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Apocalyptic Dimensions: Seeing the Beginning from the End

Abstract

In analysing apocalyptic discourse, it is essential to distinguish the spatial and temporal dimensions in which a catastrophe exerts influence, paves the way for the development of a particular way of thinking, and accordingly builds an appropriate and distinct worldview. My goal is to explore some of the consequences of putting discourse into action to affect political or social change. It is important to understand how certain beliefs and conventions are constructed through the use of catastrophic language, symbolism, and imagery. To this end, I will examine how apocalyptic discourse shapes the way people see the world around them, using as examples works by Mario Sironi, Ludwig Meidner, and Stanley Donwood, while comparing them to the Benjaminean notion of "destructive character", emphasising how the visual discourse structures space and time to unveil novel aspects of reality.

Keywords: apocalypse; catastrophic imaginary; non-places; visual art; creative destruction

Резюме
Апокалиптични измерения: Да видиш началото от края

При анализа на апокалиптичния дискурс е важно да се разграничат пространствените и времевите измерения, в които катастрофата оказва влияние, проправя път за развитието на определен начин на мислене и съответно изгражда подходящ и особен мироглед. Моята цел е да изследвам някои от последствията от въвеждането на дискурса в действие за осъществяване на политическа или социална промяна. Ще бъдат разгледани определени вярвания и конвенции, изградени чрез използването на катастрофичен език, символика и образи. За тази цел ще изследвам как апокалиптичните дискурси оформят начина, по който хората виждат света около себе си, използвайки примери от творчеството на Марио Сирони, Лудвиг Майднер и Стенли Донууд – сравнени с Беняминовия концепт, описващ „разрушителния характер", подчертавайки начина, по който визуалните дискурси структурират пространството и времето, за да разкрият нова форма на реалност.

Ключови думи: апокалипсис; катастрофично въображение; не-места; визуално изкуство; творческа деструкция

Introduction

Apocalyptic discourse has at its core an implication of imminence that translates into a call to action directed at the present. This particular effect of urgency is intended to increase audience participation through the ideology contained in the messages of the discourse. By using techniques of rhetorical persuasion, the audience is made to realize their importance as a decision-maker, by

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choosing, first and foremost, an earthly action in which to participate.[2] A disposition that aims to create a numerous collective that accepts the ideology and opposes the prevailing political rule and order. As Harry O. Maier points out regarding the purpose of manifesting such a genre, apocalyptic discourse was never meant to be passively accepted. Rather, it should lead people to adjust their mind-set and lifestyle to the ideals such a discourse refers to.[3] Furthermore, Maier argues for the disciplining power of observation that a discourse of catastrophe provides. Thus, externalizing such a discourse into a clearly visible phenomenon creates order and discipline within the structure of a society through a visual and observational disciplining – as in a panoptic society, but instead of being performed by the dominant order, it denounces it by providing the tools for a revolt against it via mechanisms of making visible and known what was previously concealed, thereby revealing the true order of reality.[4]

As a tool suitable for a particular kind of observation, then, the apocalypse is able to show its adherents a larger perspective on their present through its use of language, with a somewhat critical view of it. Finally, through the vision of the image in relation to contemporaneity, the observer is able to identify its cultural location, contextualizing "what is denounced" or the denounced social problems in its time. In this way, following Maier, apocalyptic discourse becomes an instrument for a political and structural evaluation of the current situation. Beyond this, however, apocalyptic discourse aims to create a kind of certainty about the future or to avoid the continuation of the present in the future.

Revelation as denunciation

In *The Book of Revelation*, for example, John alternates between tenses, and particularly between present and future, during the narration of his vision. By employing this narrational style the author not only increases the reader's interest in the sequence, but also temporally shifts the promised future, from a non-negated possibility to an ever-probable and present prospect.

Accordingly, apocalyptic discourse is revealed to be always open to interpretation and adaptation to social necessities in both time and space. Locating the discourse in a contemporaneity creates a desire for certainties that are adopted by new communities united by the same new determination. Having identified the current social and political system as unjust, they will seek "greater social justice" (or denounce excessive abuse of power).[5]

Thus, successful communication of fears and ambitions promotes the values of cooperation and collaboration through shared material and intellectual resources. In the catastrophic imagination, there

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[2] Maier, Harry O. *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom.* Ed. Amazon Kindle. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002, p. 2007.
[3] *Ibid,* p. 954.
[4] Ibidem.
[5] *Ibid,* p. 2007.

is always a tension towards progressivism that pursues change. In this sense, there are two different types of catalysts that can cause a social apocalypse. One is the catastrophic discourse led by communities, united by the necessity for social change. This moral obligation gives birth to independent, self-managed or proto-anarchic movements – such as the Occupy Movement, or the Accelerationist Movement that opens its 2013 manifesto with a catastrophic annunciation.

Another source for apocalypticism would be brought by a catastrophe or disruption of the socio-political order brought about by a new political decision, introducing a new government and structure *ex novo* after the previous one has been destroyed. As David Plotke affirms, the capacity of a discourse is fundamental in such a process, as "political orders can be destroyed and replaced by more durable institutional and discursive frameworks"[6]. Furthermore, Plotke describes the process of destructive change in a political regime as one that necessarily requires an "ideological capacity to address the problems that bedevilled the old order" and a "popular opposition to that regime"[7]. This leads to a process of creative destruction. In the words of Mark Fisher, who defined the establishment of capitalism following Fukuyama's assumption of the end of history – a dominant political structure "subsumes and consumes all of prehistory"[8]. Thus, we live in the future of the past, i.e., of what was destroyed as a political reality before the present one. In this sense, there is a phenomenon of mobilization and acceleration toward an end or a "near future" when the future is no longer the continuation of the past, but there is a sense of a "dizzying present" that does not lead to concrete future stability, which brings with it the corresponding need to escape such a state.[9]

To return to the first example: If self-managed movements accelerate the destruction of the current order, then this statement is exemplified by the Accelerationists' proposals for "a more modern future [...], an alternative modernity that neoliberalism inherently cannot produce"[10]. Indeed, the Accelerate Manifesto sets the premise of a cataclysm and an apocalypse befalling the current organizational system. On the other hand, apocalypticism could also be seen as a political structure that erases all elements of the previous order and social lifestyle. The replacement of an entire culture with a new one that with an alternative that corresponds to the new political structure and its order of things. This type of substitution is visible, for example, in the initial stages of a new regime's beginning. Culturally speaking – the voice of any novel ideology are found in intellectual or artistic personalities or movements charged with carrying and curating new beliefs.

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[6] Plotke, David. Democratic Polities and Anti-democratic Politics. – In: *Theoria,* 2006, no 53, p. 37.

[7] *Ibid,* p. 39.

[8] Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative.* Winchester, Zero Books, 2009, p. 4.

[9] Cfr. Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration.* Columbia University Press, 2013. p. 118; Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative.* Winchester, Zero Books, 2009, p.58.

[10] Williams, Alex and Srnicek, Nick. Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics. – In: *Utopian Studies,* 2013, no 24, p. 216.

An example are the Futurists and their Manifesto (1909), in which they convey and implement their ideals and directing their entire artistic production towards the visual and cultural enforcement of a new regime. Moreover, Mario Sironi[11], a former Futurist, commissioned by Mussolini as the regime's art representative, wrote a manifesto detailing the new aesthetic key elements required to visually represent and perpetuate the regime's ideology. On this occasion, the artist reiterated the importance of fascism and its art as an "instrument of spiritual guidance" and a lifestyle.[12] Throughout the manifesto, civilization is praised as "the new civilization" that is, a better civilization, worthy of its new art and ideology, suitable for acclimating the public to the new system.

The need to break away from the old culture or civilization through catastrophic Accelerationism means that a space must be created (through destruction) to contain the new ideology. For the Futurists, war is actually considered progress. Revolution is compared here to warfare, as it is able to reinvent spaces by freeing them from their old, dysfunctional content.

Another approach to the concept of spaces liberated both by and from war is that of the German artist Ludwig Meidner.[13] Contrary to the Futurists, he denied the previously praised 'purifying quality of war', influenced by the cultural and social devastation he himself witnessed in World War I. His apocalyptic series dating from 1912, visually anticipate the consequences of the First World War, where chaos and disorder reign while people flee their homes, which they will eventually lose (*The Burnt-Out Homeless Ones,* 1912) [Fig.1]. In the following years, Meidner continued his depiction of the apocalypse as war and the total destruction of urban life. The final piece of the series is *The Last Day* from 1915-16, in which people are uprooted from any possible dwelling, urban or otherwise, setting the focus on the sacrifices demanded by war as well as its effect on people. [Fig. 2]. The cause of the apocalypse is not apparent in this artwork, or at least the only aspect illuminated appears to be the destruction brought on by the war, which makes the people's presence in that landscape disquieting and forebodes an unbearable future. Everything in such a post-apocalyptic world must rise from the rubble in a complete cancellation of the social catastrophe's destructive power. This results in a clear

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[11] Mario Sironi (1885-1961) was an Italian painter, sculptor, and designer. Sironi is best known for his role in the development of the Italian Futurist movement and his later work as a leading proponent of the Novecento Italiano movement. Sironi's early work was strongly influenced by the Futurist movement, and he was associated with the group from its early days. Sironi's career was interrupted by World War II, and he spent the latter part of his life working in relative obscurity. However, his influence on Italian art and design continues to be felt to this day, and he is recognized as one of the most important Italian artists of the 20th century.

[12] Sironi, Mario. Manifesto of Mural Painting. In: *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas.* Ed. C. Harrison and P. Wood. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 425-426.

[13] Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966) was a German expressionist painter and printmaker. Meidner's early work was influenced by Futurism and Cubism, but he soon developed his own distinctive style. Meidner was also an accomplished printmaker, but his career was interrupted by the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, and he was forced to flee to England in 1939. He continued to paint and teach in England, but his work was largely forgotten until a revival of interest in Expressionism in the 1960s. Today, Meidner is considered one of the most important German Expressionist painters and printmakers.

illustration of how such a catastrophe, can liberate spaces. In this case, the apocalypse appears to give hope and the chance to develop new types of social organization as this process progresses.

Figure 1

Ludwig Meidner

Burned Out (Homeless)

1912

Oil on canvas

Figure 2

Ludwig Meidner

The Last Day

1916

Oil on canvas

Figure 3

Mario Sironi

Urban Landscape

1940-1941

Oil on canvas

The character of the landscape

The apocalypse, as mentioned earlier, can also be associated with the establishment of a new political order that brings the devastation and loss of all previous values. Cityscapes and landscapes only populated by trucks embody Sironi's vision of empty spaces pregnant with the possibility of new purpose [Fig.:3-4]. It is worth noting that despite his initial commitment to fascism, Sironi devoted his last cycle of works to apocalyptic visions and urban landscapes. Disappointed by the success of the Fascist political regime and having lived through the social consequences of his political decision to initially adhere to it, the artist began to work on the development of an apocalyptic cycle that would negate his initial enthusiasm of the regime. As Emily Braun notes, "pessimism was an essential component of the radical nationalism of Sironi's generation. [...] pessimism gave birth to the idea of apocalypse and created the idea of myth"[14]. To return to an observation by Fisher: The constant and dizzying present in which we live gives us a perspective of cynicism and an ironic distance from our contemporaneity, a boredom that we must put an end to through apocalyptic and disruptive visions of our time.[15] Apocalypticism, then, encourages such initiatives to put an end to the uncomfortable times of social existence.

Accordingly, Walter Benjamin, for example, places catastrophe in a landscape, as Meidner and Sironi did, while attaching great importance to the significance of space in a social and political context. In his essay *The Destructive Character* (1931), Benjamin considers the empty place itself as a sign of a destructive character. The place is thus a symbol of a past destruction and elimination. In this way, it is emptiness that contains within itself the presence of a catastrophe. Yet, according to Benjamin, empty space in its visualization and meaning is a specific place, the place "where things stood or victims lived"[16]. In the example of Meidner's *The Last Day* [fig. 2], the destroyed houses and buildings in the artwork are not completely empty, but they bear the signs of a concrete possibility of life that has now been extinguished. In the apocalyptic depictions, the destroyed buildings and abandoned houses are only ghosts of a lost culture and its relations to the rest of the "known".

The "destructive character" is a sign of its own pursuit of demolition, and thus, for Benjamin its purpose fulfils an inherent need for order, by removing objects, associated with the place's history and identity. Consequently, the devastated space reflects the aftermath of a catastrophe along with its

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[14] Braun, Emily. Mario Sironi's Urban Landscapes: The Futurist/Fascist Nexus. In: *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy.* Ed. M. Affron and M. Antliff. Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 66.

[15] Also, a famous assertion by Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History* (1989): "the prospect of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history going again". Cf. Fukuyama, Francis. The End of History? – In: *The National Interest*, 1989, no 16, p. 18.

[16] Benjamin, Walter. The Destructive Character. In: *The Destructive Character.* Ed. D. Raaijmakers. Eindhoven, Onomatopee 54, 2011, p. 6.

deserted appearance – the devastated landscape that outweighs the rest of the visible signs is thus transformed into a visual "spectacle of deepest harmony"[17].

Conversely, the apocalyptic visionary in Sironi's work is predominantly orderly and tranquil, thus recalling some typical features of the emotions and sense of sublime Romanticism [Figs. 3-5]. On the other hand, once one explores these landscapes and notices some details and features of decay – such as a smoking industrial chimney or an anonymous truck crossing an equally anonymous empty street. The sense of the sublime immediately gives way to an eerie feeling. Apocalypse has fulfilled one of the primary functions of its direction – the liberation of space. Perhaps the liberation of space is an act of creation, making way for a new order and new meaning. Which, in turn, always mirrors an act of rearrangement. A new meaning always reflects an act of reordering and recomposition.

Accordingly, both Meidner and Sironi have chosen the apocalyptic genre of expression, but Meidner's work depicts the temporal progression using a series of urban landscapes, where the apocalypse and its consequences unfold before the viewer's eyes. [Figs. 3-5]

In contrast, Sironi choose to show a vision from a time ahead, the catastrophe has already taken place. As Fisher notes in reference to the apocalyptic scene, "its cause lies long in the past [...], detached from the present"[18]. This is then, an apocalyptic representation of a new political or social existence that takes the place of something we can no longer even see – because it has been reinvented.

Something similar is evident in the apocalyptic depictions by contemporary artist, Stanley Donwood,[19] in his series from 1999. His apocalyptic landscapes are missing the catastrophic reference but exude a feeling of otherness by depicting a world that is too calm, too orderly, and altogether empty. The series of thematically related artworks is characterized by slightly highlighting some distant and hidden connotations to a catastrophic event that occurred in an abandoned place. The landscape is used to signify, through its own emptiness, that which has happened there. The artist was influenced by the Kosovo War and his works illustrate landscapes as depicted in the news and media of the time. Donwood portrays geographic landscapes in a way that shows their hidden truth as places where war took place, even if the consequences of that violence are now hidden to the eye [fig.6].

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[17] Ibidem.

[18] Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative.* Winchester, Zero Books, 2009, p. 2.

[19] Stanley Donwood (born 1968) is an English artist and writer. Donwood is particularly known for his distinctive style of screen printing, which often incorporates surreal imagery and political commentary. His work often deals with themes of environmentalism, politics, and the human condition. He is known for his use of dark humor and satire, as well as his commitment to exploring the potential of art as a tool for social change.

Figure 4

Mario Sironi

Landscape with a Truck

1920

Oil on canvas

Figure 5

Mario Sironi

Periferia

1948

Oil on canvas

Figure 6

Stanley Donwood

Red snow. Bootprints.

1999

Oil on canvas

In this sense, the cataclysmic events in the three examples of *apocalypses* presented (Meidner, Sironi, and Donwood) were all directly influenced by contemporary socially and politically cataclysmic events. Consequently, it could be stated that, wars serve as a link between the contextualization and the historicization of our culture, and thus the consequent conceptualization of the end of the world. In order to define the apocalypse's occurrence as an event, it is given a specific temporal dimension as well as precise geographic and physical coordinates. The apocalypse is thus able to transcend its status as a merely imaginary representation and transform into an accurate social and political reference by being given precise spatiotemporal dimensions.

Nonetheless, as Dick Raaijmakers notes in analysing Benjamin's notion of the "destructive character", there are two types of time in a catastrophe that simultaneously constitute such an event, which are respectively, the "time of destruction" and the "time of arrangement".[20] Together, these separate moments constitute the natural time of a disaster, in which the moments of destruction and order are the sum of a single phenomenon's destructive character. The moment of destruction is characterized by an impact. As a result, its explicit evidence is destruction. Transience and short-livedness are characteristics of time in a destruction. The impact of the catastrophe, the destructive attack, thus happens too quickly to be fully grasped through the concept of time; hence, its cause remains invisible or incomprehensible. Similarly, the time of destruction runs throughout Meidner's apocalyptic series, in which the destructive effects are clearly visible, even on a social level.

On the other hand, the time of arrangement is understood as a consecutive and complementary part of a destruction: and this is visible in the interpretations of Sironi and finally of Donwood. The time of decay instead, as Raaijmakers notes, is the aftermath of a destructive effect, and for this reason, the effect falls into the past – invisible in the present. Respectively, in Sironi's landscapes, there is a vision of a remade and reinvented place, while with Donwood the place is frozen, forever in the moment after the impact, and before the reorganization.[21] The creative clearing is thus a characteristic of the power of destruction. The place of the apocalypse is transformed into a non-place because, as Marc Augè notes, it is now a "space that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or having to do with identity"[22]. Now, it is not only an order that is brought about in an apocalyptic way that it is disastrous for its subjects, as it interrupts a certain social existence in favor of another one suitable for political or economic development – subjects may themselves be apocalyptic and therefore seek the

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[20] Raaijmakers, Dick. The Destructive Character. In: *The Destructive Character.* Ed. D. Raaijmakers. Eindhoven, Onomatopee 54, 2011, p. 15.
[21] According to Benjamin, the destructive character and its devastating forces help to "clear away the traces of our own age". Cfr. Benjamin, Walter. The Destructive Character, In: *The Destructive Character.* Ed. D. Raaijmakers. Eindhoven, Onomatopee 54, 2011, p. 6.
[22] Augè, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of Supermodernity.* London, Verso Books, 1995, p. 77-78.

destruction of a continuing political order of rule that is unsuitable in its conditions for the continuation of a social existence.

In *The Book of Revelation* there is a similar atmosphere: in fact, Ronald Herms notes that the aim of the book revolves around three main themes and accordingly denounces: "1) political rulers and systems that have persecuted a [...] minority; 2) economic policies that lead to excessive luxury and neglect of the poor; 3) the general inequality between social classes"[23]. In general, according to Herms, the book is an indictment of the conflation of politics and capital interests. This is evident, for example, in the following statement, from *The Book of Revelation:* "[t]he merchants of the earth have become rich by the power of their luxurious life"[24]. John's community has openly chosen to oppose the dominant political rule of Rome and its oppressive policies towards the slaves. In this regard, David deSilva affirms that *Revelation* points to the Roman Empire, but from the practical side condemns any system, state or empire in history that has the same ideology as the past Roman Empire and its politics.[25] In its historicity, then, apocalyptic discourse is a critique of the abuse of political power by opposing groups or collectives and their demand for greater justice in history.[26] The call for greater justice in history outlined above leads us to the current political order and some adversarial movements. In particular, when we think of the Occupy Movement and a statement made by Manfred Steger and James Paul in 2013, in which they define the movement as one that seeks "global justice"[27].

For the community of the Occupy movement, the decline of the current societal and political order is to be attributed to the 'evil' permeating all capitalistic institutions, especially those of the financial sector. The movement has collectively acknowledged that financial institutions are responsible for a significant portion of the malaise of society, including environmental and climate change, which is subject to irreversible change, along with the conditioning of human beings on an absolute level.

If we return to the contextualization of one of the most important apocalyptic discourses in the Apocalypse of John, we find an explicit denunciation and criticism of the merchants who have enriched themselves in the political system of Rome, in which case the Apocalypse literally serves to put an end

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[23] Herms, Ronald. *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World: The Narrative Function of Universal Language in the Book of Revelation.* Ed. W. de Gruyter. New York, 2006, p. 205.

[24] Revelation, [18:3]. New King James Version.

[25] Cf. deSilva, David. *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation.* Westminster, John Knox Press, 2009.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] James, Paul and Steger, Manfred. Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies. – In: *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 2013, no 12, p. 35.

to unfairly gained wealth and luxury.[28] From here, it can be argued that the Apocalypse acts in a secular way against the mixing of politics and capital.

Conclusion

The purpose of engaging with apocalyptic discourse is not to comprehend any mystic "prophecies", but rather to understand how this discourse reflects the anxieties, guilt, and aspirations of humanity about itself and the system that contains them. Here, apocalypse takes the form of activism that "speaks through catastrophes" – appropriate for depicting and interpreting the present world and its inhabitants. Such discourse has specific objectives – to describe or pursue the end of a specific time and space, that is typically located in the "now". As such, apocalyptic imagination and discourse are also the means for the aestheticization of politics. Accordingly, it becomes possible to address and comprehend current issues through the use of apocalyptic discourse, but it also becomes possible to look to the future and imagine ways to break free from a current impasse. In this sense, the apocalyptic discourse might be viewed as a bridge between experiencing the present and transitioning to a desired future.

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[28] Cf. The Book of Revelation*,* [18:3] and [18:11]. *New King James Version.*

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