

Review: Toronto New Wave Cinema and the Anarchist-Apocalypse by David Christopher

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David Christopher. *Toronto New Wave Cinema and the Anarchist-Apocalypse*. Manchester UP, 2025. \$130.

As David Christopher notes in the opening of *Toronto New Wave Cinema and the Anarchist-Apocalypse*, “Chances are you’ve never heard of the Toronto New Wave (TNW)” (1). Maybe you’ve never thought much about the affinities between apocalyptic and anarchist philosophies either. Christopher’s book develops a comparison between the rhetorical strategies and thematic engagements of apocalyptic and anarchist thought to establish their influence on TNW directors such as David Cronenberg, Bruce LaBruce, and Patricia Rozema, and provides a new perspective on the ways in which their films critique the patriarchal social formations of their historical moments. The book is very complex and ambitious as it represents an attempt to reevaluate not only anarchist political philosophy and its relevance as a critical framework, but also the legacy of TNW cinema in contemporary scholarship.

Christopher argues that viewing the TNW through the lens of an anarchist-apocalyptic framework provides a sense of conceptual unity for a group of 1980s-1990s filmmakers whose only concrete similarity is often taken to be the city of Toronto. Instead, Christopher argues that there is a coherent set of anarchist-apocalyptic themes and conventions that can be used to characterize TNW films and filmmaking. Generally speaking, Christopher defines “anarchist-apocalyptic” as the combination of an anarchist rejection of authority, hierarchy, and government power with a ceaseless, apocalyptic drive to unmask repressive ideological structures, destroy the status quo, and imagine alternative social systems. He utilizes existing TNW film scholarship alongside original research into anarchist philosophy, formal analysis of TNW films, and his own interviews with TNW filmmakers to argue that this anarchist-apocalyptic dimension is an inherent property of the TNW as a movement. As much as cementing the legacy of the TNW as an influential alternative film movement, he is also clearly interested in demonstrating the relevance of an anarchist-apocalyptic analytical framework for film studies today.

Christopher’s book begins with chapters on two of the most prominent members of the TNW, David Cronenberg and Don McKellar, and later follows a more thematic organization with chapters on technology, class, sexuality, and gender. Needless to say, each of the themes is inflected by

an anarchist reading of the films and critical literature. Like much of the existing scholarship on the TNW, Cronenberg is treated as the central figure of the movement. Christopher goes further to argue that it was Cronenberg's early work that exhibited the anarchist-apocalyptic element that would come to define the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations of subsequent TNW filmmakers. Unlike the following chapters on Peter Mettler, Don McKellar, and Vincenzo Natali, the Cronenberg chapter does not contain an original interview with the filmmaker. This is unfortunate considering how foundational Cronenberg is taken to be for the development of both the TNW and an anarchist-apocalyptic aesthetic. However, Christopher does engage with a wealth of secondary scholarship on Cronenberg and a compelling analysis of Cronenberg's earlier, more obscure films from the 1960s and 70s. Christopher's ability to bring out the complexity of difficult, unsettling, and often deliberately repulsive works is one of the great strengths of this book as a whole.

After developing the anarchist-apocalyptic aesthetic through Cronenberg's early works, Christopher turns to his influence on McKellar (chapter 2) and Mettler (chapter 3). This influence is taken to be both conventional and philosophical, and Christopher employs a comparative reading of their filmmaking techniques and thematic engagements. Where chapter 2 establishes the relationship between McKellar's films and anxieties surrounding nuclear proliferation, the third chapter compares Mettler's and Cronenberg's anarchist critique of technology. In each chapter, there is an effort to understand how the apocalypse represents not only a destructive, existential threat, but also an opportunity for the destabilization of social hierarchies and progressive revaluation of the status quo. Christopher's argument is especially strong at the end of his third chapter when he contrasts the treatment of virtual reality in Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) with *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999). Where *The Matrix* maintains a more or less clear distinction between the real and virtual world, Christopher writes that *eXistenZ* complicates this distinction in favour of an "ongoing state of apocalypse" in which the blurring of boundaries promises a form of social emancipation (102). Such comparisons vividly demonstrate the significance of the TNW's various representations of the apocalypse and provide a compelling foil to more mainstream preoccupations with existential threats.

Another argument Christopher makes throughout his book is that the TNW represents a critique of patriarchal film conventions and social formations. While the earlier chapters of the book illustrate how Cronenberg, McKellar, and Mettler work to unsettle the authority of their male protagonists and authority figures, it is in chapter 4 and onwards that Christopher makes his most sustained arguments for the connection between an anarchist-apocalyptic aesthetic and the critique of patriarchy on a thematic level. In chapter 4, he looks at Vincenzo Natali's horror-sci-fi film *Cube* (1997), as well as his unreleased screenplay adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) to connect the critique of technology even more explicitly with a critique of patriarchal authority. Chapter 5 explores the queering of the apocalypse through Bruce LaBruce's *LA Zombie* (2010). Here, Christopher develops LaBruce's more ambivalent representation of the apocalypse, which functions as both a metaphor for the oppression of the gay community and a revelatory event aimed at denaturalizing patriarchal normativity (153). Chapter 6 turns to Jeremy Podeswa, Rozema, and LaBruce to characterize their engagements with gender as an apocalyptic critique of patriarchal social relations. The final chapter examines the afterlife of the TNW's anarchist-apocalyptic propensities post-9/11. Christopher draws a comparison between mainstream American cinema and TNW filmmakers to illustrate their continued critique of patriarchal authority via representations of the apocalypse.

Christopher's book is a significant revision of the legacy and canon of the TNW. It also develops a unique analytical framework for understanding the TNW and film studies more generally. At times, his efforts to derive a distinctly anarchist political commitment from the TNW treatment of the apocalypse can lead to somewhat deterministic interpretations of the films. The language and theoretical engagements of the book are also quite complex, so it may not be well suited for students without a background in film studies. That said, Christopher brings together a great plurality of primary and secondary literature, as well as a keen eye for the ostensibly strange and deviant, making this book an invaluable resource for those looking to put together a lecture or course on the TNW. His original research into the apocalyptic rhetoric of anarchist political philosophy is also a unique and timely contribution. He generously includes a summary of his preliminary findings at the end of his book for those interested in tracing the genealogy of this connection to specific anarchist thinkers and the broader history of anarchist political thought. All told, Christopher brings together the TNW, anarchism, and the apocalypse in a multifaceted and ambitious book that sheds a new light on how we have and continue to imagine the transformative potential of social instability and crisis.

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