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## Psycho-Apocalypses, from Theory to Practice

As the present paper is being written, the 21<sup>st</sup> of December has already passed as (un)eventful as any other ordinary day, in the absence of the Big Event, but with high expectances reaching their culminating point and then transforming this day into history: another day when humanity was longing for the Apocalypse more than ever. Of course, this date will go along the vast series of settled days for the end of the world, beginning from Montanus heresies to the Y2K Millenium Bug of the year 2000. For those interested in the study of the apocalyptic phenomenon, this comes as a unique chance to witness the transformations underwent by the apocalyptic expectations and projections, before and after such an event. The main idea of my article is the assumption that we have gradually passed during the last decade and during the last two years from a post-apocalyptic imagination/ideology to the pre-apocalyptic distress, from the postmodern apocalypses of the 1990s to the intense anxiety of the psycho-apocalypse, from the comic/parodic mood of the 1990s apoca-

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the concept of psycho-apocalypse as belonging to a new type of apocalyptic imagination in film and literature, with a vast range of examples, mostly taken from the films of 2011, extremely significant both for the change in the apocalyptic genre of the last two decades and for the return of pre-apocalypticism, a resurgence of intense expectations for the end of the world (a new apocalyptic psychoses). In the first part of the article I outline a few theoretical perspectives on this shift, and, in the second part I analyze the significant examples, from the TV series "Doomsday Preppers" to films like *Take Shelter* and *Another Earth*.

**Keywords:** psycho-apocalypse, pre-apocalypticism, imminence, apocalyptic expectations, reactive depression.

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lypses to the dark undertones of the recent narratives which tend to emphasize our current deadlock, our lack of hope/solutions and our desperate fascination with the total end of the world.

Even the theoretical background seems to have shifted from the focus on the postmodern ends to a more receptive and concerned approaches, which tend to survey our contemporary crisis from various perspectives. The first category was very well represented during the Nineties with Fukuyama's famous end of history, Baudrillard and his "strike of events"/end of real and with the idea that apocalypse has already happened, seen as immanent in the course of history, especially with the events of the Twentieth Century (the Holocaust, the atomic bombs, etc). James Berger's introduction to an issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* centered upon the apocalypse is the perfect example for the mainstream critical inquiry which insisted on the end of history, the fading fear of the nuclear disaster, the end of the Cold War generating the end of a specific mythology (Berger 387), a set of religious symbols (the Antichrist, Armageddon), a discourse which is also a staple of the Nineties criticism. The overwhelming feeling was that "apocalypse was our history", being immanent, the very essence of history. From the year 2000's perspective, which was another privileged point of view for the scholar to witness a projected apocalyptic date, the millennium seemed almost irrelevant, passing unnoticed, with a general feeling of exhaustion regarding the traditional apocalyptic scenarios.

As it has been often noted, this paradigm of skepticism and postmodern deconstruction of the apocalyptic fears ended with the 9/11 attacks, perceived as revealing the whole potential of an apocalyptic symbolism: the return of history, the unexpected disclosure of the sacred, but, most important for our discussion here, the intense longing for the end, our insatiable expectances for catastrophic events. The best diagnostics for this new "panic culture" that has emerged in the 2000s, after 9/11 belongs to Peter Sloterdijk, who speaks about the *pedagogy of the catastrophe* and about some key features regarding what has changed in the apocalyptic imagination (Sloterdijk 54). The new apocalyptic spirit which structures the alternative culture presents itself as very informed on the possible dangers around us, having a new pragmatic relationship with the catastrophe which no longer belongs to the field of vision, but to that of perception (Sloterdijk 47). Apocalypse is no longer confined to the field of prophecy and religion, but becomes part of the everyday news and has its equivalent in a neo-pagan version of panic.

Once again, Günther Anders, the philosopher of the nuclear age, proved more actual than ever, especially his remark about the fact that "there is no more final and no more fatal proof of moral blindness than to deal with the Apocalypse as if it were a «special field»" (Anders 500). In other words, this general spread of concern for the apocalyptic implications of our current state of af-

fairs has produced in the last decade a huge amount of books displaying an appetite for synthesis, an almost compulsory interdisciplinary approach, a panoramic view on all the domains (I am not referring here to the genre of popular scientific, which has a long post-war tradition, but to the mainstream of the cultural sphere). It seems that is no longer possible to remain within the confines of the apocalyptic as a specific field of study, detached from our worries regarding the world around us. And, vice versa, it is no longer possible to analyze some aspects of our world without coming to apocalyptic conclusions. Jean Michel Besnier, *Demain les posthumains*, Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (also *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*), and Naomi Klein *The Shock Doctrine* are just a few examples.

Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times* proves to be a very accurate guide through the very recent apocalyptic film productions, and also for the concept of the psycho-apocalypse. Following Catherine Malabou's inquiry on the new forms of contemporary violence (*Les nouveaux blessés*), Žižek emphasizes the fact that we deal with "abstract violence at its purest", with important effects on the human psyche, generating a new, post-traumatic subject (Žižek 308). There are several reasons why we should agree with Žižek about the utter novelty of this phenomenon, which casts a new light over the apocalyptic pattern of expectations: these intrusions of the real are often experienced as lacking any sense, hence the

fact that apocalypse is not perceived as revealing meaning ("the sense of an ending", in Frank Kermode's terms), but as a final catastrophe, without any redeeming power. The features of this post-traumatic subject are the profound indifference, the detachment from any form of erotic and emotional engagement and the fact that the causes of its demise resists any interpretation (Žižek 294). Most psycho-apocalypses center on a similar protagonist, with clear resemblances with the outlook of a post-traumatic subject, with a traumatic event situated in the present, but impossible to locate and so difficult to be interpreted (a diffuse and profound social evil, very similar to the one depicted by Fritz Lang in his 1931 classic feature, *M*, a film about an age of anxiety not very different from ours).

What is really striking at the current apocalyptic mood, pervading many valuable films of the year 2011, is the general feeling that we have reached an "apocalyptic zero point", generating a total lack of hope, being impossible to be explained or assimilated by the subject. From *Take Shelter* to *Perfect Sense*, from *Melancholia* to *Another Earth*, the only certainty seems to be the fact that the end is imminent and cannot be avoided. But before we get to the fictional representations of the end and its effects on an already traumatized subject, I will outline the particularities of this encounter in real terms, as it is shown in a very popular reality show, also very significant for our current apocalyptic mood.

### Rehearsing for the Last Days

The most significant and also very recent example for how far the pre-apocalyptic fears would go and become a social fact is the TV documentary about the *Doomsday Preppers*, which airs on National Geographic since February 7, 2012 (the date of its premiere) and it has already reached its second season in November 2012. The series captures a vast range of apocalyptic profile of survivalists, and also a large number of apocalyptic scenarios which define their new way of life in the shadow of a forthcoming disaster: economic collapse, social uprising/anarchy, different types of catastrophes (giant eruptions, solar storms/CME, nuclear holocaust, floods, pandemics etc. These envisioned scenarios have certain points in common: almost in every case the fear is linked to the effects on society, causing chaos and anarchy and the collapse of the present political order; the end is imagined as a process of disintegration of the present world, not as one last fatal blow, sinking us into oblivion; as a consequence we deal with the whole post-apocalyptic imagination and mythology.

One of the most important myths present in the post-apocalyptic scenarios is that of the last survivor, "the last man on earth", and it seems that each and every protagonist of these episodes envisions himself as one. *Doomsday Preppers* stages an apocalyptic psychosis of an imminent catastrophic end which nurtures itself from a post-apocalyptic imagination and a survivalist urge to imagine oneself as the last man standing, long af-

ter the collapse of the current state of things. The actual enemy is embodied by our world which stagnates in a never-ending crisis and the hope is that it will eventually be wiped out by a disaster, large enough to generate a new order, but not the total disaster which would not leave any survivors. In fact, the key word is here "survivalism", a re-emergence of a postwar movement (as a response to the nuclear fears of the 1960s) with such intensity comparable to that manifested during the worst moments of the Cold War. There is a vast number of critical inquires on this subject. Kenneth D. Rose for example surveys how the obsession to build shelters became a national phenomenon in American culture (*One Nation Underground. The Fallout Shelter in American Culture*). The close connection between the imagination of disaster and survivalism has often been noted and it is rendered manifest by the "preppers", as it was in the case of the Eighties post-apocalyptic movies and, earlier, starting with the post-Hiroshima films of the Forties (Broderick 362).



Fig. 1. Curtis, the protagonist of *Take Shelter*, builds a shelter for his family, risking his job and finances.

On the other hand, preparing for the end becomes a way of life, a hobby, the last resource of meaning for these individuals, and also a process of denying

consumerism through the Marxist “negation of negation” (Gordin Tilley Prakash 30), a transgression of consumerism by intensifying its very premises (Jameson exemplifies it with Wal Mart): accumulating goods in excess and stockpiling them for the ever-postponed moment of collapse; replacing ordinary products with more austere, even primitive ones; the social realm of this individuals tends to fade away due to the peculiar hobby of prepping, which becomes a new way of life, as if the Event has already happened, as if these subjects already inhabit a post-apocalyptic world: increased state of alarm (they act as if they were subject to an imminent attack, they stockpile weapons, they do endless shooting exercises) rationalization of food, isolation from their neighbors, from the city life etc. This also illustrate Sloterdijk assumption about the new form of apocalyptic, namely the panic response, which is also pragmatic, relying on precise techniques, each of them being tested and later evaluated by a board of specialists (part of the fun for viewers). The Preppers are also encouraged by the industry for survivalism which has emerged recently, with a special line of products and kits for survival in an emergency situation (“American Eagle Endurance” line).

The criticism of Neil Genzlinger shows little knowledge about this dimension of apocalyptic phenomenon and he fails to outline its relevance in the current context (Genzlinger 2012). He also fails to explain the prepping phenomenon as a reaction to the distressful social environ-

ment (most of the preppers feel threatened and they are encouraged to be so by the authority) and as an example of escapism, of fantasizing about the end of an oppressive reality. The abstract violence produced by the media needs to be channeled. The “Doomsday Preppers” phenomenon is also generated by the media exposure to every day’s “shocks and awe”.

### The Anatomy of the Apocalyptic Obsession

*Take Shelter* is my first example of a psycho-apocalypse, which also connects us to the ‘prepping’ world, since the film’s protagonist takes the prepping obsession to the limits: the basic plot of the film is centered on Curtis’ obsession with the end of the world as a tornado coming by surprise on an ordinary day, and, in order to save his family, he builds an underground shelter in his backyard. Eventually he loses his job and is considered a mad man by everyone in their community, until one day, when the apocalyptic tornado lurks on the horizon in the last scene of the film. *Take Shelter* proposes a visual paradox: it starts with a dream that looks like reality, and it ends with a real event that appears to be a nightmare.



Fig. 2. Curtis' first dream starts as an ordinary day...



Fig. 3. ...but it looks like the end of the world.



Fig. 4. Curtis' haunting obsession, the ever-present element of his dreams: dark horizons.

The first shot of the film has Curtis, in the middle of the day, anxiously watching the sky, as if he was about to start the most ordinary of days. As the camera shifts towards the horizon, we understand that Curtis is about to witness the Great Event: the dark horizon and the black rain are signs that this is no ordinary tornado, but the one able to wipe everything from the face of the Earth. The apocalyptic tornado blackening the skies is the constant element of Curtis' nightmares, which artfully punctuate the syntax of the film: every dream is inserted by Nichols in order to appear as the natural continuation of a previous real action, scene or situation. Curtis' reality and the apocalyptic dreams are shifting from one another until they almost overlap, and the viewer is progressively submerged in this confusion which first belongs to Curtis's perspective. Curtis' third dream occurs after he and his family were atten-

ding a medical program with his daughter as a subsequent logic action: they return home, but in the car only Hannah and the dark rain pattering on the window is present, as a sign that we are in Curtis' vision. The dream ends with them being attacked by zombie-like men (this is an essential detail, I will discuss it later) and triggers the first plot point, namely Curtis' decision to enlarge the underground shelter (in the first part of the film, the effects of his visions on his daily routine are also ironic and comic). The second example also comes after the family returns home after the same program, with his wife and child sleeping in the car, and with Curtis witnessing alone the thunders on the horizon.

The terror of the imminent end which first shapes Curtis' mind becomes endemic with the whole fictional world of the film, and, indirectly, with our real world as viewers. Everything that happens between those seven visions (also an apocalyptic number, the seven seals from *The Book of Revelation*), every detail of Curtis' day-life becomes imbued and confused with the apocalyptic hallucinations, suggesting a non-religious, sensorial representation of the Apocalypse, just as Sloterdijk has suggested.



Fig. 5. Curtis' dreams submerging his day life.





Fig. 6. His visions have sensorial effects.



Fig. 7. Curtis checks his arm, after a dream about his dog attacking him.

His visions also corrode his ordinary world, and Jeff Nichols plays masterfully with this confusion, which will lead to the total estrangement of the protagonist, from his social relations, from his colleagues, from his everyday duties, and even from his family. In this context, the fifth and the sixth dreams gain a special relevance. The fifth dream is actually not represented, we learn from Curtis' laconic description that he has seen Dewart (his team partner and friend) being transformed ("zombified") and attacking him with a pickaxe. This dream has also the worst physical effects on Curtis who bleeds heavily, and is eventually forced to confess about his visions, which terrifies his wife Samantha. Jeff Nichols chooses not to represent this dream in order to shift the perspective from Curtis to his wife and to the external, objective world and to augment the effects of Curtis visions, which are no longer res-

tricted to his mind, but are communicated to others, terrifying them.

It is the first time that Curtis decides to speak openly about his apocalyptic nightmare, and his laconic words take the form of a prophecy, a warning about an apocalyptic horror of unknown nature and unimaginable effects (Curtis: "It's hard to explain, because it's not just a dream. It's a feeling. I'm afraid that something might be coming. I cannot describe it. I just need you to believe me."). Both the fifth and sixth dream refer metaphorically to a common evil, to a mysterious transformation of man (an unknown virus spreads, everyone is transformed into a zombie) and thus to the destruction of the social relationships and family, but they are also significant for the source of Curtis' anxiety, which has a social origin: Curtis has difficulty in locating this evil, but he connects it with the social realm.



Fig. 8. In his dreams, even his wife is touched by this mysterious transformation.

The film illustrates, as the other psycho-apocalypses of 2011 do, a social phenomenon of our days, the fact that we live in an age of severe depression. Dan C. Blazer demonstrates in his *Age of Melancholy. Major Depression and its Social Origins* that we deal nowadays with an epidemic of depression, which exerts the

greatest societal burden in the Western world, especially in the US (Blazer 1). His main argument starts from the fact that depression is one expected response to the current state of the Western society, subject to a fundamental transformation, and naturally generating a negative experience (loss of meaning and hope, the feeling that chaos reigns) (Blazer 15-16). As a consequence, the study of depression must be reconsidered with a shift from the medical approach (depression as pure illness and nothing more) to the a more complex interpretation, which belongs to the social psychology and considers it as a reaction to the conditions of loss and disappointment, depending on life experiences (Blazer 48-49).

### **The Last Solution: The End of the World**

The psycho-apocalypses of 2011 are the most impressive cinematic response to these facts, and are all structured by the *reactive depression* of their protagonists (very powerful and memorable characters) to an incomprehensible reality. In Justine's opinion, the world deserves its annihilation for being meaningless and ruthless. *Melancholia* best expresses this supreme and paradoxical longing for the end of all, until the very last scene, when she remembers one important reason why the world should not end: Leo's will/right to live. Although this is not expressed so bluntly in *Take Shelter*, before the last scene of the film it becomes evident that Curtis is longing for an end of the oppressive world that eventually

will cause his separation from his family (treatment of his madness).

*Another Earth* (2011) is also a significant example of a psycho-apocalypse centered on the protagonist's severe depression and guilt. After accidentally killing the family of John Borroughs (William Mapother), Rhoda (Brit Marling) spends some years in prison, facing a severe depression and a torn-apart existence, only to find out about a mysterious planet approaching the Earth, a planet that reveals itself as our planet's duplicate. This second planet entails her dreams about a parallel history, deprived of the sorrows and mistakes of this life, a place where the events could have happened otherwise (the accident that shattered both her life and John's had never taken place). Unlike *Melancholia*, *The Last Day on Earth* or *Take Shelter*, *Another Earth* emphasizes the original meaning of the word apocalyptic, which is the revelatory dimension, when the inhabitants of Earth are faced with the existence of Earth 2 (David Ketterer would classify it as a *philosophical apocalypse*).

In the memorable scene of the first encounter, the President tries to contact the other planet and an identical voice responds, shocking the audience with the fact of total resemblance, a one to one correspondence between the two worlds that implies various types of consequences for the humans, impossible to be fully grasped. The very existence of an identical planet is a mind-blowing idea, with an explosive potential to generate a psycho-apocalypse for the entire humanity.



John is well aware of this when he warns Rhoda that her trip back from that planet would cause a severe disturbance and, consequently, a radical transformation when she would narrate her experiences. In spite of a few resemblances with Innaritu's *21 grams* (the accident as a crossroads of destinies, the protagonist's attempts to seek redemption for his/her guilt), *Another Earth* is structured by a powerful apocalyptic metaphor which points to a possible antidote for the reactive depression and anxiety towards the present: fantasizing about "what if", about changing the past. The ambiguous last scene of the film, with Rhoda meeting her double, leaves an open ending and question about the possibility of such utopia, located in the past.

*Take Shelter* (and *Oslo...*) feature psychiatrists who follow the medical approach to the treatment of depression, prescribing pills and reluctant to open dialogue with their subjects, isolating them from their social problems and pointing to some individual issue (Curtis and his schizophrenic mother, Anders and his drug addiction). The supreme irony of the film comes with the scene of the appointment with the famous psychiatrist, who recommends a long term treatment for Curtis in a hospital and, before his final isolation from family and his shelter, the psychiatrist advises them to retreat to their summer resort, at Myrtle Beach, rendering completely useless both Curtis' accurate prophecy and his desperate attempts to protect his family. Both Curtis and Justine are unconventional

and uncommon prophets in a chaotic, blinded age, both devoured by their prophetic vision and witnessing its fulfillment. *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter* dramatize the relations between madness/depression, apocalyptic prophecy and its actual happening.



Fig. 9. When least expected, Curtis predictions are confirmed.



Fig. 10. Curtis is finally believed, but it's too late.

In Abel Ferrara's *4:44: The Last Day on Earth* we have the representation of the imminence filmed in real time, the most obvious example of this new trend, an austere style of representing the apocalyptic imminence. The catastrophic approach to apocalypse remains fascinated with how the world would exactly end (the agents of the apocalypse are here important). Abel Ferrara, like Jeff Nichols, or even Trier (who envisages the mysterious approaching planet as if Justine's imagination had materialized) tend to obliterate not only the spectacle of destruction, reduced to a small number of shots at the

end of the film, but also the detailed explanation of the whole process, restricted here to one single moment when we catch an accidental glimpse on Al Gore's discourse on TV about the environmental problems with the ozone layer (an ironic fulfillment of his well-known predictions). Everyone knows that the world will end, but no one can predict their own reactions to this sudden disclosure of the truth. What Ferrara has intended is to show some instances of absurd behavior in such a psychologically tensed situation. It seems though awkward that media has announced the apocalypse and this has not generated panic, chaos and the usual, expected reactions. Ferrara avoids these clichés by situating us in Cisco's perspective: we see only what could be perceived from a roof top in Lower Manhattan: a neighbor who commits suicide by throwing himself from the window, another one shoots himself, a man eats alone with his dog etc. This panoramic view is constructed through Cisco's binoculars and points to a resigned humanity waiting for the end in silence and isolation.

The end of the hermeneutical principle in apocalyptic imagination is strikingly evident in these films. Although Kirsten Thompson's term could prove relevant in this discussion, she applies the "apocalyptic dread" to a different paradigm of apocalyptic movies, which are saturated with symbols and signs, and also with the urge to interpret them (Thompson 24). The new paradigm of psycho-apocalypses eludes both the explicit religious

references and the hermeneutical quest for signs of the end. The protagonist's panic, severe depression and unpredictable reactions, the lack of affect and the diffuse evil in the social realm, the chaotic ways of the world and its forthcoming total destruction are all impossible to explain, let alone captured in a symbolic pattern. When asked about his awkward state and behavior, Curtis repeats that "there is nothing to explain". In the first part of *Melancholia*, Claire, John and the others attempt unsuccessfully to understand Justine's paradoxical reactions, but she does not offer any reasons for her sudden retreat from her social life. Only in the second part we are offered some hints, as the planet approaches the Earth. In fact, the reason for their behavior is their feeling that the end is near.

### Conclusions

The solitude and the estrangement of the protagonist is a crucial feature for all the psycho-apocalypses of the year 2011, from *Melancholia* to *Another Earth*, from *Oslo August the 31<sup>st</sup>* to *The Last Day on Earth*, since they are all character-based stories, focused on a psycho-drama which involves a post-traumatic response (depression as a reaction to the hostile social environment), augmented (with the exception of *Oslo...*) into an apocalyptic obsession with the imminent end of the world. This idea shapes the minds of these protagonists who are all longing for the end of the world as we know it. The most important shared feature of these films is the way in which the imagined

catastrophe is crucial not as a spectacle of destruction in itself, but for the effects that it generates for those who can predict it (the main characters). These directors-*auteurs* propose a different reading of the apocalyptic scenario, shifting the importance from the collective drama to the intimacy of a very small group of characters facing the imminent end, staging a replacement of the religious-hermeneutical dimension with the meaninglessness and adopting an austere style of representing the end and its psychosis, radical-

ly different from the *spectacles of disaster* of the Nineties. All the protagonists of these films seem to imagine a redemptive fiction of the end of this world which eventually takes place (each of these films end with the total destruction of the world or with an irreversible radical transformation in *Another Earth*). The current state of things has become so oppressive for these central characters that the final catastrophe comes as a paradoxical solution, even though no possibility of survival is envisioned.

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