

THE LOGIC OF THE APOCALYPSE: A CLERICAL REJOINDER

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ABSTRACT

Apocalyptic and millennial rhetoric is recycled in countless contemporary literary and cinematic works and is central in versions of progressive political critique. The first part of this essay describes Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a dystopian allegory mired in Judeo-Christian temporality and which, as a consequence, promotes a sentimental version of human salvation. The second considers the ways in which analogous renditions of catastrophism permeate (new) new left social and political critique. It argues that apocalyptic imagery and discursive structures stunt analysis by indulging simplistic patterns of history and event. The final section of the essay documents a project by Johannesburg-based artist, Jacki McInnes, and the photographer, John Hodgkiss, concerning the lives of the city's informal recyclers. Their daily journeys are presented in (discursive and visual) counterpoint to the epic southward trek of the father and son in *The Road*. 'Recycling' is presented as a trope of a contrary temporality, which suggests some of the ways in which apocalyptic logic is too teleological to capture the complexities of the lived realities of late-capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Apocalypse, Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, catastrophism, Jacki McInnes, John Hodgkiss, informal recyclers, clerical scepticism

Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle. That is why the image of the end can never be permanently falsified.

Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*

I just don't need none of that *Mad Max* bullshit

Modest Mouse, *Good News for People Who Love Bad News*

This essay is an exercise in what Frank Kermode calls “clerical scepticism.” It is a triptych, each section of which engages the use of apocalyptic rhetoric. The first considers the journey of a father and son across the “ashen scabland” of a post-apocalyptic United States in Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road* (2006). It presents McCarthy’s fable as a symptom of catastrophist hysteria, arguing that his atavistic vision of humanity is ameliorated by a sentimental conception of human preservation. This suggests that the novel typical of its genre.

The second confronts insidious apocalyptic metaphors in strands of contemporary (new new) leftism. This central panel is conceptual. It sets out the imaginative and political costs of catastrophism, offering a (clerical) rejoinder to the reiteration of the rectilinear logic of the “end of days.” It also addresses representations in which the poor and homeless function as avatars of the apocalypse.

The third section presents a cautious, documentary counterpoint. It considers a representation of Johannesburg’s informal recyclers, who every day push plastic pallets bearing bulk bags across the city, collecting waste. Artist Jacki McInnes and photographer John Hodgkiss collaborated on a two-year project documenting and representing the lives and daily journeys of a community of recyclers. Their representations – McInnes’s objects made from beaten sheet lead; Hodgkiss’s photographs – address the coercive symmetry of the binary utopia/dystopia. I conclude by proposing the trope “recycling” as a means of imagining a temporality within late-capitalism that does not fall prey to the regulating teleology of Judeo-Christian myth.

I.

In *The Road*, the north-east is cooling rapidly and, because a father is convinced that they will not survive another winter, he and his son head south in search of warmth and food, but also with a vague notion that the coast might offer either respite or prospect. Their departure, delayed as long as possible, is finally instigated by the suicide of the man's wife, the boy's mother. Just before she leaves the house to slit her wrists with an obsidian flake, she articulates her despondency: "We are not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film."¹

The two travel through a desolate wasteland, pushing all their worldly possessions in a shopping cart. "Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind."² Each day, the swirling ash brings the world closer to permanent winter. "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world."³ The cause of this global devastation is left vague: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions."⁴ For a time, compassion survived the catastrophe. "People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them."⁵

Within a year, though, all social cohesion has been displaced by widespread atavism: "there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road."⁶ Bulldrums reverberate across the night sky as nomadic "bloodcults"⁷ perform ritual slaughters of the vulnerable, who they not only cannibalize, but whose remains they fetishize. The father and son come across a "tableau of the slain and the devoured" captioned with "runic slogans, creeds misspelled."⁸ Later they find "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit."⁹ McCarthy's post-apocalypse is a nightmare of primitivism, of the relentless predation of small bands of survivors who are desperate to protect vestiges of their humanity.

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, 47.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

In a scene even more horrific than these remains, the two discover a plantation mansion in which people are being held captive in the basement. As these prisoners clamber towards the light, screaming in desperation for rescue, the father describes “a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps blackened and burned.”¹⁰ Compassion has been generally extinguished: it has become possible for marauders to keep others as a living food-store. People have become meat.

The survival of the father and son in this abject wasteland consists in their movement and in protecting their possessions (their cart, a torn map, a revolver with two rounds, a tarpaulin, spare clothes, what food they have foraged, their slutlamp and blankets). Trudging along the cluttered and cracking blacktop, through suburbs, cities and forests, they have been reduced to the condition of hunter-gatherers. They walk through the detritus of the wrecked world, two brooms attached to the cart sweeping the road in front of them, dependant on what they can salvage. To stop is to increase their chances of being discovered by the roving bloodcults. So they keep moving south, vagrant and hunted.

Far from the ideals of freedom, self-discovery, even manifest destiny, “the road” has become a site of diminution, on which survival is the best one can hope for. Travelling has become detached from any higher purpose – it is motivated by the inexorable need to keep moving. The “coast” and “warmth,” which might seem to give some shape to the journey, prove chimerical, false promises in this monochrome world which is uniformly obliterated.

On two occasions the father and son investigate ransacked supermarkets. In the shadow of a capitalist history of consumption, they walk down “littered aisles” and “through the trash,”¹¹ hunting for scraps. Near the door of one supermarket the man recognizes the twisted remains of a prybarred vending machine lying amidst coins scattered in the dust. He searches the mechanism and discovers a single, dusty can of Coca Cola, which he insists his son drink. The boy realizes – in the course of this post-apocalyptic sacrament – the reason for his father’s insistence: “It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one isnt it?”¹² Not only has the father’s childhood, sun-filled world of trout fishing ceased to exist, this is also the end of the line for the world of commodities that flowed in such abundance from the great corporations of the past. The scene is tinged with nostalgia: we are drawn to surmise that this might be the last can of Coke on the planet. “The last instance of a thing,” the father ruminates, “takes the class with it.”¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹¹ Ibid., 19, 68.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

A related disappearance is apparent in the scene in which the father and son sit on the floor of a derelict service station decanting dregs of oil from plastic bottles, producing almost half a quart “for their slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns.”¹⁴ This is all that remains of the oil companies, on which the global order was premised; these vestiges retrieved from the trashcan outside a gutted gas station. There is, however, no implication in the novel that the logics of Coca Cola and the oil trade might have brought the world to this devastated condition. Commodities radiate a nostalgic aura; they are the icons in rites of memory and recovery.

What, in Cormac McCarthy’s atavistic vision, survives the apocalypse? The father refuses despondency. He not only accepts that the child is his “warrant,”¹⁵ but recognizes in him an intimation of the divine: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”¹⁶ In the ritual of rehearsing the son’s suicide should he be taken by cannibals, the two are latter day incarnations of Abraham and Isaac, the father accepting his sacred charge as the ordering principle of his existence.¹⁷ Through their ritualized negotiation of their mutual obligations and their significance, they become “each other’s world entire.”¹⁸ In counterpoint to the violent, consumptive rituals of the marauders, the father and son have contrived an inter-subjectivity that turns on touchstones: “we are the good guys” and “we’re carrying the fire.”¹⁹ This intimate mythology not only sets them apart from the “creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland,”²⁰ it also organizes a prospective future, at least a shared reason to keep moving in a context marked only as the dying of the light. “Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.”²¹

For the duration of the novel, the two walk the blacktop avoiding bands of cannibals and encountering occasional stragglers: a man struck by lightning; an old, blind man; and, towards its conclusion, “a thief.” Their eventual arrival at the coast is anti-climactic: rather than any prospect of deliverance, they find only a shipwreck: “a twin-masted rig of some sort ... keeled over in ten or twelve feet of water.”²² She is sixty feet long, her masts broken off, “and the only thing

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ See Jay Ellis’s “Another Sense of Ending: The Keynote Address to the Knoxville Conference of the Cormac McCarthy Society,” 24–29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65, 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²² *Ibid.*, 187.

remaining topside were some brass cleats and a few of the rail stations along the edge of the deck.”²³

Despite his rapidly deteriorating health, the father swims out to the wreck. First he thinks that it has already been plundered, but then realizes that “it was the sea that had done it.”²⁴ He rummages through barrels of sea-gear; fills a seabag with clothes, nylon rope and a toolbox. In the cockpit, he comes across a “square oak box with dovetailed corners and a brass plate set into the lid.” Inside is a brass sextant, “possibly a hundred years old.” He is “struck by the beauty of it”: it “was the first thing he’d seen in a long time that stirred him.” The name “Hezzaninth [*sic*], London” casts a profoundly historical spell.²⁵

The next morning, he returns to the ship and continues unloading their windfall, including tins of olive oil and milk. Just before swimming back to the beach, the father notices, at “the bottom centre of the bulkhead just above the seat” a nylon strap protruding. He pulls it to reveal a survival kit: rolled sails, a two-man rubber raft, plastic oars, a first-aid kit, a composite tool box, a flashlight, strobebeacon, an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon), a box of flares, and a 37mm bronze flare pistol. When he shows the pistol to his son and explains its use, he offers to fire a flare to demonstrate. That night, somewhat to the boy’s alarm, he does so. “The flare arced into the murk with a long whoosh and broke somewhere out over the water in a clouded light and hung there.”²⁶ Given the threat of marauders, this seems at first a dangerously frivolous act. Yet, a few days later, when the father finally succumbs to his illness, leaving his son, a sad innocent Crusoe, alone on the beach, a man approaches who has evidently been observing them for some time.

He has a family waiting some distance off: a wife, a son and a daughter. He suggests that the boy join them, which, after establishing that they are not cannibals, he does. There is a suggestion that the family was summoned by the flare; that salvage has once again saved the boy’s life. In the Manichean logic of the novel, this new family, now including the son, is entrusted with carrying the fire.

The Road, widely praised for its “fearless wisdom”²⁷ and its “mythic and biblical grandiosity,”²⁸ treads the brittle ground of allegory. McCarthy’s fiction – whether set in the West, crossing the Rio Grande, in the reaches of Mexican drug cartels, or in the post-apocalypse – inclines to

²³ Ibid., 187.

²⁴ Ibid., 189.

²⁵ Ibid., 192.

²⁶ Ibid., 207.

²⁷ Janet Maslin, “The Road through hell, Paved with Desperation,” *The New York Times*.

²⁸ Ron Charles, “Apocalypse Now,” *The Washington Post*.

reducing human beings and their relations to bare bones. Violence brings his men (always men) to an ontological threshold at which, in the most memorable instances, they whittle their trauma into reticent knowing, usually articulated in cowboy-understatement.

McCarthy's world is one of clarifying limit-experience. His representation of the wasteland in *The Road* generalizes the pockets of extreme violence in *Blood Meridian*, the "Border Trilogy," and *No Country for Old Men*. The Apache, Comanche, Mexican outlaws, the hit-man Anton Chigurh, are replaced by the majority, who have lapsed into predation and cannibalism. The lines are clearly drawn: the atavistic savage hordes threaten small bands of survivors who represent the values that set them apart in a world that is red in tooth and claw – the craft of memory, vestiges of community, ethical reciprocity and compassion. Apocalypse has clarified things for us: the veil has been lifted on the complexities of the quotidian revealing the essence of the human condition, figured in a chosen few.

Frank Kermode, in perhaps the most enduring analysis of apocalyptic logic, *The Sense of an Ending* ([1966]2000) describes this tendency in fiction. "We project ourselves – a small, humble elect, perhaps – past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle."²⁹ This impulse originates in rectilinear Judeo-Christian temporality. Historically, the teleology linking Creation and Revelation displaced "primitive" notions of cyclic time: of the repeated succession of degeneration and regeneration. Since this shift, those societies in which Judeo-Christian temporality is hegemonic have understood themselves as moving ineluctably towards the End.

The sharply predicted apocalypse has always disappointed: followers have gathered, sealed off cities, towns, compounds, houses or cabins in the woods, only to skulk out after the appointed day has come and gone; or they have been massacred by more earthly authorities (from the Anabaptists in Münster in 1534 to the Branch Davidians in Waco in 1992); or they have admitted their error, reinterpreted the signs and have begun to wait again. Disconfirmation is quickly followed by the reinvention of endings.³⁰ There have always been Jeremiahs: some prophet lambasting society for its sins, urging the faithful to ready themselves for one sort of rapture or another. Fundamentalist Jews, Christians and Muslims await the advent of catastrophic disclosure, when divine purpose will be revealed and this illusory, deceptive normality, this muddy middle-ground, will melt into air.

Doomsaying has not remained the province of literalists. Once understood as imminent, the apocalypse has become immanent: "... sharply predictive apocalypse, with its precise identifications, has been blurred; eschatology is stretched over the whole of history, the End is

²⁹ Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

present in every moment, the types always relevant.”³¹ Kermode explains the consequences of this immanence: “... ends bear down upon every important moment experienced by men in the midst.”³² We use these ends to make sense of the present. We project catastrophic conclusions, or read any signs of prospective collapse as metonyms in order to regulate or ignore the muddles of the quotidian (with its complexities of agency, complicity of victims, inscrutable flows of capital and its facile configurations of power).

Is there a political, ethical or imaginative cost in imposing a rectilinear, apocalyptic logic on the ordinary and the historical? What are the consequences of the rhetoric of catastrophism? Drawing an important distinction, Kermode argues that fictions “can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive.”³³ Our thinking is compromised when it is regulated, when we uncritically reiterate patterns of understanding and expectation. We “insult reality,” he concludes, when we regress into myth.³⁴ These ossified fictions become the basis of false consciousness. Thinking in terms of clarifying ends can stultify thinking in the midst. Further, those who are imaginatively cauterized by the searing prospect of the End are capable, not only of remarkable docility and compliance, but of perpetrating the most extraordinary acts of violence, from flying planes in to the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center to bombing Baghdad “back into the stone age,” as the saying goes.

The Road is a symptom of contemporary apocalyptic ideology. It can be grouped with the sophisticated chiliastic visions.³⁵ Yet it also bears a family resemblance to the genre of zombie films initiated by George A. Romero, the manifold variations on *Mad Max*, the spread of cinematic pandemics and the tidal wave of environmental disaster movies. McCarthy, like so many at our historical horizon, is transfixed by the melodramatic potential of the End, by a veil torn apart in a flash of light to reveal us to ourselves. What it reveals, in the case of *The Road*, is the transfixing innocence of a child and the stoical bravery of a father set against a predatory alterity. Family values in the wilderness. This is the territory of reactionary Catholicism, of the patriarchal penitent protecting innocence in the cities of the plain.

Political correctness has compelled those seeking such moral symmetries to embrace zombies, viral plagues or their other non-human equivalents. Africans, Indians and Native Americans, once the representatives of darkness, have become just too complicated to embody an unadulterated, generic threat that can be killed off with swashbuckling ideological impunity.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Ibid., 26.

³³ Ibid., 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 109.

³⁵ From E.M. Forster’s novel *The Machine Stops* (1909), to John Wyndham’s *Day of the Triffids* (1951), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), Walter M. Miller *Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960), Russell Hoban *Riddley Walker* (1980), José Saramago *Blindness* (1995), Maggie Gee *The Flood* (2004), Jim Crace *The Pesthouse* (2007), and so on.

McCarthy's cannibals are post-humans whose pastiche savage creeds are the postmodern equivalent of the dark, obscure beliefs of the savages of the imperial romance. They hearken back to Joseph Conrad's Congo, but also J.R.R. Tolkien's Mordor: there are, once again, inscrutable slogans etched on posts bearing decapitated heads.

Is this not the dullest version of humankind? Is it not a mundane dualism that reiterates the blunt, ahistorical logic of earlier Manichean allegories? Is illumination not, as the long history of modernist aesthetics suggests, a faltering process, light falling here and there, creating shifting shadows? Why have we settled on the sentimentality of redneck cannibals hunting an innocent child? Perhaps, propelled by the rise of fundamentalist terrorism, radical environmentalism (we need a post-carbon world now ... *right now*) and financial havoc, we are losing sight of the prudential and gradual nature of disclosure. In a context of hyperbolic rhetoric, we are driven back to the simplest of discourses, and the only result – when you have the good guys carrying the fire – is a banality of innocence and puerility of evil.

The Road indicates the imaginative cost of the hyperbolic: a consequence of avoiding the textures of the real. Perhaps our dystopian allegories are leading us astray. We reiterate the apocalyptic at the expense of the complexities of history, subjectivity and the political. All we are left with are the vicarious delights of horror and apple-pie redemption.

II.

In an interview concerning his film adaptation of *The Road* (2006), director John Hillcoat describes being possessed by “the idea of a shopping trolley with all your possessions in it.”³⁶ By his account, he discovered in the “homeless in every city” a visual idiom for the post-apocalyptic travails of the father and son. What is at stake in this inference? That the poor are somehow avatars of the apocalypse? That they inhabit a condition that threatens to become universal should society collapse entirely rather than (viewed from the suburbs) only as its margins? This connection between poverty and the apocalyptic is by no means limited to McCarthy and Hillcoat.

This matter is best approached obliquely. The title of Thomas Homer-Dixon's *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* (2006) expresses an invidious, right-

³⁶ John Hillcoat, “The Making of *The Road*.”

wing line of reasoning. Homer-Dixon is the Director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and, in addition to writing regularly for *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times* and the *Washington Post*, he is a frequent lecturer to the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. He is also an advisor to such august institutions as the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council.

Homer-Dixon describes the future as “a white wall of fog in front of us.”³⁷ Each disaster, he claims, has added to our knowledge of the “progressively more complex and rigid” world we have created.³⁸ We can, he concludes his book, use this knowledge “like a compass – to help us, together, choose our path through a future full of surprises, danger, and opportunity.”³⁹ Looked at one way, Homer-Dixon simply defends qualified optimism. Catastrophes are inevitable: let us learn from them. Let us look to Ancient Rome, he advises us often, and ameliorate our excesses and move forward into an exciting future. More cynically, he is Western civilization’s Dr Phil: if we just face our past mistakes, learn from our calamities, we can choose brighter and healthier prospects.⁴⁰ To heal the world, in Homer-Dixon’s understanding, we need to fine-tune global capitalism and finesse American and European foreign policy. This will save us from decline, and keep the barbarians from the gates. Presumably he doesn’t suggest to the World Bank and the CIA that they might be agents of the principals (and principles) that cause the disasters he describes as potentially generative.

Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* (2007) presents a detailed study of the ways in which “disasters,” both natural and instigated by governments, militaries, militias or terrorist organizations, have been integral to the global expansion of corporations and to the widespread ascendance of “corporatist” ideology. She demonstrates, in meticulous detail, the ways in which “moments of collective trauma” have been exploited “to engage in radical social and economic engineering.”⁴¹ Catastrophes have been widely regarded, within corporations and the governments which represent their interests, as opportunities. They are imagined to induce – as shock therapy was initially intended to do to psychotic patients – a *tabula rasa*, erasing historical complexity and opening up the possibility of implementing a coherent and cogent vision (in most instances “disaster capitalism,” formulated by Milton Friedman and his acolytes).⁴²

³⁷ Thomas Homer-Dixon’s *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*, 308.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴⁰ “Dr Phil” is Dr Phillip Calvin McGraw, who rose to fame through appearances on *Oprah* in the late-1990s, but achieved superstardom when his own show premiered in 2002. Many established psychologists consider his media-therapy to be simplistic and ineffective, if not actually dangerous.

⁴¹ Naomi Klein *Shock Doctrine*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

Catastrophe is not, as Thomas Homer-Dixon argues, a benign, cyclic opportunity for renewal; a way of orientating ourselves in a world that is unfolding in new and surprising ways. Rather, disasters have been essential – and have been understood by Friedman and others as indispensable – to the rise of the global corporation, the decline in public spending and the swathe of privatization initiated in the early 1980s. Catastrophist thinking, in Klein’s view, has served right-wing, corporatist interests at the expense of the poor.

One has to account, given the indisputable connection between disaster and reactionary economics, for the apocalyptic logic of strands of “progressive” politics. We might call the persuasion with which I am concerned “evangelical leftism.” In many respects, Nafeez Mossaddeq Ahmed is Homer-Dixon’s left-wing counterpart. He is the Executive Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Development, and the author of *The War on Truth* (2005), *Behind the War on Terror* (2003), and, most recently, *A User’s Guide to the Crisis of Civilization, and How to Save It* (2010). His argument is that we are in the midst of a crisis that we need to understand as resulting from a combination of related – not discrete – dynamics integral to the global order. Climate catastrophe, energy scarcity, food insecurity, economic instability, international terrorism and militarization are related crises that are combining to bring us to the brink of destruction, which – in Ahmed’s view – we can avert only by “drastic reconfiguration of the *system itself*.”⁴³ Minor shifts in policy and practice, such as those advocated by Homer-Dixon, will do nothing to avert the looming crisis, because it is the logical consequence of the systems – political, economic and ideological – that are in place. This should not, Ahmed comforts us, leave us despondent: we should not gaze on the present with “paralyzing horror.”⁴⁴ Rather, we should come to accept the necessity of “civilizational transition,” which has to entail both “the end of industrial civilization as we know it” and “the coming of a post-carbon society.”⁴⁵ We are on the verge of mass death and disorder, and this should move us to clarity of understanding and purpose.

What is the intended effect of this jeremiad? To covert listeners. The theologian, Allen Dwight Callahan describes the Revelation of St John as summoning its auditors to a “transformative experience.”⁴⁶ The text is a record of a harangue, which was never intended to clarify orthodox eschatology, but rather to move a congregation away from one way of life towards another. This shift promises redemption. Ahmed’s apocalyptic rhetoric *is* offset with

⁴³ Nafeez Mossaddeq Ahmed, *A User’s Guide to the Crisis of Civilization, and How to Save It*, 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ Allen Dwight Callahan, “The Language of Apocalypse,” 460.

detailed analysis, its evangelical framework and purpose developed by careful, if impassioned, demonstration.

This is less true of Evan Calder Williams' analytical flamboyance. Williams, who is typical of the new new left, is establishing himself through his blog "Socialism/Barbarism." In his first book, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011), he suggests that we are wrong to think in terms of dystopian futures which might yet come to pass. This mode of the future imaginary prevents us seeing the world for what it is. "The world is already apocalyptic," he argues, "just not all at the same time."⁴⁷ It is a matter of scale and extent, not degree. We continue in the quotidian, Williams writes, "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."⁴⁸ The logics of late-capitalism create temporal and spatial zones of collapse, approximating the hyperboles of dystopian fiction. Compared to Ahmed's analysis, Williams escalates the tension. The apocalypse is not to come; it is already happening now ... *right now*. You just haven't seen it yet. You *must* see it.

These zones of the complete breakdown of capitalist modernity, Williams suggests, are its structural blind spots. They are not exceptions, but inevitable consequences of the ways in which capitalist totalization proceeds, which is by the exclusion of that which cannot serve the purposes of the flows of capital. Evans implores us to consider these localized wastelands in historical terms: the looters in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Ghanaian poor living on and off the toxic electronic waste of Europe, the unthinkable poverty and desperation caused by violence in regions the global south, and so on. At the same time, he gains considerable rhetorical purchase from cinematic representations of the post-apocalypse, from *The Bed Sitting Room* and the *Mad Max* and George Romero trilogies, which he reveres, to *The Road*, which he abhors for its presentation of a "*transhistorical* brutish underbelly of the human animal."⁴⁹ In his writing, imaginative visions meld with analyses, zombies with the poor and homeless. This is nowhere more evident than in the practice he advocates: "salvagepunk."

What is "salvagepunk"? Williams develops the trope of the "gutting of the boat"⁵⁰ of the neoliberal order. First, we need to gather the waste, both material and theoretical, and then we need to discern what can be made from all "the chances that were there from the start, too polished to see, too immense to grasp, too broken to have ever been whole."⁵¹ We should set

⁴⁷ Evan Calder Williams *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, 149.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

about “not the smoothing of compromised synthesis, but welding, stitching, rewiring.”⁵² We need to develop “a particular way of dealing with buried use-values, alternative histories, and false starts.”⁵³

It is clear that this sense of “construction of and from wreckage” is an order of “salvage,” but in what way is it “punk”? Williams suggests that his approach to reworking fragments of the past assumes that “the present is already the hollowed-out promise of the future.”⁵⁴ Salvagepunk is a post-apocalyptic practice that refuses both the consolations of teleology (the end has come and gone) and the inanities of postmodern pastiche. We need, in Williams’ view, to seize upon the remnants of late-capitalism strewn across the post-apocalypse and to craft – tactically rather than strategically – possibilities ignored, erased or denied by the original system. We need to make do with the remainder, with the detritus floating from the hulks of history’s grand schemes.

Ahmed and Williams’ rhetoric is typical of an influential strain of leftism. It uses cinematic spectacles of disaster and horror to imagine ruined cities occupied by rapacious, post-human beings. The latter represent the gothic evolution of our contemporary consumptive habits. Even as this writing describes noisy panic, it brings all of the techniques of the jeremiad to bear on the blindness of our age; to rip the veil of our complacency and reveal the future *for what it is*. Ahmed and Williams both argue that we have to imagine complete change if we are to create a habitable future for humankind. We need a version of *tabula rasa*, an empty – post-apocalyptic – space in which to exercise our imagination. Things have gone too far, and we need to begin again, with only a few scraps of knowledge, the true importance of which we were blind to before the disastrous revelation of the present.

Thinking back to Klein, there is an uncanny resemblance between the ways in which the left and the right use apocalyptic logic. Both seek opportunity at the limit, whether theoretical or economic. Both advance themselves through catastrophe, and both render the world in hysterical, noisy terms. Both seek, through their jeremiads, to awaken their auditors to the truth and to new opportunities. Both trade in a worn currency of myth.

This is not to belittle the dangers facing our societies. Yet apocalyptic rhetoric and catastrophism are unhelpful. They misguide us. In attempting to wake us, in the formulation of Pascal Bruckner, “they eventually deaden us, making our eventual disappearance part of our

⁵² Ibid., 31.

⁵³ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 32.

everyday routine.”⁵⁵ The hyperbolic inures us: the rhetoric of extremity, intended to defamiliarize a world obscured by complacency, has become routine. Horror, fear, repulsion all induce a momentary affective turn, seducing us into longing for their reiteration. The truth of late-modernity is that we love the apocalypse. We truly love it.

III.

In the watershed year of 1994, the South African anthropologist Robert Thornton observed that it “has always seemed that South Africa was on the brink of collapse.”⁵⁶ At each historical horizon, given the contesting realities contained in its borders and its long history of violence, there has been a pervasive “sense that it could never work.”⁵⁷ This has led to a particular political and existential condition: “a constant sense of suspense.”⁵⁸ The apocalyptic threat of a “bloody and final conflict”⁵⁹ resides deep within the South African psyche. It is manifest across South African literature, film and visual art, most commonly in works expressing, interrogating or satirizing apartheid reactionary fears of black liberation, of whiteness overrun.⁶⁰ In this context, the apocalyptic imaginary, in addition to the more general blindness set out, has specific ideological connotations.

In 2009 and 2010, the Johannesburg-based artist, Jacki McInnes investigated the lives and routines of informal recyclers living in an abandoned building, House 38, in Sivewright Avenue in Doornfontein. The community comprised a majority of migrants from Lesotho and a minority of South Africans, one of whom acted as a translator for McInnes. Due to safety

⁵⁵ Pascal Bruckner, “Apocalypse Daze,” *City Journal*, 3.

⁵⁶ Robert Thornton, “South Africa: Countries, Boundaries, Enemies and Friends,” *Anthropology Today*, 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ Perhaps the two most obvious novels in this vein are Karel Schoeman’s “post-revolutionary” *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972), translated by Marion V. Friedmann as *Promised Land* (1978), and Eben Venter’s *Horrelpoort* (2006), translated by Luke Stubbs as *Trencherman* (2008). Both concern men returning from exile to family farms, now owned by black South Africans, to confront the unsettling relation between their memories and disjunctive presents. *Horrelpoort* recasts Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: Marlouw is on a quest to bring his nephew, Koert, back to Australia. Koert is a bloated, Nintendo-playing, bed-ridden teenager, who has monopolized the meat trade in the devastated South African hinterland.

There are too many examples of apocalyptic South African visual art to list, but the installation work of Michael MacGarry (see *End Game*) and Pieter Hugo’s photographs of life on the Agbogbloshie electronic dump in Accra, Ghana (see *Permanent Error*) are as fascinating as there are troubling.

Recently, the South African film, *District 9* (2009), represents a community of aliens (“prawns”) who are being subjected to forced removal to a more distant settlement. According to Stefan Helgesson, they are “‘living the apocalypse’ (from the perspective of a once-dominant West), but even so, life goes on in a pragmatic, patchwork fashion” (*Safundi* “*District 9: A Roundtable*”).

considerations and her desire to document the daily journeys of the recyclers across the city, she asked photographer John Hodgkiss to accompany her. McInnes' resulting artwork, *Hazardous Objects House 38*, comprising a bulk bag of waste objects fashioned from beaten sheet lead, won the Sacatar-Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award 2010, affording her a two-months' artist's residency at the Instituto Sacatar in Bahia, Brazil. Surprisingly, the Spier Contemporary 2010 selection committee had no interest in exhibiting Hodgkiss's photographs. Only five were ever shown – at a subsequent exhibition hosted by the University of Johannesburg, curated by McInnes.

[Image 1: Aerial bulk bag]

[Image 2: John's pics 7 July 241]

The photographs represent far more than research or documentation. They are a careful engagement with the lives and circumstances of a community making do; living off the waste generated by the voracious city into which they had insinuated themselves.

Hodgkiss was at pains to capture the details of the recyclers' labour: the plastic trolleys they appropriated from bakeries and retailers (according to McInnes, many originated from the up market grocery store, Woolworths); the ironing board legs wired on as handles; the bulk bags laden with plastic bottles or white paper; the piles of collapsed cardboard cartons; the occasional jutting haul of scrap metal.

[Image 3: House 38 658]

McInnes and Hodgkiss mapped the men's daily routes: many walked 20-40km, pushing increasingly laden trolleys through the suburbs and then to the Newtown depot where their collected waste was weighed, bundled and stored for dispatch. The men were paid R25 to R40 for each cubic meter they had collected, amounting – on good days – to an income of R160 to R200.

[Image 4: House 38 382]

In the evenings, the recyclers gathered in House 38, where they had constructed living quarters in the gutted building. These were furnished and decorated with suburban cast-offs,

Hodgkiss's photographs revealing, without condescension, the minimum it takes to be house-proud.

[Image 5: House 38 047]

At night, the men, wrapped in Basotho blankets, some still wearing balaclavas, gathered around braziers, eating meals of pap and greens prepared for the community by a designated cook.

[Image 6: John's pics 7 July 181]

We can identify at least two implications of the combination of *Hazardous Objects House 38* and the photographs. McInnes's leaden waste objects are resonant metonyms for the toxic burden of unchecked consumption. They produce a centre of physical and moral gravity, drawing us onto the contours of their matt surfaces. Entirely unreflective, they resist any comfort of seeing anything other than themselves: in a mute assertion of the ideology of their production, they give nothing back but their irreducibly dead mass.

Their other strand of meaning suggests alchemy, reworking, manipulation. The lead objects recycle waste into meaning; they translate the residual into the dominant, complicating the relations between commodification and value, between beginnings and ends.

These possibilities are also evident in Hodgkiss's photographs. He does not balk at the decimating effects of migrancy, the brutality of poverty and the police, and the ransacking violence of the notorious Red Ants, the state's enforcers. In late-2010, the Red Ants destroyed the men's improvised rooms and evicted the community. A few months later, the entrance to the building was bricked up.

Yet, the photographs do not suggest naïve utopianism or sentimental romanticism about the tenacity of community or the resilience of the individual. There are no consoling clichés. These are lives, not at the End of Days, but produced by an eddy in the flows of late-capitalism. An "eddy" is a swirling, reverse current produced when a fluid flows past an obstacle. Our world is defined by rectilinear flows of 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, capitalize 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 marginalized 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. But it insults reality to replace dystopian fictions about the poor with naïve, self-satisfied utopianism. The lived reality of the poor is what it is.

We can, though, refuse the utopian/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 mesmerized by a received, rectilinear eschatological melodrama. McInnes' 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 Frank Kermode calls "the midst;" the place in which we stand and from which it is possible to perceive the world without resorting to either hysterical alarm or catastrophist glee.

[Image 7: House 38 374]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay is in memory of John Hodgkiss, Johannesburg-based freelance photographer, who died on 26 March 2012.

I would like to thank Jacki McInnes for allowing me to interview her and for permission to use pictures from her and Hodgkiss's project.

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