Microdosing the

"Dear diary, what a day. I swear I've never been so depressed, miserable, and lonely in my entire life. It's like I know there's got to be somebody out there somewhere… just one person in this huge, horrible, unhappy universe who can hold me in their arms and tell me everything is going to be okay. And how long do I have to wait before that person shows up. I feel like I'm sinking deeper and deeper into quicksand… watching everyone around me die a slow, agonizing, death. It's like we all know way down in our souls that our generation is going to witness the end of everything. You can see it in our eyes. It's in mine, look. I'm doomed. I'm only 18 years-old and I'm totally doomed."

This film-concluding monologue seems to capture today's signs of the times so well, it might come as a surprise that it is actually more than 25 years old. Delivered by James Duval in the final scene of Gregg Araki's 1997 film Nowhere, nowadays the feeling of being "totally doomed" has become so widespread that it has not only crept into our small talk as a lapidary response but even gives political activists like the Last Generation their name. But how did we become so obsessed with being the last people to inhabit this planet? Although Araki's final instalment of his Teen Apocalypse trilogy primarily deals with the coming-of-age of a group of L.A. teenagers, it uses imagery of the end of the world – aliens, explosions, but also abuse and suicide – along a hazy shoegaze soundtrack. In the characters' frantic search for love amidst the pop cultural values of being rich and famous, the end of the world is suddenly within reach.

Apocalypse

Mark Fisher would probably have attributed the feeling of being “totally doomed” to the contemporary condition he deemed Capitalist realism, or “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economical system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it.” In his 2009 essay, Fisher chimes in on a broader discourse on historiography in the late 20th century, namely the question if history has come to an end. Instead of the obvious absurdity of a possible ending point in history, the concept refers to alternative state systems perishing with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in 1991, while neoliberal capitalism and democracy, in the name of “freedom”, slowly took systemic control in almost all nations. Some historians took this as proof that the “best of all worlds” had prevailed, and from now on, there would be no more history, just events unfolding without challenging the system itself. This is, of course, due to a somewhat limited understanding of history that continues to reinforce the perspective of the winner, which today is Capitalism. But on the other hand, Fisher managed to put a name on the adolescent fatigue that he observed taking over his students: a kind of unresistant affirmation towards the world outside of the chronically online consumerist matrix. He writes: “They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it.” This attitude, deemed “reflexive impotence” by Fisher, is described as an effect of Capitalist realism: being aware that something is missing, but not being able to do something about it – in short, being totally doomed.

Undeniably, we have some obscure fascination with the end of the world. The Wikipedia page of post-apocalyptic films reveals an influx in such narratives after 9/11 and counting. In 2003, Fredric Jameson wrote, “it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism.” But does this mean because we cannot end Capitalism, we keep ending the world in fiction over and over instead? Well, yes and no – while post-apocalyptic narratives do bear the risk of being purely cathartic, they also hold the utopian potential of imagining a better world. In order to interpret Fisher's dire premonition positively and not fall into the trap of reflective impotence, we first need to understand the structure of the post-apocalypse. In every case, it acts as a triad: the status quo - the catastrophe - the aftermath. This structure is already prevalent in the Christian apocalypse, where sinful living comes to a halt on the Day of Judgment before the good Christians ascend to heaven; the cataclysmic events of the apocalypse serve as a premise for salvation. Over the last centuries, tales of the end of the world have become far more secular and the cause of the catastrophe is no longer divine intervention. But the structure of the post-apocalypse stayed the same: For example, in many espionage movies during the Cold War, the onset of the apocalypse can be triggered by pressing a button to drop atomic bombs, thus reflecting the idea of nuclear fallout. Nowadays, the apocalyptic object is often a multitude of natural catastrophes or a virus that wipes out humanity as a whole, reproducing climate anxiety or the widespread belief that the world would be better without humans. But even in a science fiction setting in the far future, the story always originates in the present; the apocalyptic object is always already within reach.

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Since every post-apocalyptic story is written in a pre-apocalyptic present, the ethics propagated in it are also not too far from the zeitgeist. In fact, an ideology is rarely less concealed than during the post-apocalypse. Take the 1973 eco-dystopia Soylent Green as an example: The film famously ends with the dire reassurance that the new source of protein-rich food of the same name is, in fact, made out of dead people. Since we may not engage in cannibalism on a grand scale, we need to understand the crude cuisine of Soylent Green as a metaphor: The food we produce still relies on the deadly exploitation of people and lands in a global economy where every kind of fruit must be readily available at all times. The unsustainable ideology of Capitalism in general (in the sense that it would devour itself if it could) and of consumerism in particular is at the centre of critique. The 2013 post-apocalyptic video game and later series The Last Of Us, set 30 years after an apocalyptic outbreak in a world now inhabited by fungi-zombie monsters, is similarly bad at hiding their gender stereotypes: Tracking the story of a middle-aged man escorting a teenage girl westwards from Boston, their relationship quickly takes on the well-known pattern of an over-protective dad and a capricious daughter. The end of the game brings us the certainty that the girl has no agency and any of her decisions are trumped by the man. A lack of self-determination due to patriarchal norms? I am pretty sure we don't need an apocalypse for that. Here, the etymology of apokálypsis, which means "unveiling" or making visible what was hidden before, becomes an important tool for our analysis: In order to identify the apocalypse, we don't have to look at the catastrophic event, but at the ideology it leaves behind, i.e. the things that are taken for granted after the end of the world. What is the point of building a new world when it adheres to the old world order?

In the same manner, it is also no coincidence that the protagonists of post-apocalyptic media are mostly White men. Sure, Hollywood productions in particular are as whitewashed as they can get, but there is another reason for it. As Heather Davis and Zoe Todd argue, it is also because it is their world that is ending: Although Europeans and North Americans have contributed the most to global emissions, they are the last people to become aware of the consequences of climate change. One hypothesis why doomsday media are so popular, especially in this demographic, assumes that most indigenous people, refugees, and displaced people have been experiencing the apocalypse for a couple of centuries due to colonialism, land theft, forced assimilation, removal of vegetation and eco-systems, urban development, and so on. We know that the causes and the effects of climate change are unequally distributed and not all of humanity can be held accountable for it. But now that our interventions on this planet are undoubtedly irreconcilable, White people finally experience a fear of rootlessness, too. In a self-important manner, they work through their fears by making the whole world disappear in fiction, more often than not re-installing the very attitudes that have led to the apocalypse in the first place.

The fact is, the majority of post-apocalyptic media cannot imagine a future intrinsically different from the present. Although manifestations vary, these stories are trapped with us in Capitalist realism. The reason why is obvious: We are already living through the end times. Our time is after the apocalypse, and Capitalist accelerationism caused the catastrophe. Really, you do not need the world to end to hear about injustices everywhere: While we are busy polluting and extracting every last spot on this planet, we are struck in awe when the consequences of (neo-) colonialism and capital accumulation result in further oppression. As you can see, the force at play is strikingly similar to Fisher's reflective impotence: We know that this type of behavior causes harm, but we also cannot do anything against it. Maybe we don't have the possibility to engage in activism or we just got a bit too comfortable in our little worlds where the wi-fi is always working and the next spectacle is just a doom scroll away. Perhaps playing the blame game has also never really fuelled political action. But in a world of constant apocalypse, what is to be done?

First of all, let us acknowledge the reflective potential of tales of the end of the world. They confront us with our own mortality and the strange temporalities of the planet, which will continue to exist after we are gone. These stories also reflect on the situated present they were written in, with all its flaws. Identifying the apocalypse and, most importantly, how the catastrophe is being dealt with discloses to us which ideologies are being naturalized and therefore hidden at first glance. A lot of times, the catastrophe is shown as an over-exaggerated universal force with the power to break down the whole world. Although such events are technically possible, for example, if an asteroid hit the planet, they are seldom if ever the source of inspiration behind the writing of doomsday tales. Such a biological apocalypse happens very rarely: For example, the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction, a massive loss of biodiversity with over 75% of all species going extinct, took place around 66 million years ago (its cause was, indeed, an asteroid). Luckily, we don’t have to wait until the sun explodes since Capitalist realism grants us deadly disasters every single day. Instead of tuning into the passive anticipation of the apocalypse, we need to identify the many apocalypses that happen each day and take action against them. There have been many theories on how we can understand a catastrophe so large, so heavily allocated across space and time, that it becomes impossible to grasp it. Climate change, for example, is more of a multitude of many different but interrelated crises than one single disaster. Eva Horn calls this the “catastrophe without event”, meaning that it “involves a variety of local scenarios and symptoms but is hard to represent ‘as such’.” But a catastrophe without event makes it seem like we have no place to start, which again triggers reflexive impotence. Moreover, the constant feeling of having no agency can result in depression and anxiety, turning Capitalist realism into a lethal endeavour.

Precisely this is why I propose to microdose the apocalypse: Take in the disaster, a little bit every day, but don’t engage in the spectacle of being totally doomed. Instead, consider what is in your power and what you can do about it every single day. This approach might not lead to a system crash overnight, but it strengthens our understanding of intolerable behavior and shifts our view to genuine refinements – which is the precondition to looking beyond Capitalist realism. Let us rid the apocalypse of its grand narrative and think of it as manifold, displaced, lagging, simultaneous, and full of possibilities.

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Think about it: What kind of a future would be radically different? What is unthinkable? How may our understandings of prosperity, goodwill, property or identity change? What forms of life are there, if any? Are we still pursuing the arts and sciences? What role do gender, race, and class play? What are the opportunities for collectivity? Do we depend more or less on technology? Which ideologies have prevailed? Engaging with these thought experiments leads to their materialization in discourse, the arts, science, and other people’s minds. At the end of Capitalist Realism, Fisher concludes that “[…] the most powerful forms of desire are precisely cravings for the strange, the unexpected, the weird. These can only be supplied by artists and media professionals who are prepared to give people something different from that which already satisfies them; by those, that is to say, prepared to take a certain kind of risk.” We, whether as creatives, activists, teachers, or conversation partners, must not forget to speculate about the future, because we are manifesting it as we go along – even though it may feel as if we are totally doomed.In the opening scene of Nowhere, we see a blue background while an off-screen voice states, “L.A. is like… nowhere. Everybody who lives here is lost.” Although we know the movie is going to end in a post-apocalypse, it is worth mentioning that the word utopia originally translates to “no place” or “nowhere”. A utopian vision of a better world cannot be located in the here and now because it has yet to be created. Microdosing the apocalypse enables the macrodosing of utopia.