

Back To No Future

Tales From the Post-Apocalypse

M.E.K.A.N.

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The post-apocalyptic game is a starting point for learning the magic trick of not believing in the future and enjoying the electrifying shiver of hopelessness.

The end is nigh!

“Apocalypse is looming! We are on the verge of an irreversible catastrophe and must do anything in our power to avoid it! This is possibly the most important crisis humanity has ever faced!” In the system of power/knowledge we’ve learned to call “modernity”, such calls have always been strident. Christian apocalyptic eschatology nests inside the apparatuses of “modern rationality” and the bourgeois world bubbles with millenarian ardour.

That the end of the world is predestined is a common narrative in most mythologies. However, unlike older mythologies, bourgeois eschatology clings to the hope of avoiding world destruction. It pushes all of us ahead on its motorway of living death using the cattle prod of the future.

“There is still hope if we act together now!” they tell us. “Let us restructure some elements of our practices and invest in the world’s tomorrow!” they argue. Are those arguments obtuse and hypocritical? Sure. But what is worse is that they close all territories for living, except for the most boring ones.

Let me then not just recast the dices of apocalyptic prophecy but throw them out of orbit with a final revelation: “In truth I tell you that there is no future. The doom of the current world is unavoidable. Not because it is fated by a divinity. But because the prophecy has been fulfilled a long time ago.”

The living dead

“What you most fear has already happened¹”. This oracular claim is an interesting beginning for this story. On one hand it suggests that the bourgeois subject is governed by fear, by a mix of anxiety and denial which paralyses them in a “predestined” form of being, in a solemn, fossilised pose that, through its rigidity, tries to deny the kernel of uncertainty and unravelling that nests at the core of any identity, reality, truth or system. This calcified being cries: “This is who I am! This is what/how things are!” On the other hand, the oracular claim suggests that the way out of this rigor mortis is accepting the loss of “something” that we never had: certainty, control, fullness, bliss, etc. or, indeed, a future.

So, this story starts by letting go of something we never had: the possibility of progress, fulfilment, excitement, emancipation or freedom within modernity. In this sense, the apocalypse² of the modern world has already happened: all its potentialities for creating exciting ecosystems and forms of life are long dead, “dead” in the way a metaphor is dead, an imagination is dead, a passion is dead, dead the way leaves of lettuce in a plastic box drowsed in carbon dioxide under

¹ This is a paraphrasing of Lacan, a celebrity French psychoanalyst from the past century. He was referring to something that Freudian psychoanalysis calls “castration”, the loss of the phallus, the artefact that grants fullness, power and enjoyment (and which one never had to start with). Psychoanalysis is a terrible institution, often spilling into fascisms; I see no problem in looting its mouldy coffers in search for something useful.

² “Apocalypse” actually means “revelation”, usually by divine messengers. The revelation’s content can be anything. But I will stay faithful to the sense given to “apocalypse” by Western pop culture, that of “end of the world as we know it”.

supermarket neon lights are dead³. When precisely did they die? It does not matter, sometime along the history of “modernity”, most probably at the very moment when modernity started⁴.

The only thing that modern power regimes currently manage to do is jolt this defunct reality into spasms that mimic life with regular injections of terror and paranoia; corset it in an exoskeleton of capillary control; and stuff its inhabitants with spectacular pleasures and the promise of a better future. Meanwhile, behind the faked orgasms of the consumption and leisure society breed lifeless forms of life, patented and standardised like GM seeds.

Capitalism is dead, long live capitalism!

While the modern-colonial and liberal-capitalist⁵ regimes’ possibilities for creating forms of life that are not dead or, more accurately, that are not undead, are exhausted, they are also unsurpassable. No other mass-governing regime can supersede liberal-capitalism’s ability to generate forms of life, even if these are zombies. That is: even if to some of us the liberal-capitalist dispositions of democracy, freedom, identity, happiness and prosperity seem carceral, no mass governing system can improve on them. This is because after modernity, liberalism, capitalism and Hollywood, any form of centralised governing must provide its subjects with bourgeois models of sovereignty, desire and intensity: the ecstasies of consumption, the sadistic frissons of inequality, the electric shocks of the Spectacle (including the Spectacle of democracy), the murderous passions of identitarianism and the self-deceiving compulsions of hope.

The only avenue left for those dreaming of mass regimes of power is to join the living death of the bourgeois order. And, I would add, the only territory left for those dreaming up a revolutionary paradise are the charred fields of martyrdom, ritual and dogma. For the few left that plot their desertion from this reality, there might be a more exciting prospect: life in the post-apocalypse.

You forgot that you’re dead?

Before blissfully enjoying the hopelessness of the post-apocalypse, though, one needs to deal with the bourgeois order’s predicament: it is dead but does not yet realise it. Its corpse keeps moving on blindly, loosing flesh, limbs and entrails, following idiotic appetites, a planetary El Cid, lifeless and tethered to its rabid steam horse, running after the carrot of excitement, recurrently collapsing and in need of exorbitant, Frankenstein-like reanimation.

The governors and experts struggle together to keep this decaying body erect and demonstrate its vitality. They engage with obsessive tenacity in megalithic projects of reformation, urbanisation, modernisation and de- and re-industrialisation, in ruthless transitions towards the “new and improved”. The responsible citizens, bred for the system, focus on their mass-produced “needs”, “desires” and “self-affirmation”, ready to mercilessly destroy anyone that stands in the way of their (illusory) satisfaction.

³ Lauren Berlan came up with this usage of “dead”.

⁴ This moment of origin is itself a fantasmatic one; but I will stop counting the twists of this tragic story of modernity, you got the gist.

⁵ Modernity, colonialism, capitalism and liberalism are not the same thing, but they belong to the same continuum, sharing intimate relations of filiation, co-parenting, symbiosis, fusion and mutual potentiation. For the purposes of this story it is enough to say that in the end, colonialism, modernity, liberalism and capitalism seem to have merged into one discursive and governmental ultra-body, lifeless but irrepressible.

This is the age of turbo-fascisms and will be convulsing for a long time.

Disintegration and hopelessness

To assassinate dominant reality, at least in one's own psycho-cosmos, one has no other way but embracing post-apocalyptic disintegration that splinters the myth of social integration, unity, harmony and coordination into myriads of incompatible realities that cannot be re-ordered, centralised or administered into one governable entity. The post-apocalypse is a world broken into pieces impossible to glue back together and uninterested in the lure of tomorrow. It ignores the blackmail of the future ("the present is a stepping stone towards the future"), spits on hope ("things will get better") and is immune to the call of duty ("do the right thing for the world and for their children"). But it has nothing desperate or resigned about it. Once the projection in the future is abolished and the existing starts representing that which is, rather than a failed moment towards that which should be, one is free of guilt, decency and the demands of the cause.

Most incarnations of the dominant reality are revulsive; but rather than perceiving this reality as one entity⁶, the post-apocalyptic dweller looks for what is not fully dead and putrid within it. In the post-apocalypse one can enjoy an enclave of anomaly, a pirate cove or a strange event as worlds in themselves, with peculiar oscillations and destinies, rather than reducing them to an instrument in the global orchestra of capitalism or an irrelevant exception soon to be erased. Each encounter with the unusual and abnormal is, in the post-apocalypse, a source of fascination and not something to be measured against the norm of "revolution", "insurrection" or whatever and found lacking. The cartography of the post-apocalypse takes the form of constellations of weird worlds, rather than that of a technical manual for bringing on "systemic change" or of a chronicle of the monolithic universe of liberal-capitalism.

Without the deadline of impending doom or salvation, one gives up the exhausting contortions they go through to preserve crumbs of the bourgeois world, even if these contortions are performed in the name of justice, of emancipating someone else ("the oppressed, the exploited, etc."). In the post-apocalypse, no one does politics in the name or for the salvation of a distant other. One acts for themselves and their friends. No one does maintenance and resuscitation work because there is nothing to save or hold on to, nothing left alive in that which the lovers of order call "the social". Only stuff that needs to be, finally, laid in its grave.

The post-apocalypse is a practice of the now, of the complex intensities that hide in every coil and knot of the moment. Hopelessness means that there is nothing else to do but invent and build one's reality, now: one's spaces and territories, one's battles, one's fetishes, cosmologies, mythologies and parties, one's ecosystems and economies (including of desire).

As time is derailed from the rigid railway of modernity ("towards the future!") and starts splitting, curling and sprouting weird arabesques in a plane of perpetual simultaneity, there is no moment to waste; but there is finally time to stop, reconsider and reinvent that which seemed self-evident. As space is freed from being a suffocating cubicle in the train towards some fixed destination or another and becomes an endless plane extending in all directions without absolute

⁶ This tendency to perceive reality as a unitary element is equally present in the historical imagination of liberalism, which thinks of the succession of "eras", "epochs" or "times" and in that of Marxism, which thinks of the succession of "systems of production". In this thinking, "reality" resembles the little boxes in a modern calendar, each following the preceding one and representing a step towards the next one, until the paradise (utopian liberal-capitalism or communism).

landmarks, with the baffling constancy of true disorder⁷, one is free to err towards manifold horizons in search for intensities, leaving behind the fear of getting lost.

⁷ In modernity “difference” is the basic tool of governing. When there is no difference that the governing eye can perceive it goes blind, moves hysterically without being able to grasp on to anything and demands from its official cartographers to create names, borders, populations, typologies, categories, identities, etc. (as evident, for example, in the colonial/apartheid dispositifs of governing).

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