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The End-of-the-World Appeal: Why Consumers are Drawn to Post-Apocalyptic Media

People imagining themselves in a zombie apocalypse is more common than one might think. For centuries, humans have placed much focus on eschatology, the culturally expansive philosophical discussion that focuses on the "conceptions of the last things: immortality of the soul, rebirth, resurrection, migration of the soul, and the end of time" within a religious or existential context (Landes). These speculations about an ominous future have influenced a wealth of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives and speculative fictions, all the way up to the modern day. Zombie apocalypses have become increasingly popular narratives in film and TV, with a hungry market for movies and shows such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead, 28 Days Later, World War Z,* and *The Last of Us*. The hit TV series *The Walking Dead*, was so successful that, in 2013, it "beat all other shows in its time slot in the ratings—including Sunday Night Football" (Drezner 3). In 2011, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) even released a guide for what to do if a zombie apocalypse ever occurred to raise awareness about disaster preparation—but not as a joke. The odds of a zombie apocalypse actually occurring are more plausible than one might think; according to political scientist Daniel W. Drezner, "Scientists and doctors acknowledge that, in contrast to vampires or demons, some variation of a zombie could exist in our physical world" (Drezner 7). In fact, more philosophers believe in the possibility of the existence of zombies than the existence of God (Drezner 8-9). In addition to zombie apocalypses, nuclear, climate, and supernatural apocalypse scenarios have also gained popularity in the entertainment industry with movies such as *The Road* (2009), *Annihilation* (2018), *Waterworld* (1995), *Mad Max* (1980), and *Don't Look Up* (2021). Such narratives, no matter which kind of apocalypse they portray, usually contain similar components. Stories

about the "end of the world" as a genre normally follow a formula. The story involves some sort of disastrous event, one that the world did not have much time to prepare for, that normally disrupts the social order in some way—in other words, an apocalypse. Sometimes, the characters are working to reverse the event, but oftentimes the story follows characters as they adjust to living in a new, more hostile world. The new world usually looks very different from the current one. According to "The Filmmaker's Guide to the Apocalypse," an article about the writing process for developing the apocalyptic narrative, apocalypse films begin with a family unit "torn asunder" by the apocalypse, who later find "redemption through toil against the apocalypse to survive" (Bradley). Why do post-apocalyptic scenarios, as represented in film and TV, appeal to their consumers? What does the media itself suggest about human nature? Post-apocalyptic media appeal to its audiences as a reversion to simpler social structures. These structures, depending on the portrayal, either represent complete abandonment of the current social order in a return to the natural world, or retain some rudimentary form of current society that is impossible to fully eliminate. Either way, post-apocalyptic scenarios allow the consumer to imagine a *breaking* of the current inhibiting social order and an *embracing* of anarchy as a new frontier of possibility.

THE POST-APOCALYPTIC PORTRAYAL OF HUMAN NATURE

Post-apocalyptic media provide commentary on human nature, especially how it is altered/maintained after a traumatic event such as the end of the world. Each narrative provides a different interpretation of the psychological effects of an apocalyptic environment on humanity. The way human nature and social structures persist is contingent upon the interpretation; there is no consensus on what will remain, and what will be renewed. There are two ways an apocalypse can affect human nature that are recognized by scholars and media alike. Most post-apocalyptic media portray one or both of these effects. The first is a complete reversion to more primal social structures and habits, and a reconnection with the natural world (Murphy 2013, *Annihilation* 2018, *The Last of Us* 2023, *The Walking Dead* 2010, Gomel 2000). The second is evidence of remnants of our

current societal structure, indicating that it is impossible to fully dismantle (Kohso 2020, *Dawn of the Dead* 1978, Bailey 2013, Carroll 2012). While these are two separate lines of thought, they are not mutually exclusive. They can occur at the same time in one post-apocalyptic narrative, such as *The Walking Dead*.

Some interpretations of the post-apocalyptic world view the apocalypse as an opportunity to completely redefine humanity's relationship with the earth and nature, with the apocalypse serving as a corrective device that reroutes humanity's environmentally damaging trajectory. It is well understood that humanity's damage to and exploitation of the earth is, in many ways, irreversible. We, the human race, seem to "have failed in achieving a synthetic unity with the planetary environment by its dialectical logic, and instead it forces us to share all its messes" (Kohso 87). In other words, we currently don't have much potential for reconnecting with nature given the destruction that has already occurred; instead, we are subjected to the consequences of climate change and global warming. Apocalyptic scenarios both give a word of warning about the state of the future and also present this future as a site of possibility. Although it is becoming clearer that humanity is getting closer to extinction, we have "begun to understand that some form of nature will no doubt continue far into the future, regardless of our own species' particular fate" (Murphy 235). This is exemplified in post-apocalyptic media portrayals, in which following the loss of most of humanity (whether that be through nuclear power, supernatural forces, environmental devastation, or other means), "the protagonist is forced to change his or her own traditional view of nature as threatening 'other' and accept that humankind must live within nature in order to survive" (Murphy 235). For example, the 2018 science horror film *Annihilation*, directed by Alex Garland, is set in the aftermath of a fallen meteor phenomenon in which a mysterious force, called the Shimmer, has been released in part of the United States and is quickly expanding. Within the Shimmer, DNA becomes mutated as the barrier between humans and the natural world is blurred. Multiple characters find themselves transformed into plants and animals in a physical manifestation of the human world merged with the natural one (*Annihilation*).The movie shows a literal interpretation of humanity physically

becoming a part of the surrounding organic matter—but not necessarily in a negative light. The main character, played by Natalie Portman, refers to the phenomenon as "dreamlike" and "beautiful" (*Annihilation* 0:38:12). This exemplifies the change in humanity's appreciation with nature as stimulated by an apocalyptic scenario. Humans in such a scenario are more unified with their natural habitat than ever before in the modern era, in a way that redefines humanity's relationship with nature from harmful to mutually respectful.

In addition to humanity's relationship with nature, apocalypses can also serve to redefine and reimagine the human race itself. As scholar and University of Tel-Aviv professor Elana Gomel articulates, according to the religious interpretation of an apocalypse, humanity "may be appropriated to the standard plot of apocalyptic purification as a singularly atrocious technique of separating the damned from the saved" (406). This analysis characterizes the apocalypse as a medium through which humanity receives a "final reckoning" of sorts, or a trial which separates the "damned from the saved." However, Gomel continues, this interpretation betrays the very nature of an apocalypse, which does not discriminate; therefore, "Since everybody is a potential victim, the line between the pure and the impure can never be drawn with any precision" (Gomel 406). An apocalypse (at least, one not caused by religious or divine forces) can serve as a cleanse of sorts, although not one based on any moral grounds. It only serves to cleanse humanity of its broader social expectations and limitations. With this cleansing of social structures comes a redefining of the social conditions required for those left standing. Human nature itself is effectively reinvented to fit the new post-apocalyptic environment. The main character of *The Walking Dead*, Rick Grimes, exemplifies this. Before the apocalypse, Rick was a seasoned police officer for his small town. His experience in law enforcement initially translates over in the post-apocalypse, as he becomes a voice of reason and takes on the leader position in his group. However, as Rick continues to live through the conditions of the post-apocalypse, his morals shift and he comes to solely prioritize his group's wellbeing, even to the detriment of others. Rick changes to adapt to a new, more hostile environment. His increasingly tribal mentality comes to resemble more primal social structures that are family or group-oriented.

In this new social ecosystem, only the strongest survive—so Rick becomes the strongest (*The Walking Dead*). Rick and his group come to resemble the familial and ecological systems of early human evolution in an atavistic regression to earlier social frameworks. His concerns shift from abiding by and enforcing the law to protecting his group, reflecting the breaking down of traditional social expectations. An apocalypse simplifies life back to the basic foundations of human nature, serving to return humanity back to its social roots.

Some portrayals and hypotheses of post-apocalyptic scenarios posit that capitalism and other remnants of our current social practices will always remain, as long as there are humans around to sustain them. Capitalism is now understood to be responsible for the increasing social and global "interconnectivity", which manifests as "axiomatic equivalent value together with the monopolization of violence by the state" (Kohso 87). Capitalism has permeated every aspect of society, from daily exchanges to international relations. We have become so entrenched within it that scholar and social critic Sabu Kohso asks, "Why is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?" (87). Some apocalyptic media depict how even when the world ends, capitalism lives on. In George Romero's 1978 movie *Dawn of the Dead*, zombies are drawn to a shopping mall, which represents the "iconic urban form of post-war consumer culture" and attracts consumerist tendencies in what little consciousness they have left (Bailey 95). This is a metaphor for consumerist culture, suggesting that "Americans in the 1970s are the true zombies, slaves to the master of consumerism" (Bishop qtd. Bailey 97). But it also sends a clear message that our fundamental consumerist instinct is impossible to completely abandon—even if one is brain-dead. *Dawn of the Dead* shows how there are some aspects of human society, such as capitalism, that will always survive mass destruction because they are now contained intrinsically within us.

Zombies as a motif, in particular, seem to represent the qualities and vices that define modern capitalism. As scholar Jordan Carroll points out, "Zombie consumption accidentally produces new zombies as a form of pollution or waste... zombies undermine themselves through their own success, creating additional

competitors for food until all sources of nourishment also become zombies" (41). The nature of zombies is representative of human nature itself—zombies produce waste, use up their resources, create competition where it is not warranted, and harm others to fulfill their own needs. Carroll goes on to suggest "the automatism of zombies might be read as an allegory for the unintended consequences brought about by our own consumption, environmental or otherwise" (41). Zombies are not only constructed from human waste—they represent it. Their very existence in a post-apocalyptic scenario, in fact, threatens to impede the existing capitalistic systems. The singular goal of a zombie, as one knows, is to feast on human flesh. By doing so, a zombie is, by definition; a "masterless object": something that actively works against, or inhibits, capitalist agents (88). While Kohso uses the term "masterless object" to define the dangers of nuclear power (and how nuclear power can destroy the very beings that created it), the idea can also be applied to zombies. In order to survive, according to Kohso, "the capitalist economy must create a mechanism to commodify the masterless object" (Kohso 88). In a post-*zombie* apocalyptic society, however, that means commodifying or using the zombies themselves, sometimes in the form of exploitation. The employment of zombies for human benefit is an underlying but present theme in *The Walking Dead*. The character of Michonne, for example, who is introduced at the end of season 2, displays the first instance of such innovation. She keeps two armless, toothless zombies (so that they cannot bite or scratch her) by her side at all times. In doing so, her human scent is masked and she can travel among zombies undetected ("Beside the Dying Fire" 37:40). As Kohso articulates, "capitalism is in principle a movement that ceaselessly creates new occasions for greater investment by actively involving disaster, contamination, immiseration, war, and everything that disrupts the previous cycle of its reproduction in order to articulate a new one… [renewing] both knowledge and power" every time (Kohso 88). The capitalistic tendencies that have become intrinsic within human nature are, evidently, not so easily eliminated. While humans can reestablish their relationships with nature and return to more basic familial social structures, capitalism will always endure.

THE POST-APOCALYPTIC APPEAL

It is clear that, given the wealth of post-apocalyptic media produced in the last few decades, the end of the world is a subject of fixation for many. *Why* such stories are so interesting to their consumers is a topic of further discussion. As established, an apocalypse, such as a zombie outbreak, is "likely to lead to the collapse of civilization" (Drezner 12). So, what is so appealing about the collapse of civilization? As the research has shown, such deconstruction offers opportunity for reconstruction and additionally plays into the psychological desire for entertainment and anarchy.

Although an apocalypse would be catastrophic, it also represents reconstruction and renewal. Where the present is full of the complexities and intricacies of current society, "the catastrophic, as a narrative, situates in the future... [the apocalypse] arouse[s] imaginations of possibilities vastly distinct from the predictable normalcy of the now" (Baker 142). These "possibilities" are not conceivable in the current day, because society has become so complicated that each problem seems impossible to repair completely. Life today, especially in developed countries, is entangled within the social, cultural, economic, political, and technological aspects of life—so much so that it can lack direction and meaning. However, because an apocalypse is absolute and exhaustive, it can be interpreted as an "image of purity so absolute that it denies the organic messiness of life" (Gomel 405). What results from an apocalypse is a chance to reconstruct, rebuild, and reinvent. An apocalypse is an event of mass destruction, but the result of such destruction is opportunity—without the limitations of the current society. As Elana Gomel articulates, "[The apocalypse] is a body whose mortal sickness is a precondition of ultimate health" (405). In other words, the devastation of an apocalypse is followed by a world of possibility, a chance to start again. Just as a wildfire creates fertile land for seedlings in the affected area, the cleansing of humanity creates a site of renewal. Mystical eschatology, a branch of eschatology that focuses on the "human condition in relation to the realm of the sacred," characterizes the end of the world as simply the

beginning of a new one in a cyclical process (Landes). According to mystical eschatology, "the process of creating order out of chaos that occurred at the beginning of time occurs again at the end of time [...] salvation... is found in a return of the world's origin" (Landes). This concept has been around for generations, proving that our sentiments surrounding the "end of the world" have not always been negative, and in fact have more so considered an apocalypse to be an agent of rejuvenation and renovation. Mystical eschatology spans across cultures, showing how different groups have come to similar conclusions about the cyclical nature of life. Martha Bartter, author of the paper "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal," uses this line of reasoning to reevaluate San Francisco's devastating 1906 earthquake, stating "Once such a disaster is distanced by time, we can see how these major cities benefited by having to rebuild... Cities get old, worn-out, dirty, dysfunctional..." (Bartter qtd. Murphy 234). An apocalypse, similar to the earthquake, would present what remains of humanity with a blank slate. The character of Carol in *The Walking Dead* exemplifies the expansion of opportunity that accompanies an apocalypse. In the beginning of the show, Carol is trapped in an abusive marriage with her husband, Ed. She is timid and submissive, quietly accepting Ed's abuse. It is only after Ed is killed by a walker (the show's name for a zombie) when she slowly builds confidence and strength, eventually becoming one of the show's most valued and resilient characters. Carol discusses her development with another character, Daryl, as the two search for their friend and stay the night in an abandoned women and children's shelter. Carol confesses that she went to that shelter with her daughter before the apocalypse, but "only stayed... for a day and a half before [she] went running back to Ed" ("Consumed" 34:15). Carol tells Daryl she endured the abuse and just "kept praying for something to happen... but [she] didn't do anything." And then something did happen: the apocalypse. Later, Carol says, "Who I was with him... she got burned away [...] I got to be who I always thought I should be, thought I should have been" ("Consumed" 34:44). Carol is able to rebuild herself and break free of her previous life because the apocalypse provided her with such an opportunity; she felt

empowered to change because of the lack of an oppressive society. Such a reinvention of one's character would have been impossible without a complete elimination of the existing system.

Renewal psychologically appeals to humans because of our desire to reconstruct, along with our feelings of limitation and restriction within the current system that makes reconstruction in today's environment seemingly impossible. Burtter expands her analysis of the San Francisco earthquake by stating, "We long for the opportunity to clean house from top to bottom, to 'make it new'" (Burtter qtd. Murphy 234). She touches upon the human desire for a fresh start, which is not possible without an apocalyptic scenario to initiate it. The process of manual deconstruction before reconstruction seems to be a gargantuan task without such a comprehensive cleansing. Natalie Baker posits that a reason for the appeal of the post-apocalyptic narrative is partly a "a desire for, to some extent, the social destruction of crises" (Baker 150). This "social destruction" Baker refers to means a complete dismantling of the existing system, which is much more easily achieved through a cataclysmic event. However, in idealizing this scenario, one employs what Elana Gomel calls the "eroticism of disaster," or a romanticization of the devastation that occurs. This "eroticism of disaster" frames the apocalypse as "shorthand for starting over and shedding the burdens we have accumulated" (Begley). Cultural and social practices dictate how one can live their life and what possibilities are available for them. Many are restricted by systemic racism, poverty, or other societal problems. An apocalypse would eliminate those corrupt institutions, just as Carol was able to break free of her abusive relationship within the freeing environment of an apocalypse. In "shedding the burdens we have accumulated," we can start anew without having to manually remove those burdens in the first place.

In addition to fulfilling our search for renewal, a post-apocalyptic environment both eliminates the sense of boredom that accompanies modern life and satisfies the subliminal desire for anarchy as a form of agency. The phenomenon of modern boredom, coined by Gustave Flaubert, describes "a yearning for any desire at all" which, according to Lars Svendsen, "arises from a circumstance of advantage – or perhaps even laziness –

where a yearning for the entertainment of anarchy and societal violence provides a sense of meaning for people" (Baker 149). The modern world has become so monotonous, in other words, that the stimulation of a devastating global event is what invokes any sort of "meaning." This sentiment, while perhaps arising from "laziness," is what drives people to the theater every time a new apocalypse film is released. It is satisfying, in a perverse sort of way, to witness the destruction of our current society because it reminds the audience of both the value of our society *and* the value of a new beginning. According to Natalie Baker, "The shocking is what compels one out of the monotony of everyday life... The prospect of crises always on the edge of the horizon [...] helps, for a moment, extinguish that existential boredom" (149). Apocalyptic media reminds its viewers of the "prospect of crises," or the very real possibility of what *could* happen. This reminder is what combats the onset of modern boredom, because it is a reminder that our society is not, in fact, permanent; it is still susceptible to mass destruction. In addition, if an apocalypse were to happen, as Chris Begley articulates, "It allows the possibility of living life on our own terms" ("Why Apocalyptic Fantasies Appeal to Us Psychologically"). This ability to do as one pleases without abiding by societal expectations, or anarchy, appeals to its audience as a form of freedom. A post-apocalyptic scenario would free one of the constraints and hindrances of the law, political and social obligations, and cultural expectations. Dr. Amy Merrill Willis, professor of religious studies at the University of Lynchburg, states, "[Apocalyptic narratives] explore something very important to Americans — our sense of personal agency" (Willis). The apocalyptic scenario simulates an environment of complete independence and self-determination. There is no government body to dictate one's actions or scope of power. Americans' "sense of personal agency" directly speaks to the conditions that characterize a post-apocalyptic scenario. This speaks to the appeal of anarchy, in which the lack of authority allows for "man's true liberation" (Goldman 6). Emma Goldman, in a 1940 essay in support of anarchism, states, "Real freedom, true liberty is *positive*: it is freedom *to* something; it is the liberty to be, to do; in short, the liberty of actual and active opportunity" (Goldman 7). An apocalypse would simulate the effect of anarchism

and provide the means to be truly free, in which one is able to live within complete "liberty to be, to do." According to Goldman, "Man's quest for freedom from every shackle is eternal. It must and will go on" (Goldman 8). Therefore, humans subconsciously look to post-apocalyptic media in their "quest for freedom", where they find the very scenario where such freedom might be achieved. The media that portrays such situations fulfills both the latent desire for anarchy as a form of freedom and combats the modern boredom that accompanies the lack of such freedom.

CONCLUSION

Post-apocalyptic media has provided engaging commentary on the potential effects a devastating global event would have on human nature. One can witness the fall of society on their screen; one might even imagine themselves in such a scenario, with no daily obligations—only endless opportunity. Post-apocalyptic media represents a situation in which humans can start anew, without societal baggage. Although some sort of social structure may remain, the audience enjoys self-inserting into these situations because they offer more freedom and agency than the current social order allows. However, while these movies are fun to watch, we have to acknowledge that they may not be truly accurate. According to scholar Natalie D. Baker, "Anarchy or social chaos, as a definitive feature of behavior in crisis, does not happen in practice" (141). If Baker is correct, while these movies are entertaining, they are not reflective of humanity. These movies do not offer a solution—only a bleak, theoretical future. We don't need an apocalyptic event to kickstart social change and human agency. Instead of subconsciously projecting our social correction onto apocalyptic scenarios, we can focus on what we can do in the present.

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