We live in an age that imagines itself on the brink. Doomsday environmental scenarios, the aggressive globalization of corporate capitalism (oversown by a mad, blunted financial sector) and the looming possibility of energy and food wars have made “apocalypticism” and “melodrama” our orthodoxy. It is not only in popular culture that the End of Days prevails, in which post-apocalyptic hunter-gatherers are salvaging from the wreck of civilization, in which marauders are given to atavistic fetishism, tribalism and cannibalism; or, in which zombies literalize our horrific history of unrelenting consumption. In response to this, an incipient “enlightened evangelical leftism” takes its rhetorical structure from the jeremiad, presenting the world in chthonic terms—“The world is already apocalyptic,” Evan Calder Williams declares, “just not all at the same time.” In the Euro-American complex, he continues, we live “conveniently unaware of pockets of hell on earth that approximate the total breakdown of civility and quality of life...we catch glimpses of them only when they surge up in the midst of supposedly advanced sectors of the world.”

Catastrophists—including the influential Nafeez Ahmed, Executive Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Development—read these “pockets of hell” as prophetic. The poor, living on waste dumps or in abandoned buildings, scrabbling in the dark corners of disintegrating societies, are heralded as avatars of the apocalypse. They foreshadow a condition that, unless we change our ways, threatens to become universal.

We can identify two strands in the combination of apocalypse and recycling. The first is the apocalyptic vision of “nothing” and “divine grace” alone will redeem the righteous and salvage value from the destruction of the world. This eschatology purified into occult myths and became the foundation of historical allegories, fictional structure and visual representation. Despite its detractors, it has been the dominant temporality at Western thought, binding our imagination to the logic of crisis and disclosure. In Frank Kermode’s view, “the sense of an ending” is a symptom of “a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact, as indeed we must...”

Recycling is the Greek word for “lifting the veil”—will reveal human life and history from the point of view of God. Human habit and illusion will be brought to nothing, and dire grace alone will redeem the righteous and salvage value.

The understandings depend on a rectilinear temporality. Historically, Judeo-Christian eschatology displaced earlier versions of cyclical time. Rather than a regular succession of deterioration and regeneration, human history came to be understood as a progression from Creation to Revelation. The apocalypse—the Greek word for “lifting the veil”—will reveal human life and history from the point of view of God. Human habit and illusion will be brought to nothing, and dire grace alone will redeem the righteous and salvage value.

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commodities channelled by financial contours. Commodities pile up in places of excessive consumption, generating clumps of waste in which vestigial value remains lodged. The informal recyclers, excluded from the flow of the formal economy, capitalise on an eddy, an evanescent reverse flow. Watching the current of the formal economy from which they are excluded, the recyclers know it wouldn't pay anyone else to do the work. I am not suggesting that, rather than incarnations of the apocalypse, the recyclers represent an ideal of urban inhabitation. It is common to venerate the capacity of the marginalised to contrive means of survival at the borders of cities. Academics often applaud the ingenuity of those who make do; those who recuperate, adapt, manipulate and recombine elements of possibility to improvise subaltern lives. The lived reality of the poor is what it is. We can, though, refuse the apocalyptic/dystopian binary altogether. As many writers and artists have shown, it is possible to stop submitting to fictive patterns that have reified into myth. As long as we remain committed to the logic of the apocalyptic imaginary, we will continue to be mesmerised by a received, rectilinear eschatological melodrama.

McInnes’s lead objects and Hodgkiss’s photographs confound ends and beginnings. Neither affords the viewer vicarious pleasure in the horrors of the End; neither is motivated by a revelatory evangelical logic. Instead, both dwell on the boundary of damage and possibility, rigorously placed in what Kermode calls “the middest”; the place in which we stand and from which it is possible to perceive the world without resorting to the simultaneous hysterical alarm and rapturous glee of the catastrophist. This “middest” is the territory of a relentless present in which all traces of the past and the future converge and to which we owe the obligation of detailed reading and regard. This may, as Kermode suggests, require prudential, modest “clerical scepticism”.

I would like to thank Jacki McInnes for allowing me to interview her and for permission to use her photographs as well as those taken by John Hodgkiss. McInnes will be presenting de Magnete, a solo exhibition of her recent work, at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery from 6–27 June 2012. The exhibition will move to the gallery of North-West University from 19 July–3 August 2012.

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