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## The Minimalist Apocalypse. A Genre Analysis of *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii*.

**Abstract:** This paper is discussing *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (Mitulescu 2006) as a case study for the idea that all mythologies of the end are based on personal eschatology. Elaborating on the concept of minimalist apocalypse, the author follows two main approaches – the narrative and the genre analysis as interpretation tools. The main elements of all apocalyptic narratives (considered to be the apocalyptic destruction of time; the Messianic presence; and the eschatological transformation of the world) are used in the analysis of the movie.

**Keywords:** Minimalist apocalypse, eschatological, “apocaholic”, transformation.

### *Eschatons – when time and history end*

Eschatology, as indicated by the etymology of the term itself, is about the end of things (in Greek *eschaton* /ἔσχατον/ meaning literally “the end”). Every major religion, every mythology, every civilization has a theory about *eschatos*, that is about how the end will come. There is even a field in theological studies called “comparative eschatology”, which studies various forms of religious thinking about the ending of life/ world/ history/ time.

However, the “end of the world” is one of the most profound Judeo-Christian myths, although there are some deep influences from the Mesopotamian mythologies, it remains central to Western civilization. It is in the Jewish eschatology where the end of the world has been identified with “end of days” (*acharit ha-yamim* - Deuteronomy 31:29), that is with a moment in the history of humanity when time will cease to exist, and a “new age”, a new time will be put into place. This is fundamental to our understanding of the

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end of the world – the *eschaton* is the end of time, the interruption of the linear development of human history.

Relevantly enough, the New Testament, implicitly with the message of Christ, begins with the reference to the same “end of days”. In early Christianity, claiming that the end was near was reinforced with the Messianic function. Embedded in the initial announcement of Christianity (*eschaton ton hemeron* - ἔσχατον τῶν ἡμερῶν) was the fulfillment of the Messianic message in the Old Testament. The end of the world in Christianity is the time when The Messiah has returned (Starnes 27). In the New Testament this is obvious in the references from Mark 3:2 and Matthew 4:27, which indicate that the beginning of the Gospel must be tied with the idea that the Kingdom of God is near, and that the Messiah is here to bring the change of the world. This is another important message in any apocalyptic narrative: a Savior will come one the end is here.

Another important eschatological theme in apocalyptic storytelling is that of the eschatological transformation of the world - the changing of the Heavens and Earth. The creation of the New Jerusalem, after the annihilation of the old world equals the destruction of the sinful and the restoration of a new world which belongs to the pure and just. This is the *chiliasm* tradition in apocalyptic mythology, of the millennial golden kingdom of prosperity, of a perfect new world which is supposed to come after the end. All millennial mythologies share this trait

– the end of one world is the beginning of another, better world. In this respect, the end of the world is an end of a society, an end of a social organization of humanity.

So, without detailing further the intricate problems of eschatological inferences in the Old and the New Testament, as well as in contemporary society, I consider that there are three key elements of the Judeo-Christian eschatology that must be followed in any interpretation of the apocalyptic message: the apocalyptic destruction of time; the Messianic presence; and the eschatological transformation of the world.

### *Big and small apocalypses*

In terms of the practical manifestation of the end, the amplitude of the apocalyptic phenomenon, the magnitude of the end of the world differs in the various forms it comes: tsunamis, eruptions, geological cataclysms of all kinds, planetary and even cosmological changes. There is one common trait – they are all at a grand scale. The end of the world is represented in our popular culture as being tied with large cosmic event: asteroids clashing, supernova explosions, or similar experiences with universal impact, like planets being destroyed. These are all *maximal* expressions of the end of the world. Manifested as maximal tragedies, most of the times the *eschaton* is happening at the level of the entire history of humanity – as it is the case with the end of entire civilizations, from the Atlantes to the Mayans and, more recently, with the Holocaust or

racial genocides. These are all tragedies beyond comprehension.

Yet the end of each of our personal histories, the end of each individual is as powerful as the end of an entire civilization. Within any large scale apocalypse there are the *minimal* tragedies, the *micro* catastrophes, and they are as important as the catastrophes occurring at cosmic level, even if, most of the times, we perceive them as being more tragically eventful than the personal destruction. The end of our lives is in every case the end of the world as we know it, and since we don't know any other world but our own private universe, and we have no other existence except this one, the loss of life and, for that matter, any painful event threatening this life is projected into an apocalyptic dimension.

#### *About myth projections – etiologic explanations*

One of the most important explanations of how myths come into social discourse belongs to the psychological approach to myth formation. The etiologic explanation provided by the psychological functionalism suggests that any myth is a development of a real event and action. As Malinowski (1926) has indicated, myths are stories that explain difficult concepts for the primitive individual, like death and sickness. In this respect, myths are stories that reflect our own feelings and desires; they are narrative projections of our intimate fears and hopes, ways to deal with the irrational nature of the human existence. As such,

apocalyptic mythology is a projection of the psychological and emotional disturbance of the primitive self.

This must be linked with the psychoanalytical explanation of myth formation. Following the classical description provided by Freudian myth analysis, all myths are basically projections of the inner world, mirrors of the instinctual life of the individuals. Later, in the Jungian interpretation, this was to be projected in the collective unconscious. For Jung all myths are manifestations of the human psyche, and the more fearful and unexplainable a social or personal experience is, the more we try to find supernatural explanations for its occurrence, thus mythologizing its "real" nature of events (Kerényi and Jung 3-5). The myth fundamentally explains what is going on in the psyche of the individuals, and then it projects these inner tensions into the wider, collective expression of the unconscious.

Usually when we are addressing the mythological manifestations of the apocalypse, we tend to see it as a global event, influencing humanity or parts of humanity, with an impact over the time and history. We expect the end of the world as the catastrophic event which will occur as a planetary tragedy: the Noah flood, the plague or, more recently, the nuclear disaster. Yet the end of the world, or rather the end of *a world* happens every minute - each and every one of us is facing individual ends of the world. Over time every person suffers from disease and illness, which are causing pain; every human be-

ing faces personal loss or change of their social status - these are forms of apocalypse. Losing a job or an important and beloved object represents the end of an era, and death represents the actual end of the world.

But of all the inexplicable accidents that occur in our personal existence, mortality predisposes us to have the conscience of the imminent end of our life, having us consider more often the possibility of our destruction and our irreparable disappearance. Emotionally it is sometimes easier for us to conceive the end of the world, the catastrophic destruction of all life on earth, than accepting our own death. In this sense the end of the world, the end of all life, the end of creation and of time is nothing but the projection of our own end, the end of our personal life, individual time and existence transferred at a global proportion. And, contrasting with the never coming end of the cosmic world, the end of our personal life is one of the apocalypses that will certainly happen; it is an end of the world which we will definitely witness, an *eschaton* we must surely be a part of. The end of the world is, in this respect, only a projection of the implacable end of the individual. Being mortals we know that we are all going to die - this is the only certainty of life: death.

### *Are we all "apocaholics"?*

Another approach which provides an important insight in the formation of the theme of the end of the world comes from the theory of fiction. As Frank Kermode

argued, "The end" is more important than just as a part of the narrative development. Since any narrative has an apocalyptic finality, which structures its beginning and its ending, one can say that humans are socially trained to be *apocaholics*, which means we are addicted to the end, to various ends. Basically the apocalyptic thinking is a product of a cultural habit. This revolutionary idea was put forward in a seminal book by Frank Kermode. In his book about the sense of ending in literature, the critic suggests that there are two roots of the myth of the end of the world. The first is purely narrative, the end is a structural necessity of every story to come to a conclusion, to reach an end, thus making the stories about the end of the world a necessity. Second, which I will follow later, is that every apocalyptic narrative is a projection of our own fear of death. The basic human need for ending gives us a false relationship with time, which we come to think, must end at some point. And this is changing our "real" relationship with time and existence (Kermode 57). In this sense "how" we narrate "the end" is as important as "what" we make out of it. Any changes in the narratives about the end must be seen as an indicator for a change in our understanding of the world.

This second perspective, linked to the formation of mythological eschatology, opens two major explanations for the *apocaholic* need, as Kermode has put it, in all human societies. One is optimistic, and was explained in detail by Mircea Eliade. The end of the world mythologies

are expressions of hope, no matter what terrible end we will suffer, there is going to be a resurrection, a rebirth. The second explanation suggested that the desire for the end of the world is actually a projection of the human condition, of a psychological determined necessity.

*The syntax of "The End of the World" movies. A genre analysis*

Rick Altman was one of the first film critics to propose a genre studies approach to cinema interpretation. This technique was used early on as a narrative structure analysis, which allows the comparative discussion of the similarities between various cinematic productions. In this respect, similar movies have a similar syntax, the function according to structures which can be arranged and rearranged in such a way that they provide a stable understanding of the content (Altman 1984). It is not so much the vocabulary which interests the interpreter, that is the semantic of the discourse, but rather the broader meaning, generated by structural organization of elements. Following the differences between the semantic and syntactic, the elements which are repeatedly stable and those who are constructed and irregular, the critic can have access to the deep meaning formation. Altman distinguishes between the primary level of generating meaning (the semantic) and a secondary one (the syntactic), where the bond between the elements remains unchangeable.

In order to understand the importance of the end of the world in terms of cin-

ematic narratives one must understand the profound impact stories about catastrophes have played in the history of world cinema from the early stages onwards. One of the oldest genres in film history is based on the apocalyptic narrative. The coming apocalypse was a constant reference in the history of cinema, and its presence can be traced from the earliest production called *End of the Days* (made in 1916), to the most recent TV series entitled *Revolution* (2012). The interest for representing disasters has created a specific genre which is, by definition, described as catastrophe movies. The eschatology films have become part of the Hollywood storytelling, the apocalyptic narrative being one of the most successful themes in recent cinema making. We can analyze these movies by looking at the "qualities" of the genre, at the building blocks which are specific to what Kirsten Thompson described as "apocalypticism" (Thompson 11). Basically all the catastrophe (or disaster) movies are organized as a syntactic structure following plot structures and story lines building on the human fear of ending and the implicit desire of renewal.

Without going too deep in the debate about the sub-genres in cinema - where there are some authors considering the science fiction films as a genre of its own, while others view it as a sub-genre which was developed as a specific expression of the catastrophe movies - the productions which are called apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic belong to the broader category of disaster/ catastrophe films.

A few titles of Hollywood movies with this subject are relevant in themselves: *Armageddon* (1998), *End of Days* (1999), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), *Zombie Apocalypse* (2011) these films have in their center a heroic figure trying to stop the implacable end of days (or the apocalypse). Relevantly enough, as we were approaching the year 2000, the cinematic representations of the end of the world were growing in number – this decade was dominated by the *Terminator* series or the *Matrix* series, which were carrying into the popular culture a message of the imminent destruction of the world as we know it. Only in 1997 were released 14 films with this subject, in a single year that was an accomplishment of the genre!

There are a couple of common tropes of these movies, but, as is the case with the famous *End of Days*, starring the macho hero Arnold Schwarzenegger, where the protagonist fights and succeeds to defeat evil, stopping the transformation of the world, the most common elements are those already identified in the theological narratives: the Messianic intervention, the temporal redemption and the physical renewal.

### *The Way I Spent The End of the World: a case study*

In the following discussion, I will be using Cătălin Mitulescu's movie, *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006), as a case study to explore the idea that personal eschatology, expressed in a minimalist apocalyptic narrative, follows the elements of the maximal apoc-

alypse genre. Discussing the three elements of any apocalyptic narrative (the end of the world as time and space, and the Messianic promise), the interpretation searches for similarities in the discourse and in the structure of a contemporary movie.

Before going to the in-depth analysis of the film, the first question which has to be addressed is if we can perform a generic analysis of a movie clearly not a typical disaster movie, as if it would belong to the catastrophe genre? The following question concerns the possible outcome of such an approach. The answers come from the very nature of the "new wave" cinema, from the fact that it provides counter-narratives to the canonical film making, thus allowing a more critical comparison, both at the level of the genre and at the level of content formation.

First of all is the narrative level. Matei, the young protagonist of the movie, is called Lalalilu, and this obvious alliterative name suggests the loose identity of the character. He lives between worlds, he is not mature, but he is neither a child; he is witness to tragedy, and part of innocence; he is both happy and sad. Yet this kindergarten boy's function as main character is totally opposed to the typical catastrophe action movie characters. Still, as in the case of the super-heroic apocalyptic male protagonists, he is facing, throughout the movie, several personal "ends of the world" (and will become the source for the end of the world). Actually almost each sequence in the movie represents an apocalypse of its own, an end

of the world. Unlike the superheroes in the disaster movies, initially Lalalilu passively watches the world around him collapse, observing how his sister, Eva, begins to deal with the harsh realities of life. He sees how his mother and father are struggling for existence, and how his entire neighborhood is consumed by apathy. Living in Romania during the final years of Ceausescu's regime is like living throughout the end of the world.

In Mitulescu's narrative treatment the end of the communist regime is not only the end of the world, but is also the end of several worlds. The narrative change the director proposes is quintessential. As the family of the Gypsy peddler of the neighborhood watch the December festivities broadcasted on television, we see in a brief television close-up how Lalalilu's uses his slingshot against the communist supreme Leader, which becomes, in turn, the main instigation of the Revolution in Romania. In the end Lalalilu has become the Messianic hero, he defeated the Evil figure, and while Ceausescu is helplessly calling for calm, the growing destruction of his world takes over. Later, when Lalalilu and the other neighbors are watching the burial of Ceausescu and his wife on television, the prophecy of the end is fulfilled.

*The end of innocence as  
the end of the world*

Once again childhood plays an important role in constructing the mythology of the end. As Jung pointed out, the psychic health of the individual depends on the

childhood patterns of psychic activity and the process of the psyche development is a continuous process of dramatization, a process that (unlike in the Freudian approach) never ends. This dramatization is similar to that of dreaming, where everything happens in a theater in which "the dreamer is himself the scene, the player, the prompter, the producer, the author, the public, and the critic" (Jung 1974, par. 509)

This dramatization is explicit in the very first sequence of the movie. Beginning with a *raccourci* showing a group of elderly people in a room (the parents waiting for the school celebration to begin), as opposed to the merry children in the auditorium next door, the opening shot establishes this opposition: innocent and young vs. old and destitute. The entire narrative of the movie is actually constructed around this opposition between the universe of the children (expressed by the "gang" of Lalalilu) and the universe of the "old people", of the people who are already captive in their own destiny (the parents, the professors, the Securitate officer).

The universe of the children is the universe of dreaming, while the universe of the adults is dominated by reality and pragmatic decisions. The most relevant is the opening sequence, when Lalalilu dreams that he meets Ceausescu, who personally hands him huge polenta pie (*mămăligă*). "Mămăligă eaters" was the derogatory term for describing Romanians, and here "mămăliga" is the food which can be eaten also by those

who cannot chew, who are not grown up. Since the “mămăliga” is given to Lalalilu by Ceausescu as an instance of the super ego, being a subconscious reference to fact that Lalalilu did not grow up. When Ceausescu finds out that Lalalilu has his baby teeth, he takes the “mămăliga” from the young boy, who comes back to reality. This obviously represents the coercive nature of authority, the cruelty of adult life. Having baby teeth and the falling of the baby teeth are latent manifestation of the painful transformation that the child goes through, from innocence to adulthood. The loss of innocence becomes the loss of the world, and while the child enters the world of adults it loses a paradise which was childhood. In this sense the movement from childhood to another age is automatically that compatible to a psychic apocalypse. Leaving the world effectiveness and this represented by the preschool existence of the young hero is projected as the first end of the world. The little boy faces an inner cataclysm, a catastrophe where he must recognize that there is no turning back to a world which has disappeared.

Another degradation of the innocence is represented in the movie when one of the families in the neighborhood organizes a baptism celebration. Titi, the grandfather, seems like a respected elder, a patriarchal figure surrounded by his offspring, his children and grandchildren. He has his grandson pick up an item from a tray of random objects, and declares that his future profession will be decided upon what he chose. Even if the child cannot

even talk his destiny is determined by the older generation. Yet by the end of the party Titi falls into a degraded form of innocence, he appears to be an irrational figure, taking off his clothes, climbing naked on top of the roof.

Coming out of the dream world of childhood, both Eva and Lalalilu end up facing the dark realities of the society. Eva loses her innocence (by making love to Alexandru) and thus enters the world of the adults, and Lalalilu loses his innocence when putting his dream of killing Ceausescu into action. The loss of innocence leads immediately to the end of a world.

*The end of a political world/  
the apocalyptic transformation of society*

In a narrow, political and social sense, the Romanian Revolution represented the end of a world and the beginning of a new world. This is the explicit “end of the world”, the one the title of the movie refers to. Yet, in the personal lives of the characters of this movie there are several social ends. Both Eva and her boyfriends (Alexandru and Andrei) are experiencing their own “ends of the world”. First Eva, the sister of Lalalilu, is expelled from her “elitist” high school, after smashing the bust of Ceausescu. Eva’s world ends when she is sent to a technical school, only to begin again when she meets Andrei. Then the two of them conspire to escape communist Romania by swimming across the Danube into Yugoslavia and making their way to Italy. Eva’s second end of the world happens on the shores of the

Danube, when trying to escape communist Romania only to return to the shore, while Andrei's end of the world is the successful flight to the West. The third end of the world is when Eva finally emigrates, after the death of Alexandru, only to be working on a Paradise - like cruiser, in a capitalist environment.

Almost all other characters in the movie face similar "ends of the world" - and the end scene is extremely relevant for this transformation. As it is for Ceausică, the father of Alexandru and the Securitate officer of the neighborhood, the end of communism means the end of his life as an authority figure and his transformation into a caricature - like individual. Opposed to the apocalypse of the regime, all these individual apocalypses are even more dramatic and perceived as more important, and deeper than the social one.

#### *Dying and leaving as ends of the world*

Leaving is the end of the world, or paraphrasing the line from a sonnet by Edmond Haraucourt, moving from one world to another, leaving one's country, and, for the particular context of this movie, escaping the realities of communism, is nothing but another manifestation of the end of the world. For many Romanians who have become transfuges, immigrants without citizenship or social identity, this has represented a very probable end of their world. Leaving one place for another is a representation of the end. Eva tries to revolt against the authority of her father when she disappears with Andrei to escape from Romania across

the Danube. Her leaving meant the desire to put an end to her world. When she returns back to the unjust society, she is actually accepting the final transformation of her life.

Another "minimalist" end of the world is the loss of the individual life. The young boy almost drowns himself and it's saved by the madman of the neighborhood. Death and near death experiences are in conjunction with living the end of the world in a personal manner. This is explicit in the sequence when "Boulba Superman", the town drunk rescues Lalalilu when he nearly drowns. The only adult able to perform innocently in the world of abnormality is the madman, and he is promising the young boy that Ceausescu will be "taken care of", and he will never be allowed to hurt anyone again, a promise of the end.

#### *Final transformation of the individual*

In the final scene, Lalalilu and his friends make their way to the mailbox at the end of their street, and during this short, almost dreamlike road, when symbolically the children are taking over the world of the adults (by driving the car), the line between fantasy and reality is completely erased. When reality and illusion have merged, the horrible world of the past was transformed into a colorful, happy dream world. Lalalilu's two friends are driving the car as he sits in the back and watches all the elder men in the neighborhood outside the window, and they are all changed. The secret police agent and the domineering teacher, two of the most important figures of au-

thority, have now become usual people, one almost crazy, the other a common figure. The old authority has lost its power, the old world has disappeared. As the camera pans, focusing in on this lineup of old men, they are saying goodbye to their world.

In the end, the personal eschaton is a manifestation of the radical and total transformation of the old world into a new world. In this respect any total transformation of the individual is an expression of the minimized apocalypse.

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