

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

---

Volume 8  
Issue 3 *Summer*

Article 16

---

1977

## Anthony Burgess on "Apocalypse"

William M. Murray

Anthony Burgess

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Murray, William M. and Anthony Burgess. "Anthony Burgess on "Apocalypse"." *The Iowa Review* 8.3 (1977): 37-45. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2226>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

So, we are careful, remembering mainly  
The way he mastered a wall—he could do it.  
When you fall, rhubarb crunches like sugar.  
When I fall, the plaster vase shatters  
And the bulbs that the widow kept warm all winter  
Spill over flagstones, ready for planting.

## Anthony Burgess on “Apocalypse” / Interviewer: William M. Murray

*The following interview was taped in Anthony Burgess’s office in the English Department at The University of Iowa, October 27, 1975. A week prior to the interview, Burt Lancaster and Gian Carlo de Boscio, an Italian movie director, came to Iowa City to discuss a new film script with Mr. Burgess. Lancaster was interested in the life of Daniel Paul Schreber (Memoirs of a Mental Patient), and was trying to interest Burgess in doing a film script on Schreber’s life. Mr. Burgess was already working on a script for a disaster film. He was also projecting a book on New York, and thinking of George III as a subject for an opera. His symphony had been performed here at Iowa by the University Orchestra, and so music was very much on his mind.*

*The interview remains substantially unchanged except for minor revisions for clarity and continuity. Mr. Burgess sits at his desk in a practically bare office, smoking a Dutch cigar. He speaks in bursts of monolog, waits, and then takes off again.*

**M:** Mr. Burgess, I understand you are working at the moment on an apocalyptic theme. Are you thinking about apocalypse in terms of film or novel?

**B:** What happened was that I was approached by two big men in Paramount, or rather Universal, but Universal working along with Paramount for this particular project, Mr. Brown and Mr. Zanuck, who made a lot of money out of these disaster films, you know, *Earthquake* and *Jaws* and so on, and they want to make the ultimate disaster film about the end of the world.

*M:* The ultimate disaster film!

*B:* The ultimate disaster movie about the end of the world. Indeed, this is of course paradoxical, ironic, and typically Hollywood: End of the World I, II, and III. What we'll do after it, I don't know yet. It may not be my concern. And they approached me to see about the writing of this film chiefly because they were well aware that although they were drawing in a lot of money from the box office, with these earlier disaster films, they were not getting a good critical response because of lack of interest—lack of human interest—in the film, lack of character interest, and they thought that I might conceivably do some version in which the characters were interesting and the disaster itself was there in the background. Now, in the 1930s, I think about 1932, Philip Wylie, American novelist and, I think, a scientist in a way, wrote a book called *When Worlds Collide*, which Paramount has already turned into a film in the 1950s, a very bad film, about a couple of planets coming toward the earth, one planet remaining within orbit somewhere outside the earth and the other actually hitting the earth, and people were able to get off this planet of ours into this untouched planet before the other planet collided. This is a very improbable notion. It was useful for me to come to Iowa because I'd already met Brown and Zanuck in New York and I could see a very great man, Van Allen, who is here in Iowa, and he would be able to tell me actually what will happen if an asteroid or some other heavenly body comes into our orbit—what would happen in terms of the physical apocalypse. He was able to tell me what it would be like if the moon was smashed up and so forth. But this is mere window-dressing; this is mere background material. The interesting thing is how would people behave in these circumstances and how can we present little creatures behaving in a particular way. So I suppose my interest is not primarily in apocalypse at all in that sense, but rather in people facing any great disaster.

*M:* Are you thinking of disaster in terms of an accidental event?

*B:* More or less accidental. Although naturally in the film there's bound to be discussion as to the asteroid possibly coming because God decided he had had enough of man and wants to punish him or destroy him. A parallel with Noah and the Great Flood. And naturally one has to have some great Billy Graham kind of character who thinks this is so. This is one useful dramatic conflict to begin with.

*M:* Why are people fascinated by disaster films? Is there something special in the air now? We seem to be obsessed with disasters.

*B:* People are interested in disasters, especially here in America, because there hasn't been a great deal of disaster here of the kind that we've had in the West . . . I beg your pardon, in Europe . . . you know.

*M:* Not since 1929—here.

*B:* Yes, but you see one hasn't seen in New York in actual fact what one has seen often on film, the actual destruction of a city; in London, one saw the destruction of the city, it was actually happening, the Nazis were bombing the city and down the city went. And people were living underground in tube shelters; the fascination of that period of course is not the mode of destruction, but the way the people responded to destruction. In a sense it seems that a city is a kind of spiritual entity. It's not only approachable in terms of a kind of an accidental urban aggregate but in terms again of its soul, and I think possibly New York has this soul but has not had a chance to demonstrate it and show it exists; no disaster has been big enough yet to explore its soul. It's as though—this is a cognate of what I've already said—the time between the First World War and the Second World War was comparatively short—how many years was it?—from 1918 to 1939—about 20 years; well much more than 20 years have passed since 1945. Thirty years have passed and we have not had a major world war and people are going to see these films—they want disaster because history has told them in a sense at least that we always have disaster every 20 years or so and we haven't had disaster so we're going to assume that there will be no disaster. . . .

*M:* Do you think that as the year 2000 approaches we will get that sort of millennium apocalyptic Zeitgeist that always comes about? You know, the year 1000. . . .

*B:* Oh, yes, the only records we have, you know, of the last millennium are the records of Anglo-Saxon literature with Bishop Woolstone's observations on sin and his talk about the Danes being the Anti-Christ. The year 1000 has come, this is the end of the world, the Anti-Christ is here in the form of the invading Danes. Of course, a lot of people believed it. That will happen—the kind of chiliastic superstitions which sprang up. But I think it's too early for that now. People are rather more strongly influenced than one would have thought possible by 1984; of course, 1984 is coming closer. It is going to be like Orwell has pictured it. It is now. There's a sense that things are moving in a direction of some great showdown, but I think probably because we have not had a war. I think there is a genuine unconscious desire on the part of a lot of people to have a war. Unfortunately, we don't know who the enemy would be, but it's even been put forth, has it not, by the economists that the only viable twentieth-century economy is a war economy. And history seems to prove that. We in England in the 1930s with masses of unemployment, here in America too, we got out of our depression by preparing for war, eventually by having a war. There's an end to the peace banners, the genuine desire now on the part of man to go to war.

*M:* Of course this provides excitement in boring times.

*B:* The times are a bore. Korea wasn't a real war. Vietnam wasn't a real

war. But a great war with bombs dropping on great cities, it's a most stirring image. And of course there's a bit of sexual freedom; wars are very sexy. Very true; Aldous Huxley said, did he not, "battles and ruffles, wars and whores." And it's very true.

*M:* Tennyson, I believe, was stirred by the idea, also.

*B:* Tennyson saw all these things in "Locksley Hall." I think that's what it is. A desire for the kind of sensations and emotional experiences one associates with a major war or disaster. People like getting them at a kind of surrogate level from these films.

*M:* You're thinking in terms of disaster rather than apocalypse, then?

*B:* Disaster . . . well, it is apocalypse in that the earth is destroyed, but of course one can't take into account, one cannot envisage the destruction of man; it always has to be a human mind to envisage the destruction of a human mind. The whole thing is contradictory so we have the rather corny image of people getting away from the earth. I've been aware of a television series already on the issue, called "Space: 1999." It's a British series, I gather, so I discovered the other day, it would be the planet destroyed, people living on the moon. But man and the social structures that are typical of man must go on. We cannot envisage a situation in which this is not happening. I can't.

*M:* Do you think watching disaster movies or people's desire to watch them—has any moral effect at all?

*B:* Yes, I think it has a certain effect. I think people like to undergo the emotions at a second remove, and they get a certain titillation out of it. But I don't think they have any moral effect whatsoever. I don't think films of that nature ever do. I gather this week on television they are doing a program about Orson Welles' radio program.

*M:* Oh, yes, right, "War of the Worlds."

*B:* "War of the Worlds" did in fact cause a genuine panic in parts of America, but it wasn't followed by a desire to stop backfiring; people went on drinking and fornicating, I think people always do. And I don't think any film or any book of this kind can modify people's patterns of behavior—I don't think they ever do, never could do.

*M:* You'd think if you made a terrifying enough apocalyptic movie and somehow it were shown throughout the world. . . .

*B:* It might make 'em behave better? I can't believe it would. I think you might even find the opposite. We know that the bad time is going to come. So let's have a good time. I cannot even begin to think that any work of art has ever had, ever could have a moral effect on the auditor or the reader. I don't think it's ever happened yet, that a great work of art has had a moral effect—oh, possibly *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did, probably it's almost unique in

the annals of literature. Abraham Lincoln said that Mrs. Beecher's story was the actual cause of the war, that it was the little lady who made this great war.

*M:* You'll probably have to do some research if you're going to get involved in this kind of film. What kind of research do you envision doing?

*B:* Very little. We rely ultimately on what we know of people; it's an intuitive art, it doesn't involve research. I'd like to say at this point that I have written one novel about the future, in 1962, called *The Wanting Seed* which is, I think, now showing as a film in Italy. It's a Carlo Ponti with Sophia Loren in the lead, the female lead. *The Wanting Seed* was an attempt to envisage the future, not from the viewpoint of the distant future but the viewpoint of the fairly immediate present, the population explosion and the increasing difficulty in balancing the population with the food supply. This was more or less a comic attempt to show what might happen in the future, how the social patterns would change as the begetting of children became a taboo thing, how homosexuals would reach the top—they are already in England reaching the top—how people who castrate themselves would get the highest jobs of all, and what would happen when the balance was no longer capable of being sustained. The great famine followed by a return in a rational society to a kind of superstition which would take the form of a new passion for the Eucharist. The Eucharist is, of course, symbolic of the flesh-eating process, is the sublimation of it, in which through that process you stop sacrificing real human flesh, the initial process in reverse. After this I'm going back to the sacrifice of human flesh, the ingesting of human protein, and finally the arrangement or fabrication of a warlike situation with no enemy, in which human corpses could be brought about by fighting and these corpses could then be turned into sustenance, and thus the balance would be maintained. This is a possible answer. I put it forward comically in 1962, but I think increasingly we are becoming more and more fascinated by cannibalism as Pierce Paul Reed's novel, rather his study, of the Andes survivors shows. People are fascinated by cannibalism. I think we're going to get it before long. I honestly believe we are going to get it. And with little trouble. We don't know what we're eating most of the time, when we buy things in supermarkets we don't know what we've got. Oh, we get the breakdown, the ingredients on the can, it's usually something like "animal protein," "animal fat." What is the animal? We don't know. We're going to get things like "mensch." This is going to happen, I think.

*M:* When you talk of either disaster or apocalypse, you get quite mythopoeic about the whole thing.

*B:* It's not only books. . . .

M: Films—*Metropolis*,\* for example. This film is very much flirting with disaster as a mythopoeic event. The destruction of the city.

B: Very mythopoeic. But even visually the city of the future is “metropolis.” The city of the future was made back in 1926. I’ve been looking at some slides of New York that my wife has taken of present-day New York. These cannot touch these studio mockups that were made in *Metropolis*, they cannot touch them. This is the city of the future—we have to approach it through a myth, and myth means mostly film these days. Visually. Provided by film.

M: Most of the sets for that film were manufactured, weren’t they?

B: All done in the studio, all done with reduced models. Tiny cars going up and down, aeroplanes dangling and so forth. Yet I saw that film first in 1926 when I was a young boy, and that has been a very powerful part of the structure of my mind. Seeing it was traumatic; I was nine when I first saw it. You can imagine the impact it had on a child. My whole generation has been partly made by the film. So when we think of the future, I can’t help feeling in some measure it’s got to go back to *Metropolis* sooner or later.

M: When one thinks of writing disaster or apocalyptic movies one wants to make allegories or myths out of them. Lang made a modern fable in *Metropolis*. He was not against control, he was not against the master of *Metropolis*; he wanted a mediator between the machine and man.

B: Yes. He was quite content, I think, with that kind of message. He was very soft, I think, finally. But I do obviously believe that the kind of situation which I and probably many other authors attempt to envisage in fiction (like the one I just mentioned, *The Wanting Seed*), vaguely comic but also vaguely serious—is closer to contemporary disaster myth than the one in *Metropolis*. Suddenly one wakes up in the middle of a traffic stream in Rome or in London, and God we are overpopulated. These are all people. We can’t move. Or you get jammed in a tunnel and the fumes start coming in and you have a feeling you’ll be choked to death or asphyxiated. This is it, you see; we’re suffering already now, and then we read about the Andes survivors eating human flesh, with fascination—is this a way out, possibly? We turn against, at least I turn against the Vatican too because they don’t make much of the Eucharist any more, whereas one of the links between our own activism and possibly our future was in the Eucharist; I was taught as a child in the Catholic Church and you too, we’re eating the body and blood of Christ. With all these other bodies around . . .

---

\* Note: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* was shown while Mr. Burgess was in Iowa City. A piano was moved into the theater, and Mr. Burgess played background music for over two hours, the length of the movie. Mr. Burgess’s father used to earn his living playing piano for silent movies in Liverpool when Mr. Burgess was growing up.

*M:* I find it repugnant now.

*B:* Well, no, I find it less repugnant. I feel the church was missing the spirit of the age in making it symbolical. If you want it to be, Christ is there in spirit. But it's not the great, incredible thing that Christ, according to the Gospels, ordained—you're going to eat Me and you're going to drink My blood.

*M:* I know some homosexuals who really get a kick out of taking the Eucharist. . . .

*B:* Oh, sure they do. . . . I hadn't thought of that. . . . You've gotta accept the fact that society is changing, the fact that society has something to do with this particular issue, what we are going to eat. And as to sex, a full quiver is no longer desirable—sex is totally separated from generation. We have the prominent Unisex in which you can't tell whether you're looking at a boy or a girl from the back, and even from the front sometimes. You can't be like each other in sex, homosexuality is coming out in the open, both kinds, we'll end up with societies for castration, back to origin, back to the church fathers. And these are all patterns which stem from a feeling that it is obscene to beget children. That is a kind of the will not to live, of apocalyptic motif. The beginning.

*M:* Hardy in *Jude*.

*B:* Yes, very prophetic book.

*M:* If they are castrated early enough, they'll come up with nice tenor voices, counter-tenors that will last all their lives. Music will replace sex.

*B:* I should have thought of that. Choirs of castrati—highly likely; I hadn't thought of that.

*M:* You know the story of the lemmings . . . they go beserk? . . . old Norse word . . . commit mass suicide from stress . . . overpopulation. . . .

*B:* They're not *trying* to destroy themselves, they believe there's something out there they've got to get to. . . .

*M:* And at certain periods every four years . . . you know the lemmings breed like mad . . . well, they take off looking for a place where they can have some privacy and reduce stress . . . and of course, they end up in the sea. Idea for a disaster movie.

*B:* Yes, this has often haunted me. I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night thinking of lemmings, especially a film I saw, a BBC film, where millions of lemmings, rush into the sea. No, it does seem to me the kind of pattern of the future is going to manifest itself maybe in the sexual mores, it probably is already. That our view of the nineteenth-century mother bearing 25 children as a great virtuous woman is replaced by a thinner image of woman now, much thinner more masculine image of woman who is not going to beget children at all unless she wants to, in which sex is becoming a kind of game. Sex no longer leads us to the great imponder-



ables. Sex is a little game we play. And of course, it's lost a lot of its intensity; sex is not now an intensive experience. It's going to become less and less intense as time goes on. And it's going to get tied up with our sense of the population explosion. I think man will find a means, a way out of the population problem. One way will be through artificial wars; I think men have now artificial wars, and I think we're going to have an ingestion of human flesh. We'll get used to anything. That's more or less as far as I can go.

**M:** Infinitely adaptable man!

**B:** We must adapt. The most adaptable creature in the world. I don't think if we are hit by an asteroid or by another planet we are going to survive. However, I can't see the end of man. I suppose it's another way of saying I can't see the end of life. I can't see the end of any kind of life, but human life is the only self-conscious life we have, and this is so tremendous an achievement; evolution has been working towards it, the achievement of life understanding itself. We've achieved it to some extent. This cannot be destroyed.

**M:** They tell me there are people in California now buying little hideouts, you know, for \$20,000 or \$30,000; in the event of disaster they've got this little secret place where they can survive. Self-conscious life lets us look ahead . . . but we can't stop the disaster.

**B:** Well, of course, California is a great place for an apocalypse, isn't it? It always has been—well, not always, but it's always been associated in my mind with apocalypse and magic and astrology and the like. A few years ago I was in California and went to a great Thanksgiving dinner which was given for the local astrologers of whom there were several thousand amateur and professional, and the subject under discussion that night was the astrology of the line of the *Queen Elizabeth*, or rather the *Queen Mary*. The *Queen Mary* was treated as a human being and the zodiacal significance of when it was launched, its life, its death, and so forth. It was treated with immense seriousness. And this is the place where the prophets boom or bloom, it's the place of Aldous Huxley and yellow gold and it's the place where when a disaster is coming we'll know about it there.

**M:** One final question, Mr. Burgess. Why do you want to write a disaster film?

**B:** For the money, for the money. . . . We end up always with the concern or occupation with human beings. I suggested to these two great film moguls, that the film we ought to make is Daniel Defoe's *The Plague Year*, "The Year of the Plague," which is what disaster is all about, how the soul of a city survives, and you know the plague is a pretty bad disaster so it is as bad as any great planet zooming down from outer space, this disease facing you everywhere. You come home and you find your wife and chil-

dren have got it and you don't know what to do about it or what caused it, and can you survive as a human being, can you survive as a city? I think nobody has touched the genius of Defoe. I think it's worth going back to. Nobody really reads it; they read *Robinson Crusoe*, but not this. That is the film to make. This is how a city responds to a great plague. I can think of nothing more horrible than the great plague. Nor could Camus, of course, the same idea.

*M:* When one talks about disaster and apocalypse one can't help thinking about one's own end.

*B:* Well, there's one thing—we both have the same background—there's one thing we haven't touched and really daren't touch, and that is the real Christian end of the world as prophesied by Christ and as depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. I had the job a few months ago of giving a talk in the Sistine Chapel on the Day of Judgment. It was a batted-out thing; the Day of Judgment was behind me, you know, cameras were on us both, me and Michelangelo and Michelangelo and me, there you see so-and-so, and there you see so-and-so, and hoping I was pointing at the right direction. This was one image, it's the most terrible image in the world. This great muscular Christ who is no longer Christ but a Prometheus, a huge monster; his mother is begging him not to condemn these people. And all the saints around are saying "Don't, for Christ's sake . . ." and off they go, swirling down, Charon waiting with his boat, down to the fires and the pit. And of course that terrible sermon in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. That's the real apocalypse, that's the one thing we daren't believe, we feel it's incredible, impossible to believe. Supposing it were true? Supposing there were a Last Judgment, and there was Christ . . . there's no reason it shouldn't. Without heaven, hell is as Joyce described it. Catholics have this; Catholics have this all the time.

*M:* In time of apocalypse, you don't need the sense of judgment from the outside; if I were to think my life were going to end tomorrow, or the world was going to end, automatically I begin thinking—did I lead a good life . . . at a time of disaster, I imagine one judges oneself. One performs that day of judgment on oneself.

*B:* But don't you do that all the time. It may be so, Christianity may be the true religion! Jews feel this, Protestants feel this, about their own faith, that the Day of Judgment may happen; but if I ate meat on Friday when I was a child and was not sorry, that's going to be there . . . the judgment—why not? There's no essential logic in it; why should I not have this. It's a complex problem. Judgment and apocalypse. Intertwined.