Kitap Tanıtımı / Book Review*

King, Stephen (2016) Cell. New York: Pocket Books

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There is not a single day that passes without a minor or major catastrophe in today's world. Recently, the world has fallen under a pandemic called the coronavirus, which reminds us of the destruction caused by the Black Death, smallpox and other pandemics that have taken hold throughout human history. Today, there is no guarantee that every epidemic or pandemic can be controlled. Moreover, there is no assurance of total safety or sanity. The commencement of the 21st century – a century that has arisen from the ashes of the 20th century, embedded in two world wars and an ongoing cold war – witnessed a devastating catastrophe when the Twin Towers were hit. Although it was a localized terrorist attack, the September 11, 2001, tragedy evoked an immense tidal wave of fear among people. Yet, it was only the beginning. The next chapter was ISIS, a terrorist organization that threatened nations around the world. Through its repeated attacks, which took place in France, Turkey, the United States, and many other countries, ISIS quickly became one of the most pivotal terrorist organizations in the world. It is important to remember, however, that whether it's Al-Qaeda or ISIS, such terrorist organizations are human productions. Most people know what these organizations are, and what they are not. Therefore, the source of paranoia and possible post-traumatic reactions may be related to certain aspects of their approach to terrorism, such as suicide bombings, crossfire or chemical attacks. As in King's *Cell*, when they are hit with something they cannot understand, a terrorist attack is the first approach they take:

> Tom was nodding reluctantly. 'I see where you're going with this. Someone – some terrorist outfit – rigs the cell phone signals somehow. If you make a call or take one, you get some kind of a … what? … some kind of a subliminal message, I guess . . . that makes you crazy.' ….Having heard many explosions people are nearly certain what is going on: 'They're using planes again,' the little man said. 'The dirty bastards are using planes again.' (2016, p. 59, 26)

To stop such terrorist formations, intelligence services, military defense systems and police forces often rely on technology. Such a tendency is understandable, since the primary objective is to halt any extremist attack before it begins. In that sense, the existence of advanced technology systems such as space satellites, drones, computerized supports and mobile communication enables authorities to track down any activity.

The rise of technology has been so rapid, especially since the 1980s (although this is not limited exclusively to that epoch), that dystopian literature has greatly accelerated, and this phenomenon is primarily attributable to cinematic adaptations. Instead of suggesting a better future, however, fast-paced technology has led to widespread agitation:

> So to use the well-known writer Michael Crichton as an example, there is a fairy clear line of development from a novel like *The Andromeda Strain* (an unknown virus from space threatens humankind) to 1990's *Jurassic Park* (using genetic engineering to recreate dinosaurs results in mayhem). However entertaining such novels (and the movies made from them) are, they have more in common with the "man was not meant to know" tale than with the more complex questions raised in such novels as Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985), Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain* (1993), and Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio* (1999), to name only three examples. In *Schismatrix*, humankind's

descendants are computer-based technologies; eventually these offshoots of humanity become a number of subspecies. *Beggars in Spain* depicts genetically modified human beings and the social divisions that might result from such modifications, while *Darwin's Radio* deals with a mysterious retrovirus that threatens to become an epidemic. These writers, like others using biological themes, see their central ideas as part of a system, not simply as a notion to be explored in isolation or in a straightforward extrapolation, as Larry Niven does in his story of organ transplants and criminals trading in them, 'The Jigsaw Man' (1967). (Sargent, 2009, p. 222)

Behind the advancement of post-apocalyptic exposure were the most perilous disasters.

It was on 22 September 1986 (another September!) when the world was traumatized with the news about the Chernobyl disaster. The leak of the Fukushima nuclear reactor is yet another horrifying disaster, reminding us that possible calamities can happen anytime, anywhere. Therefore, through the lens of these disasters, a post-apocalyptic aftermath has become a somewhat projected fate. In that sense, Stephen King's *Cell* adds another probability to the mayhem surrounding the world's end: *Cell* tells the story of the biological integration of a computer program to incubate inside people's mind in order to gain control. In spite of the fact that such an idea of King's may be considered a bit farfetched, according to science, controlling, damaging or destroying a human's brain is not inconceivable.

Although it has already existed in history in the form of Valhalla, Elysian Fields, Paradise or Plato's *Timeaus and Criteas*, etc., utopia primarily achieved semantic value through Thomas More's *Utopia,* which can allegedly be discussed according to a "generic meaning, a political-economic meaning, and a philosophical and hermeneutic meaning" (Freedman, 2000, p. 72). After More's *Utopia*, there were more to follow, such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels,* William Morris's *News From Nowhere,* Wells' *A Modern Utopia,* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (Freedman, 2000, p. 73). In a broader sense, at present, the idea of Utopia has become synonymous with science fiction. If it were the Middle Ages, we could have talked about angels, devils, and so on, and paradise was secluded from life itself, postponed to the afterlife. Nevertheless, today, we do not necessarily need these characters, as we have greater creativity to expand ourselves, creating distinct, alternative planets, as in the case of Tolkien's Middle Earth, or *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, or Philip K. Dick's alternative planets. We need some monsters whose existence is bereft of heroes, but we also need some heroes to fight off these monsters. We need Beowulf to sweep Grendel away. This means that in utopias, we also need some heroes to fight against the monsters, and these monsters will stand as an allegory to a system, kingdom, monarch, feudal state, church, etc. The main idea here is to defeat enemies so that a utopian system can be considered plausible during an eternal recreational phase (Atwood, 2011, p. 66-69). On the other hand, much like the necessity of a villain in almost any story, although the villain is not always necessarily a monster or a creature or even a living organism, if there is a utopia, there must be a dystopia, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite," due to the fact that "each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 2011, p. 66), as it is a common tendency in many classic myths varying from the Greek, Turkish, Scandinavian, Persian, Japanese, Native American,

and so on. Therefore, although science inflicts positivism together with optimistic tendencies toward the future, there is, and there will always be, a pessimistic inclination.

Enlightenment has widened humanity's scope to see the world without, or at least with lesser, scholastic or tautological approaches, but at the same time, through "exercise of careful judgement or observation" (Browne qtd. in Moore, 2013, p. 14). However, the developing technology separated humankind from nature and buried him/her into a more solipsist, narcissistic, and self-centered world that inevitably dragged him/her into a post-human condition. Consequently, as some of the literary works and film adaptations tend to portray a utopian future, the number of these optimistic representations has undergone a tremendous decline due to severe glitches the world has witnessed, as previously discussed.

Thus, natural expectation, posing at the stake through lustrous eyes, threatens humanity. Much like some critics who tend to see Mary Shelley or H.G. Wells as the first trend-setters of the science fiction genre, their plot is primarily reliant upon a biological transformation or an alteration, as in the case of *Frankenstein* or *The Invisible Man*. Any biological transformation may lead the character from sanity to insanity. This is precisely what happened with the Monster and Griffin, the man who turned himself into an invisible villain. Clay, the protagonist of *Cell,* commences this notorious set of scenes not by becoming biologically altered, since he didn't have any cell phone, but simply by observing the people that lead to a clear carnage:

> 'Poor damn thing was probably yapping in doggy heaven before it knew it was dead,' Clay thought. He understood in some clinical way he was in shock, but that in no way changed the depth of his amazement. (King, 2016. p. 19)

Witnessing people killing their dogs, cats, babies or each other through primordial, savage methods is something that truly hearkens with today's modern Boston. Such a distinct plague witnessed by Boston, although it was not the origin, continued to spread to various cities. When we think about the disaster that hit the American people, it can be associated with what we experience today due to the pandemic in America. Returning to the novel, Clay comes to an understanding that somehow people who use their cell phones become exposed to a kind of malicious software, and through this software, they become victims of a distinct mind control operation through what they refer to as Pulse, the self-aware AI of the communications network. It becomes a pandemic "with a speed that could not have been foreseen by even the most pessimistic futurist" (King, 2016. p. 3). Mind control may sound like a term that emanated from the mouth of a Jedi from the Star Wars series, but in fact it was a notorious attempt by the CIA, which for some people might have achieved some progress. It may sound "… like science fiction, but I suppose fifteen or twenty years ago, cell phones as they now exist would have seemed like science fiction to most people." (King, 2016. p. 71)

On April 13, 1953, "Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA, ordered the agency to develop mind-controlling drugs to be deployed against members of the Soviet bloc. The ultrasecret program was purportedly launched in response to Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean use of mind control techniques on U.S. prisoners of war during the Korean War" (Glass, 1953, n.p.). The program continued for a time and might still be in effect. Only recently, "[i]n

December 2018, a trove of newly declassified documents included a letter to an unidentified doctor discussing work on six dogs made to run, turn and stop via remote control and brain implants" (Glass, 1953, n.p.). Such control is always possible. From augmented reality to the uploading of the mind on cloud systems, neuro-scientists have been working on infinite experiments that are dependent upon several theories. The development of "brain-to-computer interfaces," especially to improve the life conditions of disabled or sick people, is fast becoming a pivotal turn in this technology (Toomey, 2018). If such technology exists or is at least under construction, it is not very unlikely for a scientist or programmer to develop a program that can transmit signals from cell phones to the human brain. Such a scenario is the primary focus of *Cell,* as previously stated. The protagonist, Clay, during an ordinary morning, suddenly found himself in a thriller movie scene, but this time the scene was more than a snippet, since the eerie fragments of havoc become 'the new normal of life.' Not only the city itself, but the whole country and nation were equipped with a network that relied upon pure technology:

> They saw we had built the Tower of Babel all over again … and on nothing but electronic cobwebs. And in a space of seconds, they brushed those cobwebs aside and our Tower fell. All this they did, and we three are like bugs that happened, by dumb dim luck alone, to have avoided the fall of a giant's foot. (King, 2016. p. 125)

Naturally, the technologies built to ease our lives turn out to be our murderers. Such a case sounds familiar to those who watched *The Matrix* or *Terminator* series. In fact, the plots are possible, and every day, we hear of digital hacks who steal anything and everything from people. It represents a recent trauma to find that "Facebook abandoned an experiment after two artificially intelligent programs appeared to be chatting to each other in a strange language only they understood" (Griffin, 2017, n.p.). Once AI gains control, it seems it decides that humans are the only real danger toward this planet, which is not, in fact, a bizarre conclusion.

Similarly, in the novel, Clay and his crew were trying to make their way out of Boston to an already devastated New England to find lesser phoners without leaders and possibilities to survive. Each time in the novel, there are some references to post-apocalyptic novels, as if they were a part of it, which is more than post-modern and is nearly a post-post-modern way of drawing the imaginary map of this journey. Being aware of the fact that they were far from heroes or heroines, characters think in more than a few instances that the world has ended. And then the heroes build it back up again. Not without struggles and setbacks, but yes, they use the tools and the technology, and they build it back up again. The protagonist couldn't remember any instance in which the heroes just stood around in a bedroom looking at a radio (King, 2016. p. 159), and they do remember having "… watched all those old Twilight Zone episodes, too – the ones where civilization turns out to be nothing more than a thin layer of shellac" (King, 2016. p. 109). Mind-controlled phoners turned into a flock-mind thing, like ants all going out from a hill or bees from a hive" (King, 2016. p. 131). The brains of humans are like biological hard-drives. Scientifically speaking, this is how the network made its way into their brains and uploaded different operating systems into their minds. It is a kind of

brainwashing, an integration of digital waves with a bio-neurological system to turn them into a telepathic group-think. For the survivors, it was a post-apocalyptic survival, and they knew "[t]hree days ago [humanity] not only ruled the earth, [they] had survivor's guilt about all the other species [they'd] wiped out on [their] climb to the nirvana of round-the-clock cable news and microwave popcorn. Now [they're] the Flashlight People (King, 2016. p. 186)." When the survivors happen to look at the yards or wide plains "[e]very inch of grass was covered with phone-crazies. They were lying on their backs like sardines in a can, leg to leg and hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder. Their faces stared up into the black predawn sky (King, 2016. p. 196)." They were acting like one single organism instead of the so-called times when they used to be individuals. But like Enkidu, who was born into savagery, man's descendants were and still today are deeply savages. We only take some manners up, obtaining some civilization or the codes that define civilization, and we call it an enlightened society. Nevertheless, during the days of orators reciting The Iliad, Greeks called their people civilized and the others barbarians. Those were the days that even in some severe and pathetic conditions they were offering humans to Gods as Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to Artemis. Odysseus and Myrmidons massacred many innocent people, including youngsters, but yet they were the heroes. Therefore, even today, nothing much has changed. We have wars, we have massacres and mass killings, and social and racial genocides are ongoing. Yet we are considered civilized. Therefore, setting the ethic codes aside and remembering Freud, Jung, or Strauss, we are still mixtures made up of our tribal ancestors:

> Although neither the Freudians nor the Jungians come right out and say it, they strongly suggest that we may have a core, a single basic carrier wave, or – to use language with which Jordan is comfortable – a single line of written code which cannot be stripped. 'The PD,' Jordan said. 'The prime directive.' 'Yes,' the Head agreed. 'At bottom, you see, we are not Homo sapiens at all. Our core is madness. The prime directive is murder. What Darwin was too polite to say, my friends, is that we came to rule the earth not because we were the smartest, or even the meanest, but because we have always been the craziest, most murderous motherfuckers in the jungle. And that is what the Pulse exposed five days ago. Man has come to dominate the planet thanks to two essential traits. One is intelligence. The other has been the absolute willingness to kill anyone and anything that gets in his way … Mankind's intelligence finally trumped mankind's killer instinct, and reason came to rule over mankind's maddest impulses.' (King, 2016. p. 206-207, 231)

Once humans are cleared of the codes, they are inclined to revert to basics like a computer hard drive, or maybe even a tabula rasa in which a new code can be embedded. This is exactly what happens in King's *Cell,* and much like Neanderthals were once overthrown by Homo sapiens, this time modern Homo sapiens are swept away by a flock of cell phone users.

Although Stephen King's *Cell* depicts the possible post-apocalyptic survival of a few people who are not cell phone users in an unexpected biological apocalypse, there is yet more to come. As previously discussed, science fiction as a genre tends to create more dystopias, since the prediction of utopias is far from reality. It may or may not be our future to be

annihilated by a cosmic, biologic, or other form of war. Nonetheless, a communications network has already captured control of people in masses. Individual thinking, acting or protesting is not conducted in the way it used to be. Today, huge tides of people across the world are controlled and led by mass social media, embedded as heaps of programs in mobile phones. For too long, modern buildings, creepy computer games, social media accounts, and network sites have become the factual world, more real than trees, flowers, clouds, animals and nature. Every day, more and more people commit suicide due to social media (Luxton, David D et al.). In fact, Stephen King's suggestion is neither awkward nor irrational. If cells and networks can affect people's lives so deeply in both negative and positive ways, especially considering that during a pandemic the effect of social media greatly increases, their integration with a biological system is highly conceivable, especially through psychological affections. Therefore, it is possible to say that cells and expanding networking manage to control people in one way or another. If this is the psychological and very realistic way of understanding King, one day, someone may try what the CIA has already attempted on humans through cell phone signals, and King's nightmare may come true.

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