

A POST-APOCALYPTIC MANIFESTO OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE WASTELAND

BY
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THOUGHTS ON URGENCY

This decade, which is only two years old, I have witnessed the end of the world dozens of times. I have watched it end by inter-planetary collision, alien invasion, contagious super virus, mass infertility, nuclear attack, weird unexplainable mist, the proliferation of zombies and occultists, the re-figuration of the climate and the sudden occurrence of ice storms, tidal waves, flash fire and drought. In the cinema and in my lounge room I have seen good men saving us all with science, with religion, with extreme physical fitness and with good old fashioned patriotism.

I have seen the survivors (because there are almost always survivors), emerge from the arms of salvation much humbled, more sensitive to the warnings of environmentalists, less cavalier and greedy, more open to the possibilities of tolerance, human connection and love. It's a heart-warming idea. All we need is a wake-up call. When that happens, we'll straighten up and fly right.

In the newspaper and on the radio, foreshadow for similar plots glimmers like mirages in the ceaseless desert of progress. Economies collapse. People in some places starve needlessly and in other places needlessly starve themselves. Bullets filled with depleted uranium find targets, and then just hang around setting off the Geiger counters and making us all extremely nervous. Rich white baby boomers publish practical guides to living forever while their disease afflicted parents are forcibly kept alive.

I'm not trying to get you down, man. Mostly I just get along. I work. I study. I make things and talk to people. We all do.

But it's hard to ignore these immanent endings. There's an urgency, a sense that whatever we are getting on with, we have to make it count. Is this novel to our times? Almost certainly not. Each time the Nile overflowed the ancient Egyptians had a glimpse of the end. The black plague knocked out

half of Europe and the crusades mopped up with the remnants. What we face is less tangible and a little further away.

On approaching uncertain futures, we tend to want certainties. We long for the perceived simplicity of bygone eras or cling to the tangible achievements of our moment. For some people the desire to pin down a purpose manifests in a return to the 'simple things', to face-to-face interaction, to loving, knitting, having kids, keeping animals and forming communities. For some it means working hard, forever. For some it prompts a kind of technological fervour—a faith in the radical possibilities for connection represented by social media and communications gadgets and by the life-enhancing potential of nanotechnology and artificial intelligence. And then there are those of us who just feel uneasy, certain only that we are travelling in unmapped territory.

It's okay. We aren't alone in our anxiety or our uncertainty. Everyone looks at a sunset and sees nuclear fall-out from time to time.

In the 1980s the philosopher Jean Françoise Lyotard evoked the fable of the explosion of the sun in 4.5 billion years in order to consider the problem of 'what the Brain and its Human would resemble at the moment they leave the planet forever, before its destruction.'¹ This, he told us, is the question all progress—logic, astrophysics, astronautics, genetic biology, chaos theory, military strategy, etc.—seeks to answer: In what form will the human survive the inevitable annihilation?

The figure of a human, or even 'a brain and its human', who survives while the rest perish, involves pinning down what it is about the human brain that should survive. Is it our resilience, our neuro-plasticity, our emotional sophistication? Will difference survive? Or is the content of thought itself most important, making the brain an archive for our

precious history? This is a philosophical, scientific and artistic question.

On screens we have been modelling prototypes. I'm thinking of the child/robots—David in Spielberg's *A.I.*, Shinji Ikari in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. That they are part-robot means they can survive beyond the blazing earth. That they are children means there must still be a future. Or, is their existence only functional, to trick us into believing that we have a future? If this is the case and they are the human who survives annihilation, they are not children but evidence of our irrational demand for unmodified continuity in a world where:

*The icecaps melted due to the greenhouse gases and the oceans had risen and drowned so many cities along all the shorelines of the world... Millions of people were displaced. Climate became chaotic. Hundreds of millions of people starved in poorer countries.*²

Think also of the great cyborg women, all with one foot in Donna Haraway's manifesto. Motoko Kusanagi, the existentially taxed major from *Ghost in the Shell*. Rachael, Pris and Zhora, *Bladerunner's* femme fatales with borrowed memories. Or the cylons from *Battlestar Gallactica*, whose task is redefining love from the front-line of a galactic workers' rebellion. These women show us how recognize colonised memory. They refuse to allow their cyborg bodies to be subordinated. If they are the survivors then what is essentially human is the struggle to be acknowledged as such.

The truth which cyborgs know, and which Lyotard knew, is that 'the pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system'. This isn't something we want to hear. It's not something we are united in working towards. We are like the Rutger Hauer replicant angrily addressing our own design flaws. Would we like to be upgraded? No! We want more life, fucker!³ But our demand is not just for a longer life but more in type and kind.

With our telescopic sites aimed at a flaming far-off and the means to survive it, we run the risk of living lives characterised by anticipation, 'that is, the presentifying of an absence'.⁴

On the other hand, we can think of no other force powerful enough to halt the unsustainable momentum of progress.

How can we work in these conditions?

We would block our ears but dying stars have filled our minds with white light. We can hear the sirens,

smell the smoke. We find it harder not to imagine the apocalypse. We have watched so many survivalist TV shows we feel we might have a chance. Not if the sun exploded but one of the other ones. Though how can we know which to prepare for?

Perhaps the end of everything is located everywhere, not in a single catastrophe but in a multiplicity of actions and reactions. Leave the singular ending for the universal man, we are many in type and kind and so require infinite possible endings!

There is no restoration of original wholeness. Meaning must lie elsewhere. It is up to us to untangle it from the detritus. We have to rip up the floorboards and grope around in the dirt. Let's head out into the streets and sniff about.

Try to imagine every ending you have seen—all at once. Light those circuits and sizzle. Now we are the survivors.

So, in the aftermath, how do we go about constructing our own unique visions of post-apocalyptic existence? We have seen these scenarios too of course. We know all the signs—the torn up clothes, the motorcycle gangs, the strange cults, the long journeys to the coast past overturned road-trains. What else?

For starters, we will have to reconsider the way we relate to our environment. After all, a post-apocalyptic world can no longer be considered a material resource. Rather, it's a challenge. Its air is polluted. Its minerals are volatile. Its seasons are consistent only in calamity. The post-apocalyptic earth can't be managed or cultivated. It requires of us a new kind of ingenuity and spontaneity. We can't rely on evolution or engineering to adapt us to its rigors because environmental conditions change and change again faster than research or adaptation can keep pace. We need to learn to live beside this volatile environment, respectfully and cautiously.

The post-apocalyptic world is host to mutations, amalgamations and strange appropriations of forms and ideas left in the wreckage beyond the end. We

need to get down to the work of imagining what possibilities these mutations might bare politically, socially and personally.

We might find we are drawn to the site of the ruin, architecture which is both inhabited and abandoned by progress and history. We can't ignore the traces present in the ruin, nor can we afford to leave them to stand as a deified relic. This is not a call to restoration. We have neither the resources nor the inclination. We are better off finding new ways of understanding and inhabiting them. We need shelter. It is cold outside. Then suddenly, too hot to bear.

In the post-apocalyptic economy production is limited and so materials for building are likewise limited to scraps. We learn to think carefully when tempted to throw away something that still works. Obsolescence is predicated upon progress toward the technological development of 'a brain and its human' to fly off into space—we are beyond that now. We are what survived, we are plural and we aren't flying anywhere.

Post-apocalyptic thought is not about forgetting what came before in favour of the all-new. The importance of remembering is evidenced by the fractured reflection on a shattered surface. But our memories don't need to compete with these shards and patterns. Post-apocalyptic survivors know that there are many different ways a thing can be viewed. We know the whole image doesn't automatically disclose the meaning.

There is no revelation. Because we are post-apocalyptic we are free of the Old and New Testaments. We can make no real judgement on their teachings but can easily agree that their jurisdiction ended with the prophesied apocalypse, and they have no further bearing on our future.

To access the radical possibilities of the post-apocalyptic we need to consider now as the destiny, the telos toward which all history pointed. We will then be well positioned to recognise that this ending does not suffice. Because we are post apocalyptic we are unsatisfied and unsaved. There is no restoration of original wholeness. Meaning must lie elsewhere. It is up to us to untangle it from the detritus. We have to rip up the floorboards and grope around in the dirt. Let's head out into the streets and sniff about. There is nothing left but to engage in the activities of post-apocalyptic peoples—scavenging, translating, repairing, replying, reassembling, journeying. We take inspiration from the drifter, choose an impossible quest and live for the encounters along the way.

Against the urgent and cut-throat activity of survival in the service of redemption, which has always been our existence, post-apocalyptic survival is in the service of the urgent and thoughtful activity of witness. To bare witness after the end is such a great privilege that we will be extra attentive and eager to share the benefit of our experience with others. There is no way to profit from hoarding—value is anyone's guess these days. While everything we see on our various treks and travels has meaning, every meaning is contestable, up for debate and slander. We are all qualified to speak just by virtue of our continued existence. Though now, with the benefit of hindsight, we are all just as interested in listening.

Likewise, post-apocalyptic art is the practical and imaginative act of witness. It articulates the ruins and seeks to engender new possibilities rather than to enter a canon. Canons are a total joke in the post-apocalyptic wasteland.

If movies have taught us anything useful to our situation, it's not that good Christian values and familial duty will save you from the storm, it's that the primary skill of the post-apocalyptic person is in sorting through the rubble and finding ways to make things work—whether the things are objects like radios and engines or constructs like families and communities. In the post-apocalyptic space the new is literally exploded out of the old. We work with the remnants of what came before. Everything is already strewn and scattered and fallen apart. Picking up the pieces might mean putting together configurations that have never occurred before.

Here, in these ruined times, instead of suffering in anxiety generated by the threat of something to come, or something left unfinished and unresolved, we can attempt to accept that, in the end, to be human is to be unfinished and unresolved. This is what survives.

We are artists and thinkers. We are imaginers. We live off scraps. We inhabit these ruins. The end is now.

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¹ Lyotard, J.F., *Postmodern Fables*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 83.

² *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, Steven Spielberg, 2001.

³ Or father, depending on the cut you watch and your take on Oedipus.

⁴ Lyotard, *ibid*, p. 98.