

Douglas Coupland's Visions of Regional Apocalypse.

In his Vancouver fiction, Douglas Coupland implies that apocalyptic anxiety stems from the accelerated transformations of place and the increased global broadcast of apocalyptic images that are associated with globalisation. His cold war upbringing also appears to be influential on his apocalyptic imagination. However, whilst Coupland's visions of apocalypses are global and generational, they are also geographical. He emphasises the role of the locality in determining the specific nature of his apocalyptic fears and through his fiction maps a region of apocalypse onto Vancouver and the Northwest Coast.

Although literary regionalism is troublesome, in that the assignation of region is always arbitrary and has been considered increasingly meaningless in a time where people and ideas move frequently from place to place, recent revisions of regionalism have taken these factors into account. New regionalists propose that writers remain interested in region and moreover, 'no longer simply reflect the region they describe; now they help to create the region itself.'¹ Coupland might be said to have a particular interest in creating a region in that he has written a number of non-fiction books that look at the impact of place on identity: two volumes on Canada and one on Vancouver. Whilst his non-fiction assertions of regional and national identity jar somewhat with his fiction's emphasis on globalisation as a transformative and potentially erosive force on place, his interests in creating region and nation are still evident at points in the Vancouver-situated texts *Life After God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus*. In this essay I acknowledge the paradox of Coupland's global apocalyptic visions yet trace how Coupland nonetheless creates a Northwest region of apocalyptic anxiety, drawing on real events and actual geography in his fiction.

In his article, 'The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's Geography of Apocalypse', Robert McGill comes close to my own interests in situating Coupland regionally. McGill initially appears to consider the West Coast as the geographical context most appropriate for Coupland's work. He compares Vancouver with Los Angeles, suggesting they have the shared psychological burden of being cities on the edge, 'always in danger of

¹ William Westfall quoted by L. Hönnighausen in 'The Old and the New Regionalism', *Writing Nation and Writing Region in America. European Contributions to American Studies* 33 ed. By Theo D'Haen & Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 1997), 4-20 (p. 17).

breaking away,² and ‘the last continental place on earth to experience a day’s closing.’³ They are also at the end of the new world and consequently there are no further utopias to be imagined. ‘The California impulse is to live up to its utopian mythology through pretence if not through fact,’ McGill suggests, and ‘its superficiality and simulacra [...] extends northward along the Pacific Rim.’⁴ Yet Vancouver and *Girlfriend in a Coma* are saved from simulacrum by the sublime landscape: ‘The sublime in its infinity, denies the power of the artificial apocalypse.’⁵ McGill thus ultimately considers *Girlfriend* in the context of the city of Vancouver rather than the West Coast region, yet a number of other regions are mentioned in his work, illustrating the difficulties in defining region and limiting literary analysis to just one of many possible regions. McGill uses West Coast and Pacific Rim interchangeably, though the two have different connotations, the former referring merely to North America and the latter to a multi-continental circular region. He fleetingly refers to British Columbia and Canada, suggesting that a salmon’s desire for home is a British Columbian metaphor, and reflective of a distinctly Canadian desire. McGill consequently overlaps regional and national distinctions, yet returns to the more traditional way of thinking about region, suggesting the existence of homogenous geography. McGill refers to ‘British Columbia’s mountain ecology’ and its resulting cultural manifestations.⁶ Yet geography is far from homogenous in British Columbia. Only part of the province is mountainous, and salmon is only found near the Pacific Ocean and in a small number of landlocked locations. The roughly homogenous geography that McGill might more accurately refer to is that of the Northwest Coast, a cross-border region absent from his article, yet the most appropriate regional context for Coupland’s work.

Whilst McGill draws on the tectonic geography of the West Coast and the consequent risk of natural disaster as reasons for Coupland’s visions of apocalypse, I propose that Coupland is more concerned with humanity’s role in rendering the Northwest Coastal region potentially unstable. His novels are permeated by a tension between the land as it existed before the pioneers arrived, and how it has been manipulated and abused since. In the 1993 collection of short stories, *Life After God*, the narrator of ‘Thinking of the Sun’, echoing

² Robert McGill, ‘The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland’s Geography of Apocalypse’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 70.24, (2001), 252-277 (p. 259).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260-261.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

Coupland's biographical experiences, recalls his first visit to a Macdonald's restaurant, a visit tainted by the fact 'it was also the date and time of the Cannikin nuclear test on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians. [...] According to fears of the day, the blast was to occur on seismic faults connected to Vancouver, catalyzing chain reactions which in turn would trigger the great granddaddy of all earthquakes.'⁷ In reality, the blast had no adverse effects on Vancouver, yet Coupland uses creative license to envisage the potential damage of the event, imagining how a North Vancouver mall might break in two, the nearby Cleveland Dam shatter, and modern suburban homes crumble. He writes that the event made connections in the narrator's mind that 'are hard for me to sever, even now, twenty years later: one that Macdonald's equals evil; two that technology does not always equal progress.'⁸ Coupland sets up the regional event of the blast alongside global forces which pose a threat, physically and socially, to his locale. Additionally, he highlights human activity rather than tectonic activity as the principle cause of regional apocalyptic anxiety.

The Cannikin blast is only the first of many apocalyptic visions described in 'Thinking of the Sun.' Throughout the story Coupland emphasises the regional whilst simultaneously suggesting apocalyptic fear is universal. After referring to 1970s disaster movies, Coupland suggests that these films are no longer made because 'they are all so vividly projecting inside our heads.'⁹ No-one is exempt from his assertion that apocalyptic influences have been internalised. On the penultimate page of 'Thinking of the Sun', Coupland shifts his emphasis. His visions of apocalypse are not entirely global but, like most of his fiction, based on the experience of the middle classes:

In modern middle-class culture, the absence of death in most peoples' early years creates a psychic vacuum of sorts. For many, thoughts of a nuclear confrontation are one's first true brush with non-existence, and because they are the first, they can be the most powerful and indelible. [...] At least this is what I tell myself to explain these images in my head that will not go away.¹⁰

The story's narrator claims that he has interviewed both friends and strangers, and found that many people envision the flash of nuclear apocalypse. These people are apparently all Vancouverites, since the places they envision the flash map an apocalyptic geography onto southern British Columbia and northern Washington state: 'Over the tract suburbs of the Fraser

⁷ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (London: Scribner, 1994), p. 70.

⁸ Ibid, p. 73.

⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.85.

River Delta, over Richmond and White Rock [...] the Vancouver Harbour, over the Strait of Juan de Fuca, over the Pacific Ocean, the American border, over Seattle, over Bremerton, Tacoma, Anacortes and Bellingham.’¹¹ The inclusion of Bremerton in the above list of imagined flash locations implies Coupland’s awareness of the devastating weapons stored in Washington. Bremerton is home to the largest submarine ever built, The Trident Ohio. This carries ten warheads, each designed to ‘produce an airburst that would cause flash blindness, hurricane winds, spontaneous combustion, thermal radiation, and radioactive fallout.’¹² Moreover, Everett, Washington, is home to Boeing’s cruise missiles. Coupland’s place-specific references again construct a region of man-made apocalyptic anxiety.

The presence of nuclear weapons is an extreme example of humanity’s tendency to play God, developing technology that can change landscapes and kill en masse. Yet Coupland is also concerned with the tension between humanity and nature in the Northwest that exists in the everyday existence of his middle-class protagonists. He suggests that many of Vancouver’s suburban homes challenge the rules of nature. Coupland refers to a ‘winding suburban street on the mountain of West Vancouver’ close to the beginning of *Girlfriend*,¹³ but the unnatural positioning of these homes is most clearly evident in a description from his 2001 novel, *Hey Nostradamus*:

I walked up a driveway so steep to feel dreamlike. From a real estate agent’s point of view, chez Cecilia was a tear-down, but so is most of North and West Vancouver. This kind of 1963 house was so familiar to me that I didn’t pause to acknowledge its ludicrous existence, at the top of a mountain where nobody should live.¹⁴

Coupland’s characters inhabit homes that have been built in defiance of nature. Richard notes the striking binary in *Girlfriend*: ‘Up here we have our world of driveways and lawns and microwaves and garages. Down there inside the trees it’s eternity.’¹⁵ Much of the human world, especially urban locations, jars with nature and it might be said that the tension between man and the wilderness is a global concern. In 1990 Bill McKibben wrote that ‘we have killed off nature -- that world entirely independent of us which was here before we arrived and which encircled and supported our human society.’¹⁶ This is something Coupland acknowledges in *Girlfriend* when Jared explains that the world can no longer repair itself in the absence of

¹¹ Coupland, *Life After God*, p. 87.

¹² Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), p.282.

¹³ Coupland, Douglas, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (London: Harper Perennial, 1994), p.14.

¹⁴ Douglas Coupland, *Hey Nostradamus* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 209

¹⁵ Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 149

¹⁶ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 88.

humans: 'Earth is now totally ours.'¹⁷ I propose that the inhabitants of Northwest coastal cities feel the end of nature more intensely because they have achieved more successfully than inhabitants of many other locations the convenience of living in a city whilst being only minutes away from wilderness. Coupland's experience of this is evident in the preoccupations of his novels. Interviewed by Noah Richler, he explains that he grew up in a suburb where there was 'this weird binary reality' of modern humanity and wilderness.¹⁸ This binary reality is emphasised in *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* where characters frequently move from one side of the binary to the other and Coupland emphasises the sublime in contrast with the paraphernalia of contemporary living.

In his Vancouver fiction, Coupland frequently implies that humanity desires sleep. Many of his characters yearn for sleep as a method of avoiding the future, and I propose that this is the embodiment of their cultural exhaustion, of sustaining a fast-paced existence in an environment where wilderness constantly reminds inhabitants of what they have overcome in order to make the Northwest their homes. In *Girlfriend in a Coma* the apocalypse occurs when all of humanity falls asleep. Moreover, at the beginning of the novel, Karen confesses in a note written to Richard just before she falls into her coma, 'I feel like sleeping for a thousand years - that way, I'll never have to be around for this weird new future.'¹⁹ Coupland implies that the apocalypse is similarly brought on by humanity's desire to avoid the future. The title and imagery of the final story of *Life After God*, '1000 Years (Life After God)', foreshadows the themes of *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Its narrator, Scout, occasionally wishes that he could 'go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world.'²⁰ Later, he imagines 'I will fall asleep for a thousand years, and when I wake, a mighty spruce tree will have raised me up high, high into the sky.'²¹ This image is reminiscent of fairy tales, evoking the magical possibility of enchanted sleep, particularly in this latter quote, where it is combined with imagery from Jack and the Beanstalk and the possibility of reaching new worlds high above the earth. The desire to leave the current world for a new world is theoretically satisfied by the apocalypse. If Judeo-Christian texts featured the destruction of the old world and the

¹⁷ Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 256.

¹⁸ Noah Richler, *This is My Country, What's Yours?* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), p.170.

¹⁹ Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 28

²⁰ Coupland, *Life After God*, p. 253.

²¹ Ibid, p. 284.

revelation of the new, Coupland's apocalyptic visions are a literalisation of cultural exhaustion and the desire to evade the here and now.

The Northwest Coast is often associated with the tragic impulse of suicide, and it should be said that if one wishes for eternal sleep, the desire expressed is not altogether different from the suicidal urge. Though eternal sleep has deceptive fairytale connotations, perhaps with the imagined possibility of someone special waking the sleeper when circumstances have improved, the desire for eternal sleep and suicide have in common the urge to escape the world as it is. It is stylistically typical of Coupland to deal with serious issues without dwelling on their gravity, often seeming flippant, whimsical or humorous in his description of events of tragedy. Consequently, I propose that when he creates a character who desires eternal sleep, he is representing those people who have considered ending their own life. Whilst suicide is sadly a universal affliction, it is common to describe suicidal people as 'on the edge.' Similarly, literary sources such as McGill and Richard Hugo have linked suicide with reaching Northwest Coastal cities, teetering on the edge of America. McGill uses a quote from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* as his epigraph: 'Vancouver is the suicide capital of the country. You keep on going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off.'²² Hugo writes: 'in the 1930s Seattle was reputed to have a suicide rate second only to Berlin. One explanation went that suicides were people running away from themselves and their lives, and that after one reached Seattle there was no place left to run to.'²³ If one is running away from oneself, there is nowhere left to run. Yet the Northwest Coast's inhabitants, attempting to civilise an inhospitable landscape, might also be exhausted by their struggles and driven to suicide when this landscape becomes too much for them. Joel Garreau suggests that there are 'very few geographic reasons for cities to exist on the northern Pacific coast,' giving examples of the lack of naturally sheltered areas for use as harbours, the formidable barrier of the mountains that trap Northwest cities on the oceanic edge, and the fact that most land in this region is 'at a 45 degree angle to the horizontal.'²⁴ It is humanity's determination to defy nature and make a home on this inhospitable land that might be seen as

²² McGill, p. 252.

²³ Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), p. 13.

²⁴ Garreau, *The Nine nations of North America*, p. 258-259.

the cause of his exhaustion, a metaphorical exhaustion that causes people to desire eternal sleep, suicide or an apocalypse.

In Coupland's fiction, as I have suggested, it is human interference with the regional landscape that functions as the cause of apocalyptic anxieties rather than the tectonic instability alone. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, tectonic instability only manifests itself after apocalypse has occurred, when humanity has succumbed to the sleeping sickness and natural disasters are no longer a crisis but a reassertion of nature's power. Coupland narrates Linus' experience of the earth's post-apocalyptic movements:

The silent city, pocked with burns and sores and rashes is spread below him. In the midst of this serenity comes a surf-like roar and then a catastrophic *bang*. An image flashes through his mind: his drunken father slamming the dinner table with a fist. The ground booms and Mount Baker in the east erupts with a fire pole of lava shooting up into grey cabbagey Nagasaki ash clouds.²⁵

Despite the spectacle of natural supremacy the eruption is described by Coupland with reference to the power of humanity to cause harm, on a personal level with the reference to Linus' father, and on a global level with the reference to Nagasaki. This is further evidence of the end of nature as described by McKibben. Nature is represented by humans and defined by human experience.

It is likely that the fictional eruption of Mount Baker in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is inspired by Coupland's experience of the eruption of another of the region's volcanoes, Mount St Helens, which was considered a natural disaster in that it killed fifty-seven people and caused over a billion dollars damage.²⁶ The 1980 eruption was a rare instance in the Western world where nature overcame man's dominance of the landscape. In the film *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland links the two events. On his father's farm in Abbotsford, South Vancouver, Coupland looks South towards Mount Baker in Washington State. He tells his father that he still has recurring dreams that 'we're standing here and Mount Baker goes all Mount St Helens on us.'²⁷ In fictionalising such an occurrence and splicing it with imagery of nuclear disaster, Coupland is again active in creating an apocalyptic region. Mount Baker might be added to a

²⁵ Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 232.

²⁶ Robert I. Tilling, Lyn Topinka, and Donald A. Swanson, 'Eruptions of Mount St. Helens: Past, Present, and Future', *U.S. Geological Survey Special Interest Publication* (1990), <http://vulcan.wr.usgs.gov/Volcanoes/MSH/Publications/MSHPPF/MSH_past_present_future.html>

²⁷ *Souvenir of Canada*, Dir. Robin Neinstein (2005).

map of landmarks drawn from fictional and real events described in *Life of God*, the site of the Cannikin test and the imagined locations of nuclear annihilation.

In conclusion, it appears that Coupland uses his Vancouver fiction to re-examine the Northwest Coastal landscape and re-evaluate the role of humans in making it what it is today. Whilst implying that universal apocalyptic anxieties have grown from the experiences of the generation that grew up in the cold war and more recently from global technological developments, he asserts the role of local landscape as shaped by its inhabitants in creating apocalyptic visions and through his fiction maps an apocalyptic geography onto his own region of Vancouver and Northwest.