivialising of a series which was originally exciting and intelligent' and had descended into the standard drama format or, as Last describes, it was 'more like a bad "Avengers" than a genuine "Doomwatch"' (Holland 1972: 26; Last, 1971: 10). Holland also takes the occasion to decry what she observes as 'Ecological overkilling' of television programming surrounding the conference, which were generally 'pretentious' in tone or which offered no genuine solutions or concrete evidence (26). As with so much regarding *Doomwatch*, this is an argument that continues to resonate up to the present day.

Indeed, this was a perception similarly shared by creators Davis and Pedler, who left the series 'when the fiction became larger than the science,' as reported in an interview with *The Guardian* (Gardner 1973: 11). *The Times* reported as the third series was being aired, that the pair had left after a 'policy dispute' and had only served as 'advisors' for the second series ('Doomwatch TV Men Leave' 1972: 2). Pedler tellingly states in the same interview

that the problem with the environmental issue is that the public are ‘saturated with horror stories’ rather than any workable solutions. This did not stop the production of a spin-off film from *Doomwatch*, which accentuated further, rather than softened, the association with horror.

### ***Doomwatch* – Film (1972)**

The film version of *Doomwatch* was released after the final series ended in 1972. Despite having left the series, the show’s writers and creative team of Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis developed the story ideas, but Clive Exton wrote the final screenplay. Exton had previously written the script for the horror/drama *10 Rillington Place* (1971) based on the case of serial killer John Christie and contributed to the horror/sci-fi anthology series *Out of the Unknown* (1969) amongst others, showing his familiarity with writing the ‘horrific.’

The film was produced by the company Tigon, who had a reputation for producing ‘exploitation’ or ‘sexploitation’ films, such as *Au Pair Girls* and *Virgin Witch* (both 1972); historical rural horrors *The Witchfinder General* (1968) and *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971); other horror films, including *The Sorcerers* (1967) and *The Creeping Flesh* (1973). Tigon replaced the televisual cast with a new one headed by Ian Bannen as Dr Shaw, Judy Geeson as Victoria Brown and also George Sanders as The Admiral, Sir Geoffrey.

As such, the science fact and fiction elements were somewhat downplayed in favour of the ‘horrific’ although still restrained by the standards of Tigon’s more extreme content. Peter Sasdy, a veteran of film and televisual horrors such as *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970), *Countess Dracula* (1971), and the supernatural BBC film *The Stone Tape* (released in the same year as *Doomwatch*) directed the film. The film’s publicity emphasised the horror, and also exploited the simultaneity of its narrative with contemporary events. ‘Doomwatch – A chilling story from today’s headlines!’ proclaimed the promotional one-sheet, a film ‘set against one of the world’s most relevant problems today – pollution’ which ‘points up the potential horrors of a real future’ (*Doomwatch* Pressbook, 1972). It proceeds to inform the reader that it was filmed on the same beaches where contaminated canisters recently washed ashore. These were the so-called ‘Cornwall canisters’ that kept appearing on the beaches of Cornwall in January 1972, which turned out to be leaking toxic cannisters of Tolylene Di-iso-Cryanate, thought to have emanated from the stricken Spanish freighter *The Germania* (Owen 1972: 2).

The film details the effects of illegally dumped pituitary gland growth hormones in the coastal waters surrounding the fictional Isle of Balfe, just off the Cornwall Coast. This

small fishing community is afflicted by a form of gigantism, acromegaly, caused by eating fish infected with the hormone. Doomwatch scientist Dr Shaw (Ian Bannen) travels to the island to take samples of marine life, but his presence is greeted with scepticism and his investigations into the local population's deformities are obstructed and treated with hostility. Dr Shaw is assisted only by the schoolteacher, Victoria, (Judy Geeson) herself an 'outsider.' Laboratory tests on the marine life reveal abnormal traces of the growth hormone and Shaw's investigations lead him first to the Royal Navy and a prohibited nuclear waste dumping ground off the coast. It is revealed that this is not the source of the contamination and further investigations lead him to a private company who have been developing a failed growth hormone for cattle. This 'treatment' was abandoned as it led to violence in the cattle, and the company paid a local company to dispose of it – who does so illegally in the prohibited naval zone. As Shaw investigates further, he realises that the community's hostility is down to their superstitious belief that the deformities are a result of inbreeding and a judgement from God. After a standoff with the locals who rightly fear that their way of life will be destroyed, the island is evacuated and quarantined.

The story bore remarkable similarity to a number of the TV episodes, especially *Burial at Sea* (1:3), which dealt with the dumping of a deadly chemical warfare compound, and *The Islanders* (2:3), in which expatriate inhabitants of a remote Pacific island (who are similarly superstitious and anti-scientific) suffer the effects of a diet in which deep sea fish have been poisoned. This again relates back to some of the headlines which had manifested within the last few years. The same *Guardian* article that announced, 'Nature's balance upset,' from two years hence, reported on contaminated fish: 'A process has begun in parts of the sea which concentrates mercury in fish to a level which can poison men [sic] over a period' (1970: 10). It links this, as does Carson, to mercurial fungicides present in herbicides and pesticides (especially DDT) and also mentions a 'doomwatch' safeguard being set up by the Minister of Agriculture to monitor this pollution. There is therefore a circular, referential, and symbiotic interrelation between the film, the TV series, newspaper reports, and environmental movements and concerns.

Even taking into account that genres are not fixed, discrete, and stable categories, *Doomwatch* exemplifies societal horror in a number of important ways. In addition to the film's marketing, the horror connection shared between producers Tigon, the writer and director, the film itself employs many of the narrative and representational tropes of horror. These link to the culturally and societally 'horrific,' both in terms of physical human deformity (see e.g. Williams, 1991) and the horror of pollution/contamination (Chaturvedi &

Doyle, 2015), in its broadest and specific forms. Jonathan Lake Crane may be only partially correct when he surmises that ‘Only the contemporary horror film comes close to the terror of everyday life’ (1994: 17).

Either way, its focus on a form of eco-horror places it within a larger context of films that were beginning to emerge which straddled the horror/science-fiction boundaries dealing with dystopia of an environmental nature. These included the Hollywood science fiction films *Silent Running* (1972) and *Soylent Green* (1973) and horror, *Frogs* (1972), *The Crazies* (1973) as well as the British sci-fi *No Blade of Grass* (1970), the Japanese *Godzilla vs Hedorah* (1971) and the Italian horror *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (1974), in which pesticides inadvertently resurrect the dead. This is exemplified by the film’s release in international territories, including its renaming as *Island of the Ghouls* in Romania and the United States. Articulating Doyle’s aforementioned paradigm of environmental discourse, Pedler also told the magazine *Photoplay* in an interview for the film’s release that:

What we’ve got to eliminate is the dreadful apathy which people have about pollution. I’m sure they don’t realise how serious it is. I feel that one of the best and most effective ways of making the public aware of the problem is dramatically. Talk a lot of dry, dusty facts and they couldn’t care less, but absorb those facts into a dramatic, fictional work and they start to take notice. (D’Arcy, 1972: 32)

The film’s opening titles establish the environmental theme, playing over images of the sea, coastlines and marine life contaminated with oil. Again, this echoes the real-life disaster of the Torrey Canyon, an oil super-tanker which leaked its contents off of the coast of Cornwall in 1967 (‘Oil Gushes out as Tanker Breaks her Back’ *The Times* 1967: 1). Oil itself, was another concern of the 1970s, with the discovery and exploitation of North Sea reserves in Britain, the global economic depression caused by high oil prices and the aforementioned concerns over pollution all dominating headlines throughout the decade. Significantly, marine birds are shown stricken with oil. The absence or silence of birds is an important indexical link back to Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Carter Soles suggests that avian life for Carson is therefore a ‘barometer...of an imagined yet very real and impending wholesale environmental apocalypse’ (2014: 527). *Doomwatch*’s stricken seabirds thus resonate with this powerful expressive trope and again provide a discursive echo of ‘real world’ coverage of maritime disasters.

As discussed, the advertising of *Doomwatch* prominently displayed the ‘horrific’ elements of the story, with the deformed and monstrously afflicted islanders featuring heavily

in Tigon's posters and stills. The gigantism caused by pollution mirrors the numerous nuclear deformity horrors of the 1950s, such as *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958) and the Japanese *Gojira* (1954). *Doomwatch* updates the man-made threat of those texts, which often featured gigantic marauding monsters, with a similar threat caused by human pollution. The updating of this trope in favour of another is emphasised in the text by the prominence of gigantism.

The plot initially alludes to the possibility that it is the Royal Navy that is responsible for the pollution, as the coastal waters near the island are a designated nuclear dumping ground. However, the Navy is exonerated, as it is a chemical company and the firm they hire to dump their waste, who prove ultimately responsible; industry and big business are the societal bogeyman. This is underlined when Dr Shaw utters the slightly odd line, “[it’s] *only* nuclear waste.” In this sense at least, one societal bogeyman is replaced by another. It is the industrial sector at fault, something which resonated with the parlous industrial-economic context of the time. The threat of the cold war and nuclear Armageddon is afforded a temporary reprieve in the same year as the first ‘winter of discontent’ (severe energy shortages in Britain). This was the beginning of a decade marked by industrial unrest and mass industrial action in Britain. In January 1971, the National Union of mineworkers voted to officially go on strike for the first time since the 1930s. It was to last seven weeks before resolution and Edward Heath’s government were to call a state of emergency a month later on 9<sup>th</sup> February. Meanwhile inflation was reaching dangerous levels and, on 6<sup>th</sup> November, increases in pay and prices were frozen in an attempt to counter inflation. Energy shortages were so bad that two years later, a three-day week was declared to conserve fuel. Much of Britain was returned to candlelight at times, offering a glimpse of a society facing a return to a primitive state. In this environment, the terror of industrial and climatic collapse offered an environment in which horror was easily born.

### **Horror Tropes**

*Doomwatch* draws on established narrative, presentational and paradigmatic tropes of the horror film – the contemporary British horror film especially. The film opens, like many Hammer Horror films (which either have a pre-credit sequence, ‘cold opening,’ or the post-credit opening feature graveyards and funerals, e.g., *Dracula* or *Prince of Darkness*), in a dark woodland setting. The villagers are in mourning as they dig a shallow grave for a dead child. The non-diegetic music soundtrack also creates a sense of foreboding. Later, as Dr Shaw heads towards the island, he is warned by the boatman that it is an unusual place: “You’ll find them a strange, closed lot on Balfe” (*Doomwatch*, 1972). Again, this is

synonymous with gothic horrors, and especially through Hammer's house style, whereby the lead protagonists meet with scared and superstitious locals on their way to a particular location (e.g. Castle Dracula). This is continued upon Shaw's embarkation on the island. A villager, the postmistress Miss Betty Straker (Shelagh Fraser), looks out at the incoming boat. The camera is placed low, looking upwards at her. This is a common set-up for horror or a thriller as it distorts the figure to make them look more menacing and the viewer smaller by comparison (famously demonstrated in *Touch of Evil*, 1958, *The Shining*, 1980 and *Hellraiser*, 1987, for example).

Shaw then encounters superstitious and belligerent local figureheads including the vicar and policeman. As he traverses the small town's square, the camera wanders uneasily and from his subjective point-of-view, as he is eyed suspiciously and windows and shutters close. This effect is exacerbated by mysterious nocturnal pilgrimages by lamplight he observes the villagers undertake. This reaches its height when Shaw trails them one night and finds the monstrously deformed Tom Straker (Michael Brennan), who attacks him in the darkness of an old barn. This is accompanied by low-lighting and musical cues reminiscent of Hammer Horror films. It is after this scene, approximately a third of the way through the film, that the truth about the locals' reticence is slowly revealed and Shaw's conception of them turns to pity rather than fear, mistrust and frustration. It is the apotheosis of the human monster paradigm so central to Hammer's output. It also marks the point where the film changes gear into an eco-thriller/horror (even if the horror here is more implicit than the explicitly rendered first third of the film).

The emphasis (both within the film and in the marketing campaign) on monstrous human deformity as the focal point of the film's horrific tendencies also ties the film to cultural constructions of horror and the 'other'. David J. Skal discusses the 'dark, unnatural, hidden self' in films such as *Freaks* (1931) and the 'freak' photographs of Diane Arbus. He suggests that Arbus,

...saw 'monsters' were everywhere, that the whole of modern life could be viewed as a tawdry sideshow, driven by dreams and terrors of alienation, mutilation, actual death and its everyday variations. Working-class families, through Arbus's unforgiving lens, emerged as denizens of an existential suburban sideshow. (Skal, 1993: 18)

In *Doomwatch*, the working-class denizens are the victims of the greed and idleness of modernity – they are literally created as 'monsters' and walking monstrosities as an effect of this excess. They exist in the shadows, before literally bursting through with affected rage,

then finally, death, blurring the boundaries between human and the 'abject.' The deformed villagers of *Doomwatch* represent the 'dark, unnatural hidden self' of a society contemplating an environmental apocalypse. Their eruption out of the shadows exemplifies what David Pirie identifies of the British horror film, 'when the fantastic erupts into the dominant mode' (2007: 12), as well as more pervasive notions of horror as signifying the eruption of, or 'return of the repressed.' Yet ultimately, they resonate with a wider trend within British culture in the 1970s of a desire to return to an earlier period of pastoral existence, unfettered by the complications of technology, industry and modernity (see Hutchings 2004; Sandbrook 2010: 176-221). The working class citizens highlight the contemporary imbalance between those affected or not by the effects of eco-damage: 'We are also told by diverse actors, agencies, think tanks and media outlets dealing with climate change issues that the worst victims of climate change will be the poor and the marginalised' (Chaturvedi & Doyle: ix-x).

The use of Cornwall as a location is significant for a number of reasons. Hutchings suggests that both 'deserted coastal landscapes' and the Celtic fringes (for which Cornwall is a part) were utilised as locations in British horror, sci-fi and fantasy as 'disturbing,' 'alienating' and 'uncanny' landscapes that configure a return to the pagan and superstitious old world. In doing so, they threaten the certainties of modernity and epistemology. They also provide a corrective to a British fascination with the rural and pastoral as indicative of a secure national identity. *Doomwatch* falls within Hutchings' paradigm for 'nasty stories about the countryside and what happens to outsiders...who venture there' (2004: 34), as it does to Shaw in the narrative.

As a part of this fringe, Cornwall has always represented a 'different' England or forms of Englishness; recognisable enough as part of the mother country when beneficial, but also with its own dialect and ensign and with a reputation as being hostile to outsiders (see *Straw Dogs*, 1970, for example). It is, as Moseley points out, a 'liminal' territory (2013: 644). Perhaps due to some of the aforementioned factors, Cornwall (and the Westcountry in general) retains significant associations with the pagan (Stonehenge) and the supernatural/superstition. Daphne du Maurier utilised the gothic qualities of Cornwall's craggy coast and desolate moors in gothic-infused novels such as *Jamaica Inn* (1936) and *Rebecca* (1938).

The Cornish setting itself is something of a recognisable trope; Hammer studios also set a number of their horror films in Cornwall. *Plague of the Zombies* (1966) featured resurrected corpses working in the county's iconic tin mines, and *The Reptile* (1966) concerned a snake-woman terrorising a small village. Perhaps the most obvious filmic

antecedent is the 1959 creature-feature *Behemoth the Sea Monster*, in which a giant lizard emerges from the coastal waters of Cornwall following the dumping of radioactive waste. Again, this radioactive scare is replaced in *Doomwatch* by industrial effluent. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly in terms of environment and ecology, Cornwall was likely chosen as it was the site of the effects of the aforementioned Torrey Canyon oil spill, five years earlier.

The depiction of the island community and their belief system is also of particular significance. There is a fishing community, relatively undisturbed in their simple way of life for hundreds of years. There is obvious symmetry with *The Wicker Man*, which similarly features an isolated island community continuing their archaic traditions. However, whilst in *Doomwatch* the islander's hostility and evasiveness is initially signposted as a cause of the textual horror (exacerbated by the violent and deformed victims), unlike the Summerisle community in *The Wicker Man*, who turn out to be a mortal threat to Edward Woodward's Christian policeman, the islanders in *Doomwatch* turn out ultimately to be the victims. Indeed, their non-pagan beliefs are represented by the fact that the local pastor is a prominent figure and the simple villagers also mistakenly believe that their deformities are a judgement from God. Yet in both cases, the crisis of belief is evident. God has abandoned them. Furthermore, in *Doomwatch*, both the villagers' island and their way of life are extinguished by pollution. Whereas *The Wicker Man* depicts the murderous pagan villagers united in their beliefs, the ending of *Doomwatch* is quite different. The closing scenes are a sad and elegiac lament for a lost way of life, as the islanders are evacuated, accompanied by plaintive music. The closing credits re-emphasise the cause of this as the contaminated canisters are shown exploding underwater. Just before the film's end, Victoria, suggests that "the island will be in ruins within two years" (*Doomwatch*, 1972). One might perhaps interpret this as a wider contemporary fear for the state of the British Isles.

It is tempting to draw comparisons between the film and the term 'folk horror,' especially in relation to *The Wicker Man*. Not only is there a connection with the Celtic liminal fringes and a superstitious island community, but Tigon similarly produced *Blood on Satan's Claw*. However, alongside the above described differences, several factors mitigate against any simple generic categorisation. In its hybrid form, it is closer to the gothic horror of Hammer (as deployed by Sasdy) and in the science-fiction and factual genres of its televisual provenance ('folk horrors' do not tend to feature scientific rationale prevailing or indeed such a foregrounding of scientific enquiry). In its apocalyptic environmental

worldview, it is possibly better subsumed under the eco-horror subgenre, with elements pulling in different directions that make it something of a hybrid or curiosity.

Therefore, the circular relationship that exists between the text, its inspiration, production and reception contexts presents *Doomwatch* as an early example of what Kaplan renders ‘pre-trauma’ in her analysis of recent films that envision environmental apocalypse (2016: 1). Kaplan draws upon the hitherto little-explored phenomenon of ‘Pre-traumatic Stress Syndrome’ (PreTSS), related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suggesting that disaster films that envision a post-apocalyptic landscape caused by climatic catastrophe, such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *The Happening* (2008), enact and articulate a widespread cultural anxiety around environmental doom. *Doomwatch* similarly articulates fears of environmental pollution that is still relevant today. The depiction of a traditional community destroyed by pollution, strikes at the heart of a number of anxieties of the early 1970s Britain. Politicians are suspect and industry is corrupt, while scientists, despite their best intentions, were the harbingers of doom. This was at the same time as the fishing industry was in a state of rapid decline, exacerbated by the ‘Cod Wars’ incidents of the decade (see Friel 2003). The film was also released in 1972, the year of the aforementioned ‘winter of discontent’ in Britain – an enforced return to an atavistic past and the characterisation of industry as a cultural demon are certainly enacted within *Doomwatch*’s narrative. So, alongside the myriad environmental relevancies discussed, the film also echoes more specific anxieties regarding contemporary Britain of the time.

This is why the fictional island community of Balfe within the film, takes on an added ecological poignance, and source of horror, within the narrative, as they offer a British Isles in microcosm. The film depicts an island community, identity and way of life that has depended on the sustenance and security of the sea for generations, under threat of defilement and extinction from the effects of pollution, industrial cover-up and conspiracy, which signifies a powerful warning for the island and people of Britain at this time. Likewise, the return to an atavistic past places *Doomwatch* within a number of British horror texts of the era, including *The Wicker Man*, which depicted ‘horror’ as a regression to an earlier state. The apocalypse was imagined in many forms, but an environmental apocalypse was also one being powerfully reflected in newspaper headlines.

### **Conclusion: Fiction Mixed With Fact**

A product of its time and specific contexts, *Doomwatch* is a cultural progenitor of the type of environmental trauma evidenced in twenty-first century film, and in the ‘terror’ that exists

more broadly within media reportage of climatic change. Thus, it demonstrates the connection to media discourses of fear, horror and the fictional articulation of such. As an early filmic example of eco-dystopia and a manifestation of eco-trauma, *Doomwatch* exemplifies the intersection between fact and fiction – horror and trauma. Drawing upon the headlines of the time, upon the iconography and marketing of the horror film, on recent environmental calamities and a nexus of cultural reportage that coalesced around the TV series and its contextual antecedents, *Doomwatch* exists as a text both informed by burgeoning environmental fear and one which also passed into the popular lexicon as an indexical referent for it. Its images of polluted and despoiled marine environments and destroyed community offer both an echo and a warning at the same time.

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