

# Narratives of Apocalypse

Naomi Richman explores the cultural history of apocalyptic thought and how it can guide us in imagining a better future.

Naomi Richman

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Fantasies of euphoric reunions over summer barbecues are quickly giving way to the realisation that significant restrictions on our way of life are set to continue into an indefinite future. Questions still hang in the air about the effectiveness of antibody testing on Covid-19 recoverees and numerous public figures have warned that we are some time away from rolling out an effective vaccine on a global scale. Several companies have pre-emptively cancelled all large in-person events until 2021; a sign that for many of us, the only planning we can do effectively is to resist planning full stop. All these dark prophesies and, crucially, this inability to predict the future and strategise accordingly can easily give rise to a sense of doom – a pit in the stomach that sends a signal to the brain that the world just might be about to end. But where does this narrative of apocalypse come from, and why does it seem to resonate so profoundly with experiences of catastrophe? In my last blogpost, I offered some brief reflections on the metaphors and imagery of the virus as an ‘enemy’. Here, I will extend this line of thought by considering how this discourse of spiritual warfare belongs to the ancient genre of apocalyptic thought that we readily resurrect – for some, albeit on secular terms – in times of crisis.

Apocalypse, meaning ‘revelation’ or ‘unveiling’, has its conceptual roots in ancient Jewish and Christian literature. The prophetic imaginings offered in texts such as the Book of Daniel, as well as lesser known, non-canonical writings such as the Apocalypses of John and Thomas, brokered an association between visions of the last days and the emergence of an idealistic societal order in which God’s original design for creation would be reinstated. Jewish thought in general developed a linear notion of time as unfolding within ‘history’, consecrating particular events and weaving them into the fabric of the human story. At its most basic, the Hebrew Bible tells the tale of a transcendent God who sets into motion the wheels of time by creating the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), interceding at opportune moments within history thereafter. By this logic, if history has a beginning, then it must have an ending too.

As new Christian philosophies began to evolve in the wake of Jesus’ death, they sought to digest theologically the implications of his sacrifice on the history of creation. Jesus’ life and death on the cross were historical events, and came to be seen as prophesied by the apocalyptic visions of the figure Isaiah, as described in the Old Testament. What’s more, Jesus’ own parables and sayings had been infused with predictions of the imminent arrival of the ‘Kingdom of God’ and warnings of apocalyptic judgment. His message therefore heralded the future as much as it recalled the past. Christians gradually came to realise that the significance of Jesus’ ministry and, most crucially, his death on the cross only really made sense when understood as part of a much broader eschatological narrative, aligning Genesis with Revelation, in one great spiritual-human timeline. And so the greater the perceived need for cosmic redemption, the more value that could be attributed to Jesus’ atonement. The two became self-supporting pillars of the Christian vision of history.

Apocalyptic thought became further cemented in the European historical imagination throughout the calamities of the Middle Ages. In periods of plague, as well as



J. M. W. Turner, *The Deluge*.

Wikicommons

famine and political upheaval more generally, millenarian predictions of doom would unfailingly burst onto the scenes. During the Black Death, a preoccupation with flagellation gripped towns across Europe, as a method of absolving society of the transgressions that had prompted God to unleash his wrath in the first place. Thousands of flagellants took to undertaking pilgrimages, removing their clothes upon arrival at a church and performing rites that involved beating themselves bloody with scourges embedded with iron spikes (as well as massacring Jews). Episodes of rapid social change fostered an atmosphere of uncertainty that encouraged key features of the apocalyptic narrative to be sought out and developed further – a vision of the universe as embroiled in a battle between two forces, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, which would reach fever pitch and culminate in a Day of Judgment. Steered by a messianic figure at the helm, destruction would ultimately give way to paradisiac regeneration.

It is not difficult to spot where and when these tropes resurface today, during times of trouble or rapid change. Public discourse is regularly drawn into reflecting on the moral implications of catastrophes, what this means for our existential condition, and also to inscribing messianic qualities onto emerging popular voices. Narratives of apocalypse constitute the central script for the Western world in times of crisis, serving as the cultural template to which our experiences and reading of the world readily conform. And the effectiveness of processes of globalisation has allowed for this compelling discourse to become totalising both in its reach, as well as in its explanatory function. Much of the visual content that makes up our imaginings of apocalypse today is furnished by Hollywood, where capitalising on doomsday fears is a highly profitable enterprise. Apocalypse is not only a discrete genre but also pervades through many other genres, from sci-fi to political drama. The forms we imagine this apocalypse will take have also considerably expanded in the last half-century; alien invasion, environmental collapse, nuclear destruction, and terrorism of all kinds – bio, religious, political – allow us to imagine the unimaginable, and to reflect on what we might do in a catastrophe, from the safe embrace of our living room sofas.

In fact, scholars have long recognised that far from having the wind taken out of its sails, apocalyptic thought has more than accompanied modernity; it has actually flourished under its conditions. Stephen O’Leary notes that the latter half of the twentieth century brought with it a ‘resurgence of popularity’ in apocalyptic thought due to the threat of nuclear war, which made religious forecasts of ‘planetary destruction credible to a much wider audience’.<sup>1</sup> Scientific imaginings of global catastrophe, emerging more recently from the environmental sciences, have come to furnish our visions of apocalypse apart from recourse to divine retribution or redemption. The USA in particular has been recognised as an ‘eschatological hotbed’, from Puritan projections of a new Jerusalem to the rise of the religious right whose cosmological vision is one

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.



Image from pxfuel.com

of an epic spiritual stand-off between God and the Devil.<sup>2</sup> Although penned over half a century ago, Norman Cohn's words therefore ring truer now than ever before: 'The old religious idiom has been replaced by a secular one, and this tends to obscure what otherwise would be obvious', he writes, 'for it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still'.<sup>3</sup>



Judgment Day: Credit Joseph Chan, Unsplash

What are we to take away from this deeply-embedded disposition towards apocalyptic thought? For a start, understanding this cultural history allows us to contextualise our catastrophising emotional responses by locating them within a well-rehearsed cultural script that is, at the moment, in full swing. But rather than buying wholesale into forecasts of impending doom, or, alternatively, coldly dismissing them as 'irrational' or 'superstitious' dramatics, I suggest that we might resist the terms of this choice by recalling and reflecting on the meaning behind the word, apocalypse, in the first place.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding, 'Bad Endings: American Apocalypse', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (1999): 285–310.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 286.

At its most basic, ‘apocalypse’ simply denotes a time where truth or understanding is revealed. Grasped in this way, the present challenges we face might be viewed as an unparalleled opportunity to unveil new information and understanding about ourselves and our world. It is this kind of approach that philosopher of science Bruno Latour appears to take when he writes of the ‘astounding lesson’ that the coronavirus has ‘taught us’: ‘That it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and at the same time, a system that we were told it was impossible to slow down or redirect’.<sup>4</sup> If global society has proven itself capable of modifying its way of life in ways previously thought unimaginable, this ‘dress rehearsal’ gives us scope to ‘discover other means’ for engaging in the climactic crisis we face, Latour suggests.<sup>5</sup>

The current pandemic lays bare the truth that the natural world marches to the beat of a different drum than the economic world and it exposes the gaping divide between the two timelines of the universe – the human, and the non-human (or, for some, the spiritual). Apocalyptic time denotes a transient episode in which these two timelines become aligned, illuminating our relation to the universe we inhabit. It is only through this alignment that we can begin to imagine and even experience a different kind of future, one which can accommodate the human and the non-human, and one which will allow for the two timelines to coincide within one history, indefinitely, into a future that is as desirable as it is imaginable.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, ‘What Protective Measures Can You Think of so We Don’t Go Back to the Pre-Crisis Production Model?’, trans. Stephen Muecke, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/852.html>, 29 March 2020, [http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH\\_1.pdf](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Latour, Bruno, ‘Is This a Dress Rehearsal?’, *In the Moment*, Critical Inquiry, 26 March 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.

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