

Surviving the Apocalypse: The Hero's Revolt Against Involuntary Conformity and Hive Mind in Stephen King's Cell

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to highlight the rebellion against involuntary conformity and the hive mind in Stephen King's apocalyptic horror novel Cell. A mysterious Pulse is broadcast over the global cell phone network and those who use the phones become vicious zombie-like beings, killing each other and destroying everything in their field of view. The "phoners" or "phone-crazies" involuntarily conform to the new norms and mimic the behaviour of birds. They flock together establishing telepathic communication among themselves. They possess a group mind or a hive mind which wipes out individuality and autonomy and they function as complementary units of a single brain. The hero Clayton Riddell and his team of survivors brave the odds and destroy a flock of phoners. This automatically makes them outcasts and they are targeted by the phoners to be executed. Clay teams up with other flock-killers and daringly uses the very same cell phone which led them to trouble, to eliminate the trouble, breaking the telepathic connection, thereby, uncaging humanity.

KEYWORDS : Apocalypse, cell phones, conformity, flocking, hive mind, telepathy.

INTRODUCTION

"Apocalypse is the eye of a needle through which we pass into a different world" – George Zebrowski.

Apocalypse is a disaster of great magnitude that engenders terror, loss, cataclysmic changes or destruction. It could precipitate damage to human civilization or obstruct the well-being of humankind through unseasonable incidents. Stephen King's novel *Cell* is an apocalyptic horror novel in which cell phones lead to chaos and destruction. It was published in 2006 and it presents the life of the protagonist Clayton Riddell, a graphic artist. Clay manages to secure a publishing deal for his graphic novel in Boston and is about to return to his hometown Kent Pond, Maine, when the disaster strikes and wipes out all remnants of normality. A mysterious Pulse is broadcast over the global cell phone network and those who use the phones become vicious zombie-like beings, killing each other and destroying everything that comes their way. Though Clay does not own a cell phone and remains unaffected, he has to flee towards safety to keep himself from getting killed. He meets fellow survivors like Thomas McCourt, Alice Maxwell, Charles Arda and Jordan who team up against the phoners who begin to flock together and communicate through telepathy. Through combined efforts, the team led by Clay manage to destroy a flock of phoners. Their joy is short-lived when they realise that the phoners have marked them as outcasts and want to execute them. The only thing that keeps Clay going is his quest for his son Johnny Riddell who resides at Kent Pond with his estranged wife Rachel. The team endures a lot of tests and trials, and after suffering a few losses, finally manages to annihilate the flock and break their telepathic connection. Clay is reunited with his son but is heartbroken to find out that he has also become one of the phoners. The hero does not give up but works to revive his son from the odd state.

The Pulse

The Pulse begins at 3:03 p.m. Eastern Standard Time when Clay is waiting in line for his turn to buy an ice cream from an ice cream truck. The ones standing before him begin to attack and destroy each other as they are hit by the Pulse through their phones. They also try to grab and kill the man selling the ice cream. Clay witnesses many more violent incidents which turn the city into a bloodbath. There are screams and phone-crazies everywhere and the few who are untouched by the Pulse try to make it out alive. The phoners or phone-crazies utter nonsensical words and it seems as though their vocabulary had been wiped clean. “Eyelah! He cried. Eeelah-eyelah-a-babbalah naz! A-babbalah why? A-bunnaloo coy? Kazzalah! Kazzalah-CAN! Fie! SHY- fie!” (King 24). Clay meets a fellow survivor Thomas McCourt, a short man with gold-rimmed spectacles and later together they save Alice Maxwell a fifteen-year-old who joins them in their adventure. The phoners attack and kill each other and those that remain unaffected by the Pulse.

Telepathy and Group Mind

On keen observation, the normies are able to decipher that after the Pulse the phoners are reduced to telepathically connected individuals who do not require words to communicate with each other. The word ‘telepathy’ is derived from Greek where ‘*tele*’ means ‘distant’ and ‘*patheia*’ stands for ‘perception’ or ‘feeling’. It is defined as “the purported, vicarious transmission of information from one person’s mind to another’s without using any known human sensory channels or physical interaction” (Hamilton 121). The phoners seem to possess a group mind which results in the apparent uniformity of individuals’ emotional, cognitive, and behavioural reactions. The phoners are also forced to renounce their control over their minds. Their “group mind” is programmed and governed by an unidentifiable source which structures their behaviour patterns. “The group mind also known as hive mind is where multiple minds, are connected to form a single, [collective consciousness](#) or collective [intelligence](#)” (Sotala, and Valpola). The phoners do not step forward on their own volition to adhere to the pattern of the programming but are involuntarily lured to perform according to the commands given.

The Evolution of the Phoners

The demeanour of the phoners is dynamic and evolves with the progression of the plot. The initially bloodthirsty and savage phoners eventually calm down and begin to flock together as birds do. Metaphorically, the Pulse transforms the phoners into a flock of diurnal birds that remain active in the daytime and roost together at night. The phoners move around in groups during the day and lie together in large spaces to rest for the night. They communicate through their flock minds mimicking the strategy of the birds to make their actions and directions clear.

‘But haven’t you ever noticed the way birds are, especially in the spring and fall?’ Clay asked. ‘You must have. They’ll all light in the same tree or along the same telephone wire – ‘Sometimes so many they make it sag,’ Alice said. Then they all fly at once.... told us it is a flock-mind thing, like ants all going out from a hill or bees from a hive.’ “The flock swoops right or left, all at the same time, and the individual birds never hit each other,’ Clay said. (King 131, 132).

The murmuration of the phoners involves forming a neat herringbone pattern and performing an orderly migration towards the east and then towards the west later in the day. The phoners keep upgrading themselves and collect boom boxes to listen to music at night. There is only one audio system with a CD playing music. The speakers are connected to the system without wires and the phoners transmit the same music through their mouths. Soon they are able to differentiate between phoners and normies and attack only the normies who come their way. They know that there is safety in numbers and so they force the conversion of normies into phoners. Their prime directive is survival and the phoners are willing to go above and beyond to entice the clueless. The naïve normies are neither informed of the purpose of the conversion nor are allowed to understand the consequences. They are bamboozled into conforming to the system of the phoners. Conformity is behaving in the same manner as another person does. Collins dictionary defines conformity as “the agreement, accordance, compliance or acquiescence with rules or patterns of a system.” “Conformity is the process whereby one changes one’s own beliefs, attitudes, actions, or perceptions to harmonise with those that are practised by groups to which the person belongs or desires to be a part or by groups whose approval is sought.” (Levine). The involuntary conformity of the phoners in the novel eradicates autonomy and dehumanises them. They are driven by the

programmed odd state, which is a thorough annihilation of individuality. They are no longer people with different personalities and idiosyncrasies but serve as the functioning units of a single organism. “Because what’s building up in those people out there... only they’re no longer people, what’s building up is – ‘It’s a single organism,’” (King 221).

The War to Regain Autonomy

Clay’s team reviews the predicament and agrees to take a stand against the phoners and save the rest of the human race who can function as autonomous individuals. “The end approaches but the apocalypse is long-lived,” says Jacques Derrida. Rebellion against involuntary conformity and hive mind compels the characters to endure many tests and misfortunes. The first act of rebellion against the phoners occurs when they reside in Gaiten Academy, a preparatory school. The Head of the School, Charles Ardai and the last student of the academy, Jordan, try to convince Alice, Tom and Clay to destroy the group of phoners that flock together at night at the Gaiten Academy football field. Though initially reluctant, Clay and Tom observe the growing intelligence and psychic abilities of the flock mind and the uneasiness caused motivates them to comply. Clay and Tom find two propane tankers in the gas station nearby and decide to torch the Gaiten Academy flock using them. Clay and Tom drive the tankers closer to the field and then Clay takes aim at one of the tankers and with his .45 handgun directs a shot towards it. The tankers burst into flames roasting the flock that begins to sound a group cry of agony.

That was when the cry rose, only now it wasn’t coming from Glen Falls or Littleton ten miles away. It was coming from right behind them. Nor was there anything spectral or wraithlike about it. It was a cry of agony, the scream of something – a single entity, and *aware*, Clay was certain of it – that had awakened from deep sleep to find it was burning alive. (King 250).

Becoming outcasts or being marked as untouchables after the torching is the last thing the flock-killers desire and they get stupefied when they learn about it. The phoners want them to get going towards Kashwakamak in the north to serve justice for the murder.

The Psionics

The psionic powers of the phoners keep progressing and soon are able to levitate. ‘Primates give rise to man, man gives rise to phoners, phoners give rise to levitating telepaths with Tourette’s syndrome. Evolution complete.’ (King 396). The ability to levitate helps the phoners bring Clay’s team together even when Tom and the others separate from Clay and go their separate ways. The phoners are determined to actualise their plan and coax Tom and other normies through dreams. A dreamlike state is induced and they are unable to distinguish between the real and virtual. In the dreams they find themselves enjoying a hearty Thanksgiving-kind of meal followed by dancing and walking. In the real world, they are walking in a semi-conscious state to Kashwakamak. They are mentally nudged to adhere to the plans of the phoners and they involuntarily submit to their schemes. “‘Wearing us out wasn’t all they wanted,’ Tom said. ‘Even turning us back north wasn’t all they wanted. They also wanted us all together again.’” (King 380).

The phoners bring all the flock-killers together and now the team has additional members like Denise Link, Ray Huizenga and Daniel Hartwick who had previously destroyed another flock. The phoners use their telepathic abilities to push the normies into throwing away all their weapons. The normies are unable to resist the physical urge to get rid of their guns and then find it impossible to prevent themselves from getting into a school bus and driving to the Kashwakamak Hall. The lack of alternatives and erasure of resistance, pave the way for Clay and his team to succumb to the commands of the phoners and conform without friction.

The Final Challenge

The ace up their sleeve is Clay’s possession of a cell phone. The cell phone is given to Clay by Ray before killing himself. Ray has paired the phone with a bomb in the school bus used to reach Kashwakamak. Clay is also given a number to dial that would detonate the bomb. When they reach the destined Kashwakamak Hall, they are kept locked for the night and are set to be executed the following morning. Clay and the other normies dare to take one final risk to regain their freedom. Clay breaks one of the windows after much effort and boosts Jordan outside the hall. Because the attempt is at night most of the phoners are inactive and this helps Jordan reach the school bus and locate the cell phone. Jordan then switches on the phone allowing the call to be made. He also drives the school bus closer to where the phoners’ population is the most concentrated and then

returns to the hall.

The Impact of the Blast

With the arrival of the most crucial moment that would decide the fate of the normies, Clay dials the numbers and the bomb explodes. Most of the phoners there get torn into pieces and are roasted by the spreading fire. After the blast, the phoners lose their telepathic connections. "The flock itself had become a raw meatloaf of dead and dying phoners. Their telepathy had broken down, but the survivors could still scream, and they filled the night with their cries." (King 446). The rest of the phoners stagger towards the woods with a vacant mind and show no interest in the normies. Though they lose the hive mind, they are not restored to normal autonomous functioning. Without groupthink to guide their actions they are most likely to die of exposure to the cold weather. Thus, the normies cleanse the world of phoners and dethrone the vile forces that attempted to rule the world. The most laudable action is the protagonist Clay's usage of the cell phone, which once served as the source of threat and trouble to put an end to the troubles caused by it. Clay is happy about their triumph and brims with elation when his sincere hunt for Johnny leads him to his beloved son even though he finds him in a warped state.

Conclusion

The hero and his team of normies secure a victory befitting their efforts over the phoners and wipe away the threat to autonomy and individuality from the face of the earth. They permanently invalidate the malicious intentions of the creators of the Pulse and audaciously expunge the hive mind and involuntary conformity which seeks to blur the lines between humans and creatures of the air.

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