# In Absence of the Smoky God

## Sheffield was hit with a nuclear bomb

The city was devastated but the people lived on: some survived on the surface, others went underground. Time passed and things mutated: brains, eyes, language. Matt Stokes filmed the two groups in their environments. They never meet but when the films are shown together it appears, at times, that there is some kind of link between them. The clues are in the noises they make, which seem to organise into music. It could be a psychic development. Maybe it is a form of communication working via vibration. Or perhaps we are fantasising a new kind of music that does not yet exist.

## Is this science fiction?

Everything is science fiction, really, but Matt Stokes’ film draws on a range of particular sci-fi references. H.G. Wells deserves to be mentioned first. He wrote *The Time Machine* in 1896 when he was 29 years old, imagining an Earth in 802,701 AD populated by two races evolved from humans, the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi were small, fey surface dwellers who relaxed in crumbling buildings eating fruit, kind of like inbred aristocrats. The Morlocks were nasty ape-like albinos who tended ancient machinery below the surface, keeping the Eloi healthy, because they ate them.

There doesn’t appear to be an exploitative relationship between Overground and Underground in Matt Stokes’ film. There is a difference in the way they look and sound, obviously, but we don’t know anything about their community relations, not from the film at least. This means there’s plenty of space to project our own concerns on them. Are the Underground people, with their pots, pans and rag-tag clothing more like us? Or are we Overground people, wearing futuristic uniforms in the cold, stately light? What would we prefer? Science fiction always ends up asking questions about the present.

H.G. Wells was a working class utopian socialist who wrote *The Time Machine* to comment on class and capitalism in late Victorian Britain (my ex-girlfriend’s grandfather was his banker, which probably marks me out as an Eloi). Like many ‘hollow earth’ stories it uses an inhabited underworld to explore philosophy by dividing humanity on a vertical plane. The Christian concept of Hell is an old example, a fiery place deep in the earth. Why can’t everyone live together? Because some people are good and some bad: a system which works fine if a) good and bad exist and b) there’s an omnipotent being who’s up for the task of sorting. We can’t make those judgements about the people in Matt Stokes’ film, but it provokes memories of them. With its geometric forms and ritual atmosphere, Overground looks like a philosophic temple, post-scarcity, beyond emotion, whilst Underground looks makeshift and in need. And yet, there is something about the way the two worlds sound together that disturbs this line of thinking, that sends us elsewhere.

The ‘hollow earth’ book *The Smoky God* is not as judgemental about its denizens as *The Time Machine*. It was written in 1908 by an American, Willis George Emerson. The narrative pretends to be the testimony of Olaf Jansen, who sails into the Inner World with his dad. There he meets a race of massive men with full beards who live in a land of plenty where everyone travels on monorails and attends ‘temples of music’. All worship the ‘Smoky God’, an electrical cloud which glows in the inverse sky, literally and metaphorically forming the centre of the world. There are parallels between Matt Stokes’ film and the novel, especially the mention of temples of music, but no direct link. Its title provides an ancestor, a metaphor which is mutated by *Threads*, a film about another sort of God, the nuclear bomb, death.

Scripted by Barry Hines and directed by Mick Jackson, *Threads* was made in that most dystopian of years, 1984. The film depicts a nuclear assault on Sheffield which reduces the city to rubble and radioactive ash. In the first half life is normal, dreary even (although it’s exciting to watch because it’s Sheffield!). Then, after the bomb, the city becomes tortured and mangled, unrecognizable. Smoke pervades the air. Charred bodies lie everywhere. Those still living roll around vomiting with shock and the sickness brought about by the radiation and the dust. It is a damning film which ends in bleak despair. It demonstrates how close we are to cataclysm: just a matter of politics, buttons and triggers. You should certainly watch it, especially in 2014, on its thirtieth anniversary, with the earth still at war.

I can remember my father saying that if there was a nuclear war he hoped the blast would kill him, me and all the family. There was no way he wanted to survive, which is the premise for *In Absence of the Smoky God*. I don’t think dad feared what would be gone when the smoke dispersed, the loss of structure, possessions, the twentieth century. He was more worried about radiation, mutation and slow death. He didn’t want to be one of the people we see on the screens. Many other stories, films, products and even toys have been produced about these ‘survivors’. Two books that are important here are Russell Hoban’s 1980 novel, *Riddley Walker* and John Wyndham’s *The Chrysalids*, published in 1955. Both imagine a world in which humanity has changed radically in terms of society and culture. Although there are many echoes and memories of an old world, both are concerned with moving on, into a telepathic future.

## Is this Sheffield?

Let’s say this is not Sheffield, not for these people. Sheffield has been destroyed and what we see is something new in its place. Let’s say that they are not even people. That they are also ‘something new’. What, after all, makes a human? Matt Stokes’ film disturbs and comments on our cultural values of evolution and progress. What we see are telepathic mutants—or rather two collectives of telepathic mutants. One blue-eyed strain is incapable of feeling emotion, the other is a subterranean traveller-like people clinging on to the broken songs of their ancestors in wet tunnels. Have I fallen into an allegory of all powerful Übermensch and subhuman Untermensch? Again, science fiction brings out the present (and, in its tendency towards prophecy and allegory, a kind of fascism).

Perhaps within *In Absence of the Smoky God,* ideas of individuality and difference have been lost. Or even discarded. Perhaps we are looking at advanced, highly evolved once-were-humans who recognised something pretty cataclysmic happened and thought, or rather decided, in their own irradiated way, to breed out individuality and the self and get rid of competition and division on the basis of religion, wealth, ethnicity or gender in order to get on with the business of communal living. The Underground group elected to retain and develop their lower brain functions taking on the pain of loss, revelling in it, surrounding themselves by all that could be scavenged from the old world and relishing the old vowel sounds. The Overground group decided to focus on crystals, jumpsuits and manipulating atomic structures with the power of their minds. But really there aren’t two groups at all, they are just one group who has divided certain brain functions to maintain a harmony that won’t drop bombs on reasonably pleasant medium sized cities.

Or perhaps, you know, there are non-mutants left. Unlike *Threads*, perhaps the damage was minimal outside Sheffield and the only bomb dropped was the one that hit at the bottom of the Moor. The whole of Sheffield and the surrounding area was walled off as an irradiated death-trap and the rest of the country panic bought corned beef and tinned fruit before negotiating peace and then embarking on a remarkable reconciliation and forgiveness programme. Finally, after thirty years of world peace, curiosity got the better of everyone and robot camera crews were sent into Sheffield centre on jetpacks designed by Matt Stokes. The interesting thing is that both Overground and Underground groups totally ignored the cameras and continued to repeat a strange, ritual-like song, as if they were phantoms haunting a trauma. The resultant film was broadcast over the world and caused a sensation. Crowds flocked to viewing galleries much like Site. No one could explain it, although some began to suspect that this was a new form of science. Some even suggested that world peace could never have occurred without these mutants beaming it into everyone’s minds.

The strain and weariness evident in the faces of both groups is the manifestation of the knowledge that they must return to 2014. This is the secret churning inside: the bomb never dropped, mutations did not occur and the new society was never formed. Everyone you see is an actor. The Underground group all have names (Jim Ghedi, Devon Francis, Pete David, Lyn Hodnett, Oxo Foxo and Luke Poot). They were filmed in a disused railway tunnel in Sheffield whilst the Overground group (Angela Galvin, Nick Cox, Linda Lee Welch, Keitu Motlogwa) were filmed in the Castle House Co-Op canteen (which is delightful considering a) its modernist importance to Sheffield and b) it was named after Sheffield Castle! A psychogeographer could go mad with the echoes of power).

All are musicians or singers local to Sheffield. Some are from the Cathedral Choir, some are soul singers, others improvisers and folk singers. All worked with Ben Gaunt, a composer, collaborating on the music with Matt Stokes, who introduced story-telling techniques he learnt through his involvement in LARP (‘live action role playing’ or larping, a collective form of storytelling). Over the course of three workshops the singers experimented with sounds they’d not done before. As they did so, Matt Stokes introduced bits of narrative to help people find characters. This is how they all spent the summer of 2014, giving their time to another world stemming from disaster. Of course that disaster was terrifying, but the process of making this work was absorbing, imaginative and, in its own way, magical. Anyway, it’s through this—the creative process behind the piece—that we can say something about the art of Matt Stokes, who created a structure and filled it with people’s desire to work within it.

This desire is at the heart of the artwork and bequeaths it an enormous amount of power from a range of diverse parties: science fiction fans, musicians, larpers, Sheffield-lovers, Barry Hines aficionados and gambeson makers (the padded tunics worn by the Overground group are rehashed medieval gambesons, the undergarment worn under a suit of armour). There is the sparkle of fandom about the enterprise, which is probably why the film is so strange, rich and intense. There is little as serious as fandom. Fandom is, quite simply, a method twentieth century people developed to give consumer capitalism some dignity. That this particular film should be rooted in science-fiction fandom is apposite, for the roots of DIY culture––fanzines, conventions, BBS message boards, creative tributes—come from sci-fi fans. And it’s this generous spirit which is driving all that is good about the internet today (vernacular creativity, shared knowledge and flame wars).

In a way Matt Stokes makes art about the spirit which keeps networked, twenty-first century society going. And that is exactly what the Underground/Overground people of post-apocalyptic Sheffield are keening for, the summer they spent in an alternate universe making collaborative art. That this creative, magical time was, for many, a summer of war, protest and discord, is part of the pain and sorrow we see and hear. The legacy of the bomb is in us.

## Is this music?

Galleries curate obligatory encounters with meaning. As with festivals, whatever is experienced within them ‘has to’ mean something. Because of this they have an ambiguous relationship to interpretation. For some they are temples of over-reading, where over-interpretation is encouraged and celebrated. I have been given the opportunity to interpret, as much as I want, Matt Stokes’ work. This is a privilege denied to many, who don’t have the time or platform to do so. As a result, I have done my best to write something which provokes and stimulates further discussion and doesn’t attempt to draw lines under things. However, I do recognise that many people, myself included, do sometimes prefer not to have to think. Indeed, for many the definition of ‘good art’ is work which communicates a clear, stable meaning as quickly as possible. Work that requires a minimum of interpretation.

This desire for art which thinks for you is amplified by our relationship to information. Spurred by daily use of phones and the internet, our capacity for dealing with information has mutated to help us process the exponential amounts that we (and our computers and robots) are producing. Information, like other products of capitalism, is always different yet always the same. This makes the game of consuming run smoothly. Our info-mutation encourages a further adaptation: an aesthetic hankering after ‘transparency’ in everything from politics to art. This enables us to sidestep interpretation and binge on information, which in turn produces more: more language and more images, more noise and exclamation as our fingers glide and our thumb hits space-bar. Through this apparatus the mutation reaches out and connects with others, virtually, and in doing so traps our bodily interactions within miniature, distinct screens.

It’s not a terrible one, as mutations go, but it does mean that when we walk into the expanse of the gallery we expect the chamber to cohere immediately. *In Absence of the Smoky God* does not cohere immediately. Meaning is not transparent and the body pauses in the space, hungry for the radiation of communication. Insidiously, we want the artwork to speak, to organise itself into sense. The film does not alienate us from this possibility. With the references to science fiction and Sheffield, the mutants trapped in Matt Stokes’ screens are not free from context. There is enough to engage pop-cultural memories of nuclear holocaust. We think we know enough of the story to survive. In some ways then, this is a music video. The eye follows the images on the screen to help seduce the ear. And it is the soundtrack of *In Absence of the Smoky God* which carries the possibility of not having to process language, of transmitting knowledge without coherence and intent. It is the soundtrack of *In Absence of the Smoky God* that refuses to be heard transparently, passively, like information.

How do you move to this music? Or rather, what does this music move? A body, a collective? There is a sense that both groups, Underground and Overground are meeting in your head, or rather in everyone’s heads, because sound is a force that does not discriminate: it envelopes and unites everyone it passes through. Perhaps the two groups can hear each other, but only through your mutated mind, working together as one. The sounds are psychic and wounded, paradoxically complex whilst remaining somehow basic and onomatopoeic. Our own words and categories begin to let us down: we question whether this is actually music? We question the difference between music, noise and emotion?

The Underground seem so earthy and guttural as to emphasise our animal base. They evoke the ‘musilanguage’ of emotion and tenderness which Steven Jones suggested we inherited from breeding with Neanderthals 45,000 years ago, shortly before their ‘extinction’. The only thing I have heard that sounds remotely similar is a composition by the French composer Guy Reibel called *Langages Imaginaires* released in 1983 (a year before *Threads*!). He imagined the speech of early man mimicking animals and shadowing emotions, until words formed, bubbling up through the hot mud of group movement.

Here, we are at the other edge of time. What will, indeed, be the function of language, when the production of information ceases and we are faced with a new world empty of context? The sound of the Overground suggests a tonal knowledge about harmonics and vibration, sacred science. Like the mutants in *Riddley Walker* and *The Chrysalids* something new is being born from fading memories of the old world and the onomatopoeia of radiation itself. This is the sound of folk-science, the music of mutation, of the body. This is the sublime of the nuclear bomb, the sounds of shellshock, a ritual singing of the nervous system to exorcise and unite battlegrounds of home, mind, body.

The ear can receive the most complex of information in primitive form. It operates a far older register than the eye. The eye is more rational, attuned to seeking out divisions, patterns and texts. It is the organ of reading in contrast to the ear, which comprehends more than language: tone, emotion, cadence. Ask yourself: could you sing along with the mutants? Join in the song? And what if you did? What is the difference between speaker and listener, between Underground, Overground and the level horizon? Are there others singing with you, memories perhaps, of the buried folk song you can hear just an echo of. Or is there nothing there, nothing supernatural but the atoms vibrating in space: no demons, no ghosts, no humans, just you and the smoky god, in absence.

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Please get in touch to discuss *In Absence of the Smoky God*

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