



## ***Don't Panic.***

### ***The Apocalypse in Theory and Culture***

#### **Failure and the *Phantastikon*: Ezra Pound and Apocalypse**

James Leveque: *University of Edinburgh*

#### **Contesting Capitalist Sorcery: 'Peak Everything' as Apocalyptic Prophecy**

Paul Reid-Bowen: *Bath Spa University*

#### **The Projection of an Ending and Systems Theory: a Sociological Reading of Apocalypse as a Genre**

Anita Dremel: *University of Zagreb*

#### **Apocalypse as Religious and Secular Discourse in *Battlestar Galactica* and its Prequel *Caprica***

Diane Langlumé: *University of Paris VIII Saint-Denis*

## ***Ghosts in the Flesh***

#### **Walking Dead**

April Lodge: *University of Huddersfield*

#### **From Hungry Ghost to Phallic Mother: Linda Lê's Doubling of the Vietnamese Ancestor in French Exile**

Alexandra Kurmann: *Macquarie University, Sydney*

COVER IMAGE: 'The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha' (1852) — John Martin (1789–1854)

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On a personal note, we must say farewell to several of our members. Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone and Guillaume Collett, who were very active in the last conferences, leave *Skepsi* after many years of good and loyal service. Maureen Kinkaid Speller, who devoted much of her time in the copy-editing team, has also turned a new page. Finally, Jo Pettitt, Mathilde Poizat-Amar and Nina Rolland, who contributed much to this issue, have also retired. We wish them all well. In their place, we welcome Marine Authier, Melanie Dilly and Rocío García-Romero, who have joined the Editorial Board since becoming involved with our conference in May 2014. We would also like to thank two new editorial assistants, Sabina Sitoianu and Louise Willis, for helping us with the technical aspects of assembling the issue and proof reading.

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## Foreword

Although this double issue may seem to have been planned as a series — questioning both the end of the world and the afterworld — it actually reflects the proceedings of two separate conferences: *Don't Panic! The Apocalypse in Theory and Culture* held on 25–26 May 2012 and *Ghosts in the Flesh* held on 24–25 May 2013. The articles collected in this issue nonetheless offer a certain continuity, not only in their examination of questions of time but also in their approach of materiality.

Discourses on the Apocalypse have envisaged the idea of ‘end’ in different lights. On the one hand, a renewal of apocalyptic discourse seems to go against the deconstructive tendency to ‘de-dramatise the end’ (Scherpe 1986–87). On the other, this return does not necessarily lead to an unquestioned revival of metaphysics but rather may open up the way to a third alternative. This third approach could consider the Apocalypse as something neither culturally constructed nor unrelated to human and technological actions but as something neither wholly internal nor external.

Beyond the idea of other-worldliness, the concept of ‘Ghosts in the Flesh’, the topic of *Skepsi*’s sixth conference, was interpreted as interrogating the limits of not only corporeality and incorporeality but also self and other, inside and outside. As the thematics of both ‘Apocalypse’ and ‘Ghosts’ share the idea of exploring some of the limits of the material world, we considered that a single issue could, with advantage, contain articles on both themes.

The issue begins with two articles on the Apocalypse theme. In the first, James Leveque examines the presence of the Apocalypse in Ezra Pound’s work. Drawing parallels with biblical apocalyptic literature, his article shows how Pound’s apocalypticism is driven by a sense of the failure of modern poetry to affect genuine change in the social or political sphere, with particular reference to his involvement with Imagism and Vorticism, and how Pound’s early idea of the *phantastikon* is an attempt to construct a universe that is simultaneously derived from and an alternative to this universe. This is followed by an offer of a pragmatic apocalypticism in Paul Reid-Bowen’s article, in which he examines the relationship between apocalypse and collapse theories and explores the idea of apocalypse in the light of crises of civilization in a global industrial world.

In the first of the articles on the ‘Ghosts in the Flesh’ theme, in this case the ghostliness thematic of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, April Lodge uses deconstruction theory and Derridean ‘hauntology’ to analyse the idea of physical space in the play.

The next article, by Anita Dremel, returns to the ‘Apocalypse’ theme, this time from a sociological point of view, with her study of the projection of an ending within a systemic logic of auto-reproduction.

The second article on the ‘Ghosts in the Flesh’ theme again takes a work of literature as its starting point. Alexandra Kurmann links the idea of ghostliness with the figure of the grandmother in one of the Franco-Vietnamese Linda Lê’s novels. Her article examines how the author explores the notion of the spectre as being both connected to questions of exile and a dual maternal/paternal figure in the shape of a Freudian phallic (grand)mother.

‘Apocalypse’ is the theme of the final article, in which Diane Langlumé turns to television and cinema studies as she examines how apocalyptic discourses are used as a foundation rather than an end in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica*.

### **Bibliography**

Scherpe, Klaus R. 1986–1987. ‘Dramatization and De-Dramatization of “the End”: the Apocalyptic Consciousness of Modernity and Post-Modernity’ *Cultural Critique*, 5 (Winter), 95–129

**Failure and the *Phantastikon*: Ezra Pound and Apocalypse**

James P. Leveque

*The University of Edinburgh***Abstract**

**T**his article argues that although Ezra Pound frequently positioned himself against religious and Christian thought — exemplified in his statement that the birth of the English Vorticist movement represented the ‘End of the Christian Era’ — the apocalyptic sensibility expressed in much of his early poetry is structured by the social concerns and spiritual hopes expressed in biblical and early Judeo-Christian literature. Examining some thematic parallels between Pound’s pre-*Cantos* poetry and biblical apocalyptic literature, this article demonstrates two points: that Pound’s apocalypticism is driven by a sense of the failure of modern poetry, particularly in his involvement in Imagism and Vorticism, to affect genuine change in the social or political sphere; and that Pound’s early idea of the *phantastikon* is an attempt to construct a universe that is simultaneously derived from, and alternative to, this universe. In this way, Pound’s project was a rejection of contemporary Judeo-Christian religion, but was also an effort to recover for modern art and poetry the mythical structures of eschatology and renewal that were, in his view, the animating foundations of true religious thought.

**Key words:** Ezra Pound; apocalypse; eschatology; biblical literature; avant-garde; modernism; Imagism; Vorticism



**O**n 1 April 1914, *The Egoist* magazine advertised the first issue of *Blast* by proclaiming the birth of Vorticism, an avant-garde movement Ezra Pound (1885–1972) had launched with Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), as ‘The end of the Christian era’ (Moody 2007: 256). Nearly a decade later, Pound felt that the new era had arrived with Mussolini’s march on Rome in 1922: he declared it ‘Year Zero’ and dated subsequent letters and publications accordingly (for example, his 1935 publication *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* was dated ‘anno XIII’). Yet between these dates a series of disappointments convinced Pound that the public’s insularity and foolishness, the mercenary inclinations or cowardice of artists and ultimately World War I definitively precluded a new English Renaissance. His self-styling as a prophet of a new age of beauty began to look

embarrassing. In ‘Provincialism the Enemy’, a series of articles he wrote in 1917 in *The New Age* (a title not lacking in apocalyptic pretention), Pound stated that, ‘the lords of the temporal world never will take an artist with any seriousness’ (Pound 1973: 160).

Pound’s interest in comparing the period of his avant-garde ‘isms’ — Imagism and Vorticism — with the end of Christianity is both significant and ironic precisely because this essay will argue that the paradigm for his millennial aspirations can be elucidated by reference to biblical prophetic and apocalyptic literature. First, it will argue that the apocalyptic viewpoint is a result of the failure and breakdown of the prophetic viewpoint, which imagined salvation within historical and political terms. Pound’s apocalyptic tone was often inspired by the failure to envision the ‘temporal world’ as the source for the new era. His solution was to chart a middle-course between the visionary artist and history, an idea he called, in his discarded ‘III Cantos’ of 1917, the *phantastikon* (employing the Greek term for ‘imaginary’), which was not history as such, but an imagined history called into existence by the poet. Imagism and Vorticism asserted that the essential component of poetry, the image (which Pound later generalised into the vortex — an analogue covering multiple art forms), distilled the essential reality (be it moral, ethical, cultural, social, aesthetic, etc.) of the world around the poet, but then transfigured it into a new reality. Describing Imagism, Pound stated, ‘The image is the word beyond formulated language’ (Pound 1939: 102). In the way that the biblical books of Daniel or Revelation can only speak of history through the obscurity of fantastic allegories, Pound’s image was a radical break with the known and a revelation of the unspeakable — an entirely apocalyptic move. Biblical *apōkalypsis* (Greek for ‘revelation’ or ‘disclosure’) is the revelation of the *secret* history of the world, comprehensible only in the terms of Christian or Jewish belief. This study examines the roots of Pound’s feeling that a truly apocalyptic sensibility was necessary to shake the world out of its decline; when the history of this world only provided dead-ends and failures, it was incumbent upon the artist’s *phantastikon* to conceive of a new history from the ruins of this one.

## 1. Anti-Politics and Apocalyptic

Biblical scholarship has proposed that apocalyptic eschatology developed from the failure of prophets to justify a belief in the restoration of Israel after a series of catastrophic military defeats that ultimately deprived the nation of sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Hanson

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<sup>1</sup> Hanson’s view has been widely accepted, with varying reservations, by biblical scholarship. As recently as 2008, Norman K. Gottwald reiterated apocalyptic thought in terms similar to Hanson’s, as ‘*Radical*

outlined this view: when the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the end of the Davidic monarchy definitively precluded any probable avenue for God's salvation through those institutions, salvation could only occur precisely in the realm of the historically impossible:

The prophets no longer have the events of a nation's history into which they can translate the terms of Yahweh's cosmic will. Hence the successors of the prophets, the visionaries, continue to have visions, but they increasingly abdicate the other dimension of the prophetic office, the translation into historical events. At that point we enter the period of the transition from prophetic to apocalyptic eschatology (Hanson 1979: 16).

This leads to an anti-political attitude that rejects the struggle between the institutions of monarchy or religion as a source of salvation. This attitude looks outside of history itself for redemption, as in Daniel 2. 34, when the statue representing the four world empires is struck and destroyed by a 'stone [...] cut out, not by human hands'.<sup>2</sup> The statue, made from four materials, represents the historical succession of four kingdoms, but that order is decimated by an entirely external and divine force.

In 'Provincialism the Enemy', Pound states, 'Fundamentally, I do not care "politically", I care for civilisation, and I do not care who collects the taxes, or who polices the thoroughfares' (Pound 1973: 169). As often as Pound donned the mantle of the prophet,<sup>3</sup> this is not what one normally finds in the biblical prophets. When Amos proclaims doom on those who 'afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, / and push aside the needy in the gate' (5. 12), he passes judgment on the power relations in Israel. But this is not an apocalyptic attitude because 'establish[ing] justice in the gate' (Amos 5. 15) is a challenge for every generation and necessitates no fundamental paradigm shift, merely fidelity to God's covenant. What concerns Pound is culture: not more equitable systems, but more civilised attitudes and behaviours. Wyndham Lewis in *Blast* similarly argued that 'political struggles of emancipation are questions of "votes" and not of "art"' (Puchner 2006: 115). And Bruce Comens notes that for Pound, 'the ideal of representative government to some extent conflicts with Pound's conviction that the arts are not democratic' (1995: 30).

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*pessimism* about the meaning of history fuse[d] with *radical optimism* that history is about the pass away before the divine kingdom' (Gottwald 2008: 343).

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> In the unpublished poem 'From Chebar' (1913), for example, the title casts the speaker as a new Ezekiel (see Ezek. 1. 1, 3; 3. 15).

Anti-political elements are part of the root of much apocalyptic literature because it projects salvation into the realm of the divine. John J. Collins's description of 'the wise' (*maškîlîm*) portrayed in Daniel 10–12 identifies them as activists, but:

Their activism lies in making the masses understand. [...] The thesis of the visions is that the true meaning of events is not publicly evident but is known to the wise, through revelations. The *real struggle* is being fought out between the angelic princes (Collins 1984: 89; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

The belief 'that whatever happens on earth is a reflection of a celestial archetype' (Collins 1984: 88) was common in the mythologies of the ancient Near East and gave apocalyptic writers the ability to view political struggles as shadows of cosmic events. Political history was illusory, whereas 'true' history was revealed in the eschatological vision. The reward for this understanding was the election of 'the wise' to a divine or quasi-divine status, 'refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end' (Dan. 11. 35). This reading of Daniel coheres with Hanson's thesis that prophecy 'resisted the temptation of escape from the real world to the cosmic realm', and translated revelation into socio-political terms (temple, monarchy, city), while apocalyptic found:

such translation increasingly difficult, as little within plain history could be identified with divine action and the political realm took on the appearance of unmitigated evil. A sudden resurgence of myth began to offer the possibility of escape rejected by early prophecy, and the result of this development was the death of prophecy and the birth of apocalyptic eschatology (Hanson 1979: 282).

Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' (1920) is animated by the view that the political sphere is antithetical to the true artist. 'Mauberley' begins with a reminder of the irreparable separation of his alter-ego, 'E. P.', from English society. In section VI, which presents a history of art and literature in Victorian England, Pound begins with the line, 'Gladstone was still respected' (Pound 2001: 189).<sup>5</sup> This line refers to W.E. Gladstone (1809–1898), a liberal politician and critic of the Pre-Raphaelites (Ruthven 1969: 134), to show bright points of artistic beauty against the bourgeois darkness. An even more devastating critique is section IV's 'home to old lies and new infamy' (*P* 188), an allusion to David Lloyd George's (1863–1945) statement as Prime Minister that the soldiers of World War I would return to 'homes fit for heroes' (Ruthven 1969: 133). The statement epitomised the corruption of truth in politics, and Pound reflected on the need for an

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the divine surrogates of Israel (represented by the archangel Michael) and Persia and Greece (see Dan. 10. 13, 20).

<sup>5</sup> Future reference to this work in this article will be designated '*P*'.

eschatological break with the situation in a 1917 letter to William Carlos Williams (1883–1963):

I thought the [...] millennium that we all idiotically look for and work for was to be when an American artist could stay at home without being dragged into civic campaigns, dilutions of controversy, etc. (Pound 1951: 180–81)

In ‘Maunderley’, the poet’s priorities are radically different from the cynicism informing politics:

For three years, out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry; to maintain “the sublime”  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start— (P 185)

The reference to ‘three years’ would be Pound’s association with Imagism and Vorticism — mid-1912 to 1915. The former association ended when the democratic inclinations of other Imagists conflicted with his own view of himself as creator and leader of the movement.<sup>6</sup> The latter movement fizzled out when the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) died fighting in World War I. The stanza ends with Pound’s judgement that E. P. was ‘Wrong from the start—’; however, are not all apocalyptic sentiments ‘wrong from the start’? While Pound would have emphasised the point more if he had broken the second line at ‘dead’ rather than ‘art’, there are apocalyptic connotations to the idea of resurrecting or resuscitating the dead, and thus creating something from an entirely negative position. Daniel 12. 2 is an example where, at the moment when Israel is rescued by the archangel Michael, ‘Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake’. But the characterisation of the time just prior to the resurrection of the dead is of a period where Israel’s suffering is at its greatest point: ‘There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.’ The moment when time seems terminal, when Israel’s history is definitively over, is the moment that it becomes reversible and the dead live again. Like E. P., ‘The wise’ in Daniel are initially ‘wrong from the start’:

The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder (Daniel 11. 33).

Therefore, the following stanza of ‘Maunderley’ immediately mitigates the harsh judgment that Pound places on his own work:

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born

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<sup>6</sup> At one point, Pound told the American poet Amy Lowell (1874–1925) that he refused to consider the other Imagists his ‘critical and creative equals’ (Moody 2007: 224).

In a half-savage country, out of date; (*P* 185)

The 'half-savage country' refers to America, Pound's national and political *bête noire*. The fact of E. P.'s beginning, his birth '[i]n a half-savage country' that Pound regarded as a cultural backwater, identifies him as a hero who has started from the point of the furthest remove from his true goal, out of place as well as 'out of date'. He begins in a place filled with pettiness and cynicism, politics and propaganda, Gladstone and Lloyd George, emphasising the seeming impossibility of him ever reaching his 'millennium'.

Pound speaks from the standpoint that his 'out of date' agenda was not 'Wrong', but in fact allowed him to see the deception of politics. He saw the reduced status of truth during the war as both a measure of the irrecoverable state of the world and occasion for identifying 'deceits', 'usury', and 'liars':

Died some, pro patria,  
non "dulce" non "et decor"...  
walked eye-deep in hell  
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving  
came home, home to a lie,  
home to many deceits,  
home to old lies and new infamy;  
usury age-old and age-thick  
and liars in public places. (*P* 188)

The final line echoes Isaiah 59. 14: 'for truth stumbles in the public square'. As opposed to the poetic vision of E. P., the public sphere is the place of 'civic campaigns' and 'dilutations of controversy', where truth is most suppressed. Pound wrote that 'If Armageddon has taught us anything it should have taught us to abominate the half-truth, and the tellers of the half-truth, in literature' (Pound 1967: 139). The soldiers, having fought in the war, go through 'hell and back' (to recall an old cliché), reached the furthest point from the deceits of the public sphere, and so return with a clear-sightedness. Like E. P., the soldiers must find themselves in the place of the impossible in order to achieve the understanding for revelation. Pound portrays them as lifting back the deceptions in a great revelation of truth:

fortitude as never before  
  
frankness as never before  
disillusions as never told in the old days,  
hysterias, trench confessions,  
laughter out of dead bellies. (*P* 188)

The experience of the war has something of a cleansing effect in terms of wiping away all of the falseness that led to it in the first place. There are no more illusions, only

*disillusions* so great that they were ‘never told in the old days’. The ‘unbelieving’ soldiers make confessions in the trenches and corpses laugh, again recalling the apocalyptic motif of the return of the dead. Pound also makes the point that this sort of revelation takes an uncommon level of courage, relating the word ‘fortitude’ to the plainspoken ‘frankness’ rather than to a more refined ‘honesty’ or ‘authenticity’. In Pound’s view, not only has Armageddon ‘taught us to abominate the half-truth’, but it actually takes an Armageddon to reveal truth, suggesting again that truth can only be reached in the midst of the lie, that — like Pound’s predecessor Dante — Paradise can only be reached via Hell.

If the biblical prophet claims that the life of the nation will be saved *if only* the political and cultural institutions behave within history according to God’s will (i.e., alignment towards social justice, proper methods of worship, acceptance or rejection of foreign domination), then analogously, E. P.’s pursuit of the poetry *ought* to create a more humane and creative world, rather than one that ends in the carnage of World War I. The Imagist and Vorticist aesthetics expressed Pound’s faith that England was on the cusp of a new renaissance by recovering the image or the vortex — the fundamental bases of artistic creation — in the modern world. But the political history of Europe, culminating in the war, disconfirmed that faith. Therefore, the lines ‘trench confessions / laughter out of dead bellies’ might demonstrate a ‘doubling-down’ that is itself the mark of apocalyptic thought. Laughter suggests defiance in the face of death, and a will to continue when all has been lost. When Israelite prophecy was ‘Confronted with the apparent injustice of God, [...] she confessed God’s healing presence *in the face of everything*’ (Crenshaw 2007: 105; emphasis added). In this respect, the laughter of the dead represents an ambivalent form of mockery: laughing at death itself, looking beyond into a future whose door is reached by walking ‘eye-deep in hell’.

Pound’s ultimate abandonment of the avant-garde is largely due to the failure of the poet to influence history in a concrete way, and so the poet simply asserts his higher ‘truth’ in the form of an unaccountable revelation. Out of the disconfirmation of prophecy, Collins writes, the apocalyptic visionary can find comfort in that:

apocalypses do indeed present a kind of wisdom insofar as they, first, offer an understanding of the structure of the universe and of history, and, second, see right understanding as the precondition of right action (Collins 1984: 17).

‘The wise’ of Daniel, in this sense, are those élite few who have already received revelation and attempt to live that revelation in spite of present circumstances.

Envisioning oneself as wise beyond your peers was a common theme among the esoteric traditions such as apocalyptic, and as Leon Surette explains:

history is seen as a story of conflict between superior individuals of small number (“the few”, whether defined genetically or by enlightenment) and an oppressive inferior mass (whether defined genetically or by ignorance) (Surette 1993: 38).

In this way, the European avant-garde of Pound’s early years is apocalyptic in the sense that its radical aesthetic practice anticipates a future whose justification is questionable. The obscurity of avant-garde aesthetics implied a racially alternative sensibility about the world, but that sensibility was always only accessible to a few and, ultimately, only to the poet. For example, Pound’s Imagist transmutation of ‘faces in the crowd’ to ‘Petals on a wet, black bough’ in his 1913 poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (*P* 111) suggests the movement from one realm of experience to another, but that movement is never justified or, to put it another way, only justified by the privileged viewpoint of the poet. The reader may accept the transmutation, or not, but they cannot rationalise or debate it because its terms are those set forth entirely by the poet.

The avant-garde is apocalyptic in another sense as well. Pound’s aesthetics were dedicated to constructing an entirely new conception of the world — in some sense, a world alternative to this one. At its most apocalyptic, the book of Isaiah predicts a new creation that lies outside of history:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. (Isaiah 65. 17)

And this new creation comes to pass in the final chapters of Revelation: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away’ (Rev. 21. 1). When the prophet fails within history and society, the only option is to envision a world absent of both, and the next section will argue that Pound conceived the possibilities of art and literature to be the blueprint for that new world.

## **2. The *Phantastikon***

‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’ describes an aspect of art and poetry fundamental to Pound: every artwork tends toward a kind of absolute independence from the world and ‘every masterpiece contains its law within itself, self-sufficing to itself’ (Pound 1973: 25). A masterpiece is not simply its own ‘take on the world’, but its own self-contained system. The world might provide elements from which the poet drew as artistic impulse, but those elements were not *of* the world as objective representations:

The primary pigment of poetry is the IMAGE. The vorticist will not allow the primary expression of any concept of emotion to drag itself out into mimicry (Pound 1981: 154).

Rather, the image steps outside of history and becomes the starting point of something new, and Witemeyer argues that the image's revelation is part of the poet's ability to create an 'imaginative "world"' (Witemeyer 1969: 15). Drawing from Pound's quotation that 'The essential thing about a poet is that he build [*sic*] us his world', Witemeyer states that the faculty Pound called the *phantastikon* is the ability to see 'patches of the macrocosmos' (Witemeyer 1969: 50). These 'patches' can construct 'different worlds out of what [poets] see, out of what is reflected by the "filmy shell" of the consciousness' (Witemeyer 1969: 51).

The idea of 'different worlds' within poetry does not immediately suggest apocalyptic thought, but as Collins argues, the description of alternate worlds in biblical and apocryphal literature in the form of otherworldly journeys and divine beings is fundamental to apocalyptic literature: 'The existence of another world beyond what is accessible to humanity by natural means is a constant element in all the apocalypses' (Collins 1979: 9). The book of Revelation constructs an image of heaven (visible only to John of Patmos) and subsequently begins to break down the distinction between the celestial world and this world. Or, the book of First Enoch takes its protagonist on a journey through supernatural lands. But if these apocalypses compelled readers to seek the 'truth' of the world by reference to mythological or cosmic worlds beyond this one, Pound's secular aesthetic hoped to keep:

the poet's vision always in touch with the world of his senses, holding firmly to the principle that truth should be visible *in* things, rather than invisible beyond them (Pratt 1978: 22).

In 1917, Pound published 'III Cantos', a premature attempt at his epic *Cantos*, which became his primary work for the remainder of his life. Save for a few sections that reappeared in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1924), the 'III Cantos' were abandoned, but are often considered central for understanding the concerns Pound struggled with in initiating his epic and have been referred to as the 'Ur-Cantos' (Liebregts 2011: 86). In the closing lines of Canto I, Pound reflects on the power of the poet's ability to build a believable world for himself and the reader:

And now it's but truth and memory,  
Dimmed only by the attritions of long time.  
"But we forget not."  
No, take it all for lies.  
I have but smelt this life, a whiff of it—



By posing these lines as questions, Pound considers this choice or, perhaps more accurately, whether he should refuse the choice of one over the other. The *phantastikon* is Pound's attempt to 'steer a middle course between subjectivity and objectivity' (Liebregts 2011: 89). The 'thing I see' can be, perhaps should be, confused with the 'actual gods behind me', giving the 'thing I see' the power of creation. But the plural 'gods' in the following question, 'Are they gods behind me?', exposes the implications of the confusion: if one world can be created, then perhaps there is no limit to the number of potential creations.

Pound then shifts the ability of creation to the arts in general, exploring how artists construct themselves through their art, but in doing so construct a new world around them. Furthermore, these lines address painting as well as writing, suggesting that the *phantastikon* is common across the arts. This was one of Pound's goals in formulating Vorticism, which Pound hoped would become, 'a designation that would be equally applicable to a certain basis for all the arts' (Pound 1939: 93):

Oh, we have worlds enough, and brave *décors*,  
And from these like we guess a soul for man  
And build him full of aery populations.  
Mantegna a sterner line, and the new world about us:  
Barred lights, great flares, new form, Picasso or Lewis. (P 234)

His reference to the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) contrasts the 'sterner line' with the 'aery populations', suggesting that Mantegna represents something more solid and substantial than the *décors*. Mantegna's form is the basis for a clearer *phantastikon* than more superficial stylistic flourishes. Moreover, 'new form', as attributes of Lewis and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), is certainly, coming from Pound, a genuine honour. Where Pound makes the key contrast between the earlier lines and later lines is in the phrase, 'the new world about us'. From this perspective the 'new world', flowing from the 'sterner line' of Mantegna's art, is objective and now exists 'about us', rather than as 'aery populations' within the confines of the soul. As Liebregts states, it is the 'struggle between the subjective and objective [...], between the *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing] and the *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, [nothing comes from nothing] that Pound faced' in this canto (Liebregts 2011: 86). Therefore, these lines propose the process by which the truly great artists impose subjective visionary experience onto the world as objective fact, compelling the world to conform to their vision rather than vice versa. In this sense, the question, 'Are they gods behind me?', is a legitimate one because

Pound is never entirely certain which *phantastikons* are compelling enough to become *creatio ex nihilo*.

Pound, reflecting on the language of gods and cathedrals as a religious element, delves into a religious tradition that, as I have shown above, he seemed to have very little regard for. In the Christian tradition, he felt that there was, at one time at least, the possibility of rebirth, renewal, and *creatio ex nihilo*, but apparently he now felt that it was left to poetry to take up the mantle of the creator. Pound asserted that an artwork was its own 'autonomous' world in 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris', containing 'its laws within itself, self-sufficing to itself'. To the extent that art and poetry were their own independent worlds, he intended to create worlds through the arts. When he spoke of Vorticism as a basis for all the arts, he was not attempting to break down the barriers between the arts for he wrote later that:

A painter must know much more about a sunset than a writer, if he is to put it on canvas. But when the poet speaks of "Dawn in russet mantle clad," he presents something which the painter cannot present (Pound 1939: 97).

In this sense, the *phantastikon* of the poet is entirely separate from that of the painter or musician, and Pound sets up each artist as the potential creator of his own *phantastikon*, provided that it was grounded in a transcendent characteristic: 'change hath broken down / All things save Beauty alone.' (P 195).



This other world might speak *to* our world and *of* our world, but it never can be fully identified with our world. This practice of world-making is sometimes based on utopian thought or cosmic speculation, and it might have a variety of methods to get from here to the 'beyond', but it is always based on, as von Rad defines eschatology, a 'consummation of the historical process in events which lie beyond the scope of the world's history' (von Rad 1965: 113–14). And yet, Pound does not take this process to mean a total abandonment of history or the social world, but rather seeks to propose an entirely different entrance into history by using the social world as a way of reading the story of beauty, the Vortex, or the Image into history, just as Daniel or Revelation reads the will of God into a history of persecution and defeat. Like most apocalyptic thought, the End also implies a New Beginning, and where Pound once declared the 'End of the Christian Era', his own apocalyptic sensibility is founded upon the basic structures of Christian apocalyptic: an autonomous world that is, in spite of itself, reflected in this world; that

world as the image of salvation; an ending that is intimately bound up to the commencement and course of history. Witemeyer notes that Pound saw the history of art as a ‘complete order’ that changes when something is added to it, but is, ‘eternally living and relevant because it exists in a timeless order’ (Witemeyer 1969: 4), and Pound’s time in the avant-garde was the first step to explaining this order, a project he would take up in earnest in the *Cantos*. Apocalyptic writing casts back one’s eyes over history in a different light; it highlights relationships in the world that cannot be understood except in terms of a new era that has yet to manifest itself. Similarly, Pound was searching for a ‘more totalizing narrative, an Ur-narrative, [...] an apocalyptic narrative that could subsume all others’ (Comens 1995: 32), and this ‘Ur-narrative’ envisioned the next world by searching out for the origins of this world in the history of artistic genius or beauty. This search led him to extoll Mantegna, Picasso, Lewis, and many others as an example of this alternative history; it also led him to declare that alternative history to be finally revealed in the world with the rise of Mussolini and fascism.

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## Contesting Capitalist Sorcery: ‘Peak Everything’ as Apocalyptic Prophecy

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### Abstract

This position article reflects on the ambiguous relationship between discourses of apocalypse and collapse, focusing on some contemporary writers who are concerned with theorising the unfolding crises (climatological, ecological, energy, economic and resource) and consequent collapse of global industrial civilisation. First, it is asked whether collapse theorists can be characterised as apocalypticists, particularly in so far as they tend to resist utilising the language of eschatology, soteriology and theology, endeavour to advance a robust evidential and scientifically modelled basis for their claims and stress that collapse is (probably) not the end of *the* world and/or human history. Secondly, through a reading of Pignarre and Stengers’ *Capitalist Sorcery* (2011), an argument is advanced that collapse theorists *ought* to embrace the rhetoric of apocalypticism. It is noted that, while the end of capitalism has become notoriously difficult to imagine, Pignarre and Stengers elaborate a new pragmatics, wherein activism might be sustained beyond singular socio-political events, albeit only once one begins to think that ‘another world is possible.’ The proposal advanced here is for collapse theorists to risk a pragmatic apocalypticism specifically as a means of messaging collapse more effectively, affecting socio-political change and resisting the worst possible outcomes of collapse.

**Key words:** apocalypse, capitalism, collapse, pragmatic, sorcery.



In this short position article a pragmatic apocalypticism is proposed and, more specifically, a defence of the rhetoric of apocalyptic prophecy is offered as a politically effective resource/technique for challenging what Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers have evocatively termed ‘capitalist sorcery’ (2011), or what might be more expansively referred to as the crisis of civilisation.<sup>1</sup> The article begins with a consideration of a certain opposition to apocalypticism, then proceeds to consider some

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as a paper at the conference *Don’t Panic! The Apocalypse in Theory and Culture* organised by *Skepsi* and held at the University of Kent 25–26 May 2012.

distinctions between the crisis of civilisation, considered here under the heading of collapse theory, and the meaning of apocalypse. The article pivots on a difference in attitudes towards collapse and apocalypse and argues that the language of the apocalypse may warrant adoption, *or rather be pragmatically risked*, by those who theorise imminent collapse, principally in order to acquire more effectively political purchase and achieve some of their aims; aims which typically entail mitigating or simply surviving the worst possible outcomes of collapse.

It should be noted that collapse, in so far as many civilisations of the past have undergone it, is a phenomenon of some significant scholarly interest, ranging from specialist works, such as Joseph Tainter's (1980) *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, to the more popularist, such as Jared Diamond's (2005) *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Survive or Fail*. A brief definition of collapse drawn from Tainter and Diamond is deployed here. It is for Tainter 'a rapid, significant loss of an established level of socio-political complexity' (1980: 4), while, for Diamond, it is 'a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time' (2005: 3). Both Tainter and Diamond measure the timeframe of a civilisation's collapse in decades, adding that the fall of civilisations such as the Mayan and the Roman occurred where there were no immediate competitors to fill the vacuum left by their passing. Contemporary collapse theorists make the further point that, in the capitalist organised, socio-politically networked and technologically interconnected world of the twenty-first century, civilisation is, for all systemic purposes, global and singular in nature. Collapse, therefore, when it occurs, will also be global in scope. Whether such a collapse warrants the description apocalyptic is the subject of what follows.

### 1. Apocalypse Not

In *Apocalypse Not* the social commentator and writer John Michael Greer genealogically deconstructs what he terms the apocalypse meme (2011: xvii–xix). Greer's stated mission here is to highlight how apocalyptic myths and narratives have a history. By drawing on the scholarship of the historian of religions Norman Cohn, Greer makes the point that apocalyptic predictions of global cataclysms, transformations or end of the world scenarios, have, since the time of Zoroastrianism, repeatedly been made and then failed to occur. Delivering an inductively-framed argument, he proposes that one should place no trust in modern or future versions of apocalypticism precisely because they are no different in kind from their ancestors. It makes no difference whether one favours a

Christian Tribulation, a Transhumanist Singularity or a New Age interpretation of the Mayan Long Count Calendar, apocalyptic prophecies have always failed; therefore, so too will these. Greer clearly wishes to provide a tonic for the modern anxieties and also false hopes that surround apocalyptic narratives. He maps the fate of many past apocalyptic beliefs, ideologies and movements and the resulting cognitive dissonance of their failures. His point is fairly simple: step away from the fantasies of supernatural or transcendent apocalyptic events.

However, anyone that is familiar with Greer's broader corpus of writings will appreciate that there is a possible tension or inconsistency at work in his argument that requires resolution. That is, while Greer is a fierce critic of apocalypticism in all of its diverse forms, he is also one of a growing community/movement of activists, scholars and writers whose primary commitments and energies are directed towards theorising the forthcoming collapse of civilisation and the unfolding ecological catastrophe that we are living through (Greer 2008). Sometimes labelled, dismissed and/or ridiculed as Doomers or Collapseniks, these theorists take their lead from such works as Meadows et al.'s *Limits to Growth* (1972), William Catton's *Overshoot* (1982), Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1980) and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989). They are, first and foremost, concerned with thinking through the consequences of an invidious network of material, political and social limits, processes and trends that are both immanent in the world and temporally imminent or ongoing. These encompass, but are certainly not limited to: economic collapse (to cite Richard Heinberg's latest work, '[e]conomic growth as we have known it is over and done with' (Heinberg 2011: 1)), energy scarcity (most notably peak oil and the decline of other non-renewable energy sources), climate change and global warming (a 4°C to 6°C hotter world by end century), human overpopulation (likely over 9 billion people by 2050), resource scarcity (food and water shortages and ultimately 'peak everything' non-renewable), ecological degradation and the sixth mass extinction of species. The primary messaging of the collapse theorists is fairly explicit and unified: (1) humanity and the world are confronted with multiple crises; (2) these crises are systemic, interrelated and global in nature and scope; (3) they do not permit any easy solutions (that is, they present predicaments and dilemmas, rather than problems that

are open to simple technofixes or political interventions); (4) there will be a 'long descent' (Greer 2008) or a 'long emergency' (Kunstler 2006) as these crises unfold.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, as one of the leading collapse theorists, Dmitry Orlov, noted recently, 'collapse is the elephant in the room, and that the various specialists [e.g. on late night news and talk shows] are the blind men debating whether it is like a snake or a tree or a wall or a stick or a rope' (2012). For the most part, it seems, the world is either blind to or else in denial about the possibility of collapse; while an apocalypse is an altogether more believable an option for most people. At its most accessible, collapse lies on the fringes of the cultural imagination of the industrialised, neo-liberal nations of the world; while, at its epistemic worst, collapse is unthinkable, existing far beyond the available conceptual frameworks and stories of human progress and limitless economic growth. An apocalypse, though, as Greer is at pains to highlight, is a recurrent and potent feature of the cultural imagination of those selfsame 'modern' sovereign states. A question then presents itself: what is the difference between them, collapse vis-à-vis apocalypse? Can collapse be framed as an apocalypse? Ought it to be? For many people, the said pachyderm in the room would certainly warrant the description apocalyptic. But collapse theorists, such as Greer, are not well-disposed towards the title. Why?

## **2. Predicting Collapse, Prophesising Apocalypse**

Are there relevant differences between predicting the collapse of civilisation and prophesising an approaching apocalypse? An easy answer is that, yes, there are a number of explanatory and analytic possibilities. Differences can be deployed by the collapse theorists themselves, by the advocates and members of various apocalyptic narratives and groups, and by the scholarly perspectives of a range of disciplines and academic specialisms. For our purposes, though, it is notable that the collapse theorists are eager to draw some distinctions. First, they tend to advance a robust evidential and theoretical basis for their claims, an approach that is firmly grounded in the physical and social sciences. For example the peak oil community, on which a significant portion of collapse analyses draw, rests on the research of geophysicists, chemists and other earth scientists; while their global warming and ecological degradation predictions draw on a wealth of data and projections from climate scientists and ecologists. These findings, in turn, have been judged and defended in terms of their positive track record. The ground-breaking

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<sup>2</sup> A good summation of these crises and their systemic nature can be found in Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed's *A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization: And How to Save It* (2010).

computer modelling of Dennis and Donella Meadows and Jorgen Randers' *Limits to Growth* (1972), for example, has proved remarkably accurate (despite the storm of controversy it attracted),<sup>3</sup> as have the predictions of peak oil production in countries around the world derived from the pioneering work of M.K. Hubbert. More recently, one might have asked whether the 2008 economic crisis was a 'Black Swan' event as many neo-classical economists claimed. Not at all, reply the collapse theorists. Citing a number of commentators and academics, such as the anti-economist Steve Keen (2011), who predicted these events with some accuracy, they view such events as further evidence of inevitable systemic collapse (see also Heinberg 2011; Martensen 2011). Their claims, they assert, are based on good science and well-entrenched, immanent material, political and social processes, trends and realities, not guesswork, a divine, trans-empirical revelation, supernaturalism or an ontological rupture in fabric of the world. The collapse theorists might hope or wish that they are wrong, but they tend to live with the conviction that the evidence and their models indicate otherwise.

Secondly, it is the eschatological, soteriological and theological language that accompanies and defines much apocalypticism that collapse theorists such as Greer tend to oppose most staunchly. At its heart, Greer argues that the apocalypse meme has always recognised and responded to the point that the things of the world are finite and perish. But it does so by denying that humanity need ultimately be troubled by this. In this sense, apocalypse typically means a transcendence of the world for humanity (Greer 2011: 169–78). The world ends — *yes* — but the *eschatos*, the last times, entail an otherworldly salvation for humankind (or at least for some: the elect, the enlightened, the raptured or those who merge with the AIs at the Singularity). The collapse theorists agree with the apocalypticists here that the crisis of civilisation will not necessarily mean the end of humanity, except in the worst cases scenarios of runaway climate change, but what they do deny is that *the* world ends. The biosphere will persist and human history will continue as one element of the natural history of the planet. The collapse theorists are predicting the end of *a* world: a world of plentiful energy, technological progress, ever increasing comfort and unlimited economic growth. But humanity will certainly have to continue living in *this* world. The world is not ontologically or cosmologically completed or enfolded in some divine conflagration, final judgement, omega point or evolutionary

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<sup>3</sup> For some discussion of the controversy, see for example Ugo Bardi's *The Limits to Growth Revisited* (2011) and Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows' *Limits to Growth. The 30-Year Update* (2010).

telos. The world will continue, only it is likely to be a hotter and wetter world, a world with reduced biodiversity and far fewer non-renewable resources. This will likely be a world of extreme weather events, mass migrations, resource wars and starvation, not a final battle with the forces of the Antichrist, sentient machines or plagues of flesh-eating zombies. It is perhaps significant (*qua* surprising or puzzling), then, that predictions of collapse have proved to be remarkably less palatable and thinkable for the majority of the population than the many variations of the apocalypse meme, which propose such end of *the* world scenarios. As Fredrik Jameson (2003), Slavoj Žižek (2010) and Mark Fisher (2010) have each wryly observed: *it seems far easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism*. Paralleling Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis (1992), capitalism has become the imaginative and historical horizon for human socio-political and economic possibilities. Only apocalyptic end of the world scenarios, with their ancient religious and theological resources and their tendency to locate human salvation outside or beyond the immanent/material plane of human history, seem to retain some potency as imaginative alternatives to the inconceivable end of capitalism.

Where then should we place our own alliances? Is the word apocalypse appropriate only if the world is destroyed? Does one need a supernaturalism, a hierophany or else a transcendent event/rupture/rapture or revelation for the word apocalypse to be legitimate? It is far from certain that one does. The green activist and writer Derrick Jensen begins his own meditation on the problem of civilisation, *Endgame*, by voicing his own resistance to using the world apocalypse, until, that is, a fellow activist pushed the point:

What will it take for you to finally call it an apocalypse? The death of the salmon? Global warming? The ozone hole? The reduction of krill populations off Antarctica by 90 percent, the turning of the sea off San Diego into a dead zone, the same for the Gulf of Mexico? How about the end of the great coral reefs? The extirpation of two hundred species per day? Four hundred? Six hundred? Give me a specific threshold [...] a specific point at which you'll finally use that word. (Jensen 2006: 3).

It seems an eminently reasonable question to ask: when precisely is the threshold of an apocalyptic event horizon crossed? Does it require annihilation, extinction, omnicide or some other radical transformation of a world's being and/or identity to qualify? Must it, following Lyotard, be a solar apocalypse (1991: 9)? Or, following Ray Brassier, is it a cosmic extinction that demarcates the nihilistic absolutisation of the apocalyptic and the limits of thought (2007)? Alternatively, might a more exotic paradigm shift, tipping point or transition between actual and possible worlds warrant the epithet apocalyptic? The point I want to make here is that Greer and a number of other collapse theorists are

perhaps too confident and hasty in their rejection of the language and rhetoric of apocalypse. The boundary conditions for what counts as apocalyptic are not settled and they have arguably been set too high. At minimum, there may be a pragmatic rationale to embrace the language of the apocalyptic.

A noteworthy recent case of shifting attitudes to apocalyptic rhetoric is that of climate scientists. For many years climate scientists have, as Joe Romm of *Climate Progress.org* notes, consistently underplayed the risks and dangers of climate change, and this failure of communication has largely been explicable in terms of their general scientific caution/virtue about not stating their results with complete confidence, a grossly mistaken belief that governments would respond appropriately to the facts as they became available and out of a general ‘fear of paralysing the public’ with those self-same facts. Moreover, this scientific hesitancy at predicting and communicating these future dangers has coexisted alongside two countervailing and well-established media myths: (1) that doomsday messages *are* being constantly repeated in the media, and (2) that their use *is not* an effective strategy to adopt to effect change (Romm 2012a). Romm, though, contests both of these claims and counters that an analysis of the climate messages that the public are exposed to in the US mainstream media will quickly reveal that: ‘It ain’t doomsday. Quite the reverse, climate change has been mostly an invisible issue for several years and the message of conspicuous consumption and business-as-usual reigns supreme’ (Romm 2012a). More importantly, the repeated messaging of an appropriately framed emotive subject may be precisely the right strategy to adopt to promote a shift in public opinion and behaviour, just as it is within the domains of advertising, marketing, popular culture and politics. Unfortunately, though, it is only very recently that significant numbers of climate scientists have started to publicly use the language of ‘calamity,’ ‘catastrophe’ and ‘risk to the collective civilization’ (Romm 2012b).

Why are climate scientists now starting to communicate in the register of apocalypse? Because the phenomenon under review constitutes a special kind of risk, an existential and global risk, and increasingly because it is recognised that the point at which one could speak with sufficient certainty to silence the majority of deniers and sceptics would likely be far too late. This is a very similar situation to the one the collapse theorists face with their disavowal of the rhetoric of apocalypse; and, indeed, anthropogenic climate change is one crucial element of the converging crises that they consider in their predictions. Therefore, the time may be near for them to embrace the

language of the apocalyptic, at minimum as a pragmatic strategy, or a speculative hypothesis to be tested, but perhaps especially because apocalypticism can be a spur to social and political action.

### **3. ‘Another World is Possible’: Towards a Pragmatic Apocalyptic**

We turn here for support to Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers’ (2011) *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. Taking their lead from the protests in Seattle 1999, they are concerned to develop and elaborate a new pragmatics, wherein activism might be sustained beyond singular socio-political events, albeit only once one begins to think that ‘another world is possible.’ They ally themselves here with Marx, theirs is a pragmatic Marx, and they are not weighed down by questions of authentic readings. As they note, ‘[t]o inherit a pragmatic’ Marx is not to pretend to inherit the ‘true Marx’. Rather, ‘[i]t is a pragmatic risk to be evaluated by its consequences’ (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 17). While agreeing with the previous pro-Marxist commentators, Jameson, Fisher and Žižek, that the end of capitalism has become difficult *per impossible* to imagine, they propose a novel re-conceptualisation of capitalism, specifically as a system that depoliticises the decisions of the state. For them, capitalism exists as ‘something the very functioning of which kills politics’ (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 15). It functions by producing ‘infernal alternatives’, choices that seem to be no choice at all (“of course the banks must be saved”, “of course you must pay for it ... don’t you want growth?”). But there is certainly no coordination or structure at work here, only the labour of many tens of thousands of minions; and it is the efforts of these minions, ‘on a very small scale’, of which the ‘infernal alternatives are an overall result’ (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 31). Capitalism is not some supremely rational machine or mechanism, rather the reverse, Pignarre and Stengers liken it to a ‘system of sorcery without sorcerers (thinking of themselves as such)’ (2011: 40). Capitalism is not sustained and produced primarily by an obfuscatory ideology or alienation; it operates primarily through a culture of ‘spells’, ‘capturing’ us, immobilising thinking. It is affective, energetic and irrational, just as much as it is social, systemic and economic. The way to break out, Pignarre and Stengers propose, is with ‘counter-magics’ that can open spaces for thought, new possibilities and alternative worlds.

The use of the term sorcery to characterise the functioning of capitalism is crucial to Pignarre and Stengers’ analysis. Sorcery is no mere metaphor here but takes seriously the manner by which one might be enthralled, enslaved and held by a system of ‘infernal

alternatives'; it is a means of thinking one's vulnerability to capitalism in ways that permit one to both encounter it and resist it. What must be avoided here is a simple conflation of sorcery with the supernatural or something that has been overcome in the past. They note the long history of that which:

manages to produce a coincidence between enslavement, the putting into service, and subjection, the production of those who do freely what they are meant to do. It is something whose frightening power and the need to cultivate appropriate means of protection against is known by the most diverse of peoples, except us moderns. Its name is sorcery (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 35).

In order to think otherwise than capitalism, one must understand one's capture within this sorcerous system and the need for protection from the hold of the spells it deploys. In so doing, Pignarre and Stengers consider a heterogeneous mix of examples of individuals and collectives that have demonstrated some successes in their local encounters with capitalism. Their key point is that a political pragmatics, a pragmatic Marxism, might bypass the tired old agency vs. structure frameworks of understanding and affect a transformation of the world. Moreover, an embrace of the apocalyptic rhetoric of prophecy may operate especially well within this context, at least in certain struggles; the aim is for an affect that can open up thinking and praxis, as the merely or purely rational will not suffice. That is, the language of apocalypse (another world is not only possible but imminent) and its possible affects (perhaps most notably fear, although Pignarre and Stengers consider such evocative alternatives as *yearning*) may be precisely what is needed to create openings for political change in periods of existential risk and/or social paralysis.

One might quickly denounce this strategy because of the dangers of deploying fear to motivate political changes or interventions. Too easily can one point towards the consequences of a culture and a politics of fear that can legitimate warfare abroad and various forms of repression at home, elevate social anxieties over security and promote a distrust of otherness and strangers (Altheide 2005; Furedi 2002; Gardner 2009; Glassner 2009). In opposition to this, though, one can also stress the evolutionary and survival value of emotions such as fear. Moreover, it is notable that one of the major obstacles to motivating people to engage with abstract and temporally distant threats, such as global warming, peak oil/energy, resource scarcity, species extinctions and ecological degradation, is their limited ability to connect with those threats emotionally; and any successes may necessarily be reliant on the capacity of people to forge or manufacture such connections. Systemic hazards, which lack a human face and intentionality,

ecological and nonhuman dangers, which do not immediately violate moral sensibilities or promote a visceral response, slow and temporally dispersed harms, which bypass perceptual and epistemic filters, these are the phenomena which *homo sapiens sapiens* are ill-equipped to recognise or address (Gilbert 2007), and they are also the primary forces which drive the collapse of civilisations. Any concerted action in the face of such crises, then, arguably needs to be fuelled, in part, by evolutionarily well-entrenched emotions such as fear. The options are, admittedly, unlikely to be as stark as between an impartial and objective rationality, or a partial and subjective emotionality. There are many emergent disciplines and research programmes examining the role of emotion and psychology in politics, with discussions shifting ever further towards such topics as neuropolitics, political physiology, political affect and affective cognition.<sup>4</sup> Some recent discussions in the climate change community are indicative of this movement, with some serious consideration of how many ‘Pearl Harbour type’ climate events it will take to stimulate climate action (Romm 2012c). The implicit understanding here is that a strong emotional connection with the phenomenon of global warming is required in order to motivate an appropriate political response to the climate crisis (i.e. a war footing level of expenditure, organisation and restructuring). Similarly, there has also been some interesting discussion of ‘hugging the monster’, a term derived from the US Air Force, whereby fear can be recognised and channelled productively towards positive survival outcomes (Romm, 2012b). Just as it is unlikely that reason alone will save one’s physical body in moments of imminent danger, it seems improbable that it will provide sufficient responses in the national or international body politic to address systemic and global threats. Consequently, evolutionarily potent emotions and uncomfortable narratives may need to be evoked and risked as potentially valuable resources for individual and collective survival in the future.

#### 4. Breaking the Spell

The upshot of the preceding points is that an engagement with and deployment of fear and other powerful emotions, arguably the stock-in-trade of apocalypticism, may be warranted in certain political and social circumstances. This may be construed as a pragmatic risk in Pignarre and Stengers’ political philosophy, an experiment to be

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<sup>4</sup> Two recent examples are John Protevi’s synthesis of the Deleuzian and Spinozan philosophies of affect with complexity theory, developmental systems theory, neuroscience and political theory (Protevi 2009) and Chris application of neuropolitics along the fault lines of Republican and Democrat attitudes to science (Mooney 2012).

attempted as a technique of transformation, an element in a recipe for breaking the hold of capitalist sorcery. But strategies like these seem especially relevant to the collapse theorists and their attitudes towards the language of apocalypse. That is, the crises that concern them most, for example, the realities of ‘peak everything’ and the consequent decline of non-renewable resources, such as fossil fuels, on which capitalist civilisation is wholly dependent, may benefit considerably from being communicated and messaged in apocalyptic terms. This is because the political and social affect of apocalyptic language may prepare people for the end of *this* world, and the transition to another world that must follow it, far more effectively than the business-as-usual, ‘infernal alternatives’ of capitalism. By emotionally connecting with collapse through a rhetoric of apocalypse, the likelihood of politically shaping a future world for the better arguably increases dramatically.

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## Walking Dead

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### Abstract

Contemplation of the nature of human existence has troubled humanity for centuries. ‘To be or not to be’ is the question and it is one over which we continue to toil. This article returns to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to assess various types of ghostliness in order to suggest that ghosts provide a new way of understanding the essence of Being. The theoretical application of deconstruction will offer an examination of opposing ideas, such as presence and absence, as a means to discuss how they are connected. Ghosts are more than simply an entity that is ‘other-worldly’. They occupy a physical space in the world and in their simultaneous state of life and death allow us to re-define the terms in which we discuss our own reality as humans. This article only considers ghostliness within *Hamlet*. However, there is scope to examine the ways in which a corporeal understanding of ghosts affects the way we perceive the protagonist’s existence in the genre of revenge tragedy as a whole. Hamlet is alive in his pursuit of vengeance, yet fated to die upon the exaction of it. It is in this sense we can consider his Being as that of a corporeal ghost, which in turn creates new ways to articulate our human experience of life.

**Key Words:** deconstruction, *Hamlet*, hauntology, ghostliness, philosophy, spectrality, revenge



This article will argue that ghosts can be corporeal through an analysis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, proposing that the eponymous protagonist can be considered as a ghost and that in his deconstructive state of existence he can bring about revolutionary changes in the state of Denmark. Beginning with the definitions of a spectre from, first, the writing of Jacques Derrida and then from Rodolphe Gasché, the article will consider the ghostliness of various scenes in the play. First of all, a quote from Derek Attridge based on the exteriority of the ghost of the King in the first Act will demonstrate how, in *Hamlet*, the ghost occupies a physical space in the world. This initial ghost acts as a catalyst to the subsequent actions of the play and gives rise to other types of ghosts; including the corporeal ghost of Hamlet, the spirit of revolution and the ghost of the

undecidable. I will then go on to demonstrate the deconstructive nature of a ghost's existence, as it is simultaneously visible and invisible in the scene between Hamlet and his mother.

Deconstruction is a term coined by Derrida which will be used as a theoretical approach throughout this article. Derrida recognises that binary opposites are hierarchical and that one side is given a privileged status over the other. For example, in the binary of life and death, life is ascribed a superior status to death. Deconstruction allows us to consider the ways in which these binaries are not completely oppositional but in fact overlap, thus destabilising the binary and removing the bias that characterises it. The binaries this article sets out to examine are life and death, presence and absence.

Following an examination of the recognised ghost of the play, the article will continue by arguing that Hamlet himself is a corporeal ghost. Through an analysis of Ophelia's ghostly encounter with Hamlet, paralleled with the meeting he and Horatio have with the ghost of the King, the article will show how after his meeting with the ghost Hamlet himself has become a spectre. By thinking of Hamlet as a corporeal ghost our certainty and understanding of life and death and presence and absence is deconstructed in such a way that we can question our experience of human existence. The article will re-examine the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy based on the idea that Hamlet, as a ghost, has been sent away to England with his death warrant signed and yet manages to reappear on stage in a graveyard in Act 5. The article will also suggest there is another ghost in the play, which is the ghost of the undecidable, and that the audience can momentarily bear witness to the presence of this invisible ghost in the prayer scene. Finally, the article will look at the tragic conclusion of *Hamlet* at which the ghosts that have been so pivotal to the action and course of the play are laid to rest. In arguing that Hamlet exists as a corporeal ghost, the article will illustrate that the conventional ways in which we understand or explain life and death are not as opposed as we might think. Consequently, this brings about a new way of considering our own existence that is not bound up in the notion that life is superior to death. This will lead us to consider that *Hamlet*, as a text, is itself a ghost through the timeless way in which it continues to haunt the English language, which makes it a pertinent source to argue that ghosts can in fact be corporeal.

## 1. What is a Ghost?

The first step towards arguing for Hamlet's existence as a corporeal ghost is to define what we mean when we refer to a ghost.<sup>1</sup> In the opening pages of *Specters of Marx* Derrida offers the following definition: 'the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit' (2006: 5). Derrida illustrates here the complexity of understanding a ghost, as a ghost is both alive and dead, present and absent. It occupies a physical place in the world and is therefore 'carnal', but it does not have a bodily existence in the same sense that a human does, and he therefore positions it as a 'becoming-body'. The deconstructive nature of the ghost questions the superior position of life by being simultaneously alive and dead. A deconstructive analysis of ghostliness raises questions on our understanding of life and death and encourages us to articulate it in new ways.

Another important concept Derrida formulates that will be useful when discussing *Hamlet* and ghosts is that of 'hauntology'. With his usual playfulness, Derrida creates this term, which, if pronounced as Derrida would with a French accent, is a homophone for 'ontology'. Ontology, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is 'that department of metaphysics which relates to the being or the essence of things' (2004: 824). The term hauntology combines ontology with the idea of ghosts: as the ghost is associated with death, hauntology not only is concerned with the nature of existence but also begins to 'comprehend [...] the discourse of the end' (Derrida 2006: 10). Hauntology considers how being and existence in the present are also haunted by the spectres of the past. As these ghosts have died and returned to the realm of being they bring with them teleological and eschatological ends, thus combining life with death and placing the past alongside the present. The chronological disruption and ontological paradox brought about by ghosts are characterised by Derrida's term hauntology.

Rodolphe Gasché also gives a detailed definition of a 'specter'; he argues that the ghost is associated with light due to its etymological derivation from the Latin word *spectrum*, saying that the spectre results from the 'decomposition and refraction of sunlight' (2012: 155). However, Gasché also recognises that the ghost is a deconstructive figure, despite being a thing of the light it is also associated with darkness: 'the *specter* is a being tied to the night' (2012: 155). Gasché's definition is also useful when we place

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<sup>1</sup> In this article the term ghost and spectre will be used interchangeably, as is the practice of Derrida and Gasché.

*Hamlet* in its historical context; the play would have been performed in the open-roofed theatre of The Globe in broad daylight, yet the opening scene takes place at night. The contradiction between light and darkness would have had literal significance to the audience, adding to the philosophical exploration in the play of the contrast between light and dark, presence and absence, life and death. As well as suggesting this contradictory understanding of a spectre, Gasché states in his definition that a ghost ‘possesses a disappearing, ephemeral existence, more dead than alive’ (2012: 155). However, the ghost is not always necessarily more dead than alive but can also be more alive than dead. This is the case in *Hamlet* where Hamlet is a corporeal ghost and is doomed, as his father’s ghost is: ‘for a certain term to walk the night’ (Shakespeare *Hamlet*: I. 5. 10), until he can exact vengeance against his uncle which will result, ultimately, in his own death.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Dead Walking

One way to argue that ghosts are corporeal in *Hamlet* is to turn to the first appearance of the ghost in the play. The stage direction reads ‘Enter Ghost’ (*Ham*. I. 1. 38), as Attridge notes: ‘Shakespeare exteriorizes the ghost in the first scene’ (1995: 224). An actor playing the part of the ghost walks on stage; therefore the ghost initially has a physical presence. Attridge also describes the ghost as a ‘borderline creature’ (1995: 225) suggesting that a ghost does not just appear as an image, as Gasché indicates in his definition, but that it has a corporeal existence. The ghost is more than a spectral image that is produced by one imagination it is a physical being seen by multiple witnesses in the first scene of the play. However, once the ghost has left the stage Marcellus says: ‘It faded on the crowing of the cock’ (*Ham*. I. 1. 156), which contrastingly implies that the ghost is affiliated with the light as Gasché’s definition stated. Deconstruction can be used as a means to understand these competing ideas, the ghost is both a corporeal presence and an image-like spectre that can walk onto the stage and fade away from it. To complicate matters further, the paradoxical entity of the ghost (that is simultaneously being and non-being) is not only presented as a visible entity but, later in the play, is also invisible. The first scene presents us with a physical ghost, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, which walks onto the stage and is witnessed by Marcellus, Barnardo and Horatio. Yet later in the play when Hamlet visits his mother in her chambers, the ghost appears

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<sup>2</sup> From this point on I will abbreviate Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to *Ham*. in the references and provide the Act, Scene and line numbers.

physically on stage yet is seen and heard only by Hamlet. In this scene the ghost is concurrently visible and invisible, and deconstruction allows us to comprehend this paradoxical coexistence. When the ghost enters Gertrude's chamber, Hamlet speaks to it and Gertrude asks Hamlet: 'Alas, how is't with you, / That you do bend your eye on vacancy / And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse?' (*Ham.* III. 4. 112–13). Shakespeare uses this scene, in which Hamlet interacts with the ghost but Gertrude is unaware of its presence, to demonstrate the deconstructive duality of the ghost. The ghost is at once visible (to Hamlet) and invisible (to Gertrude); it is present and absent as the spectre is not constrained to adhere to one fixed side of these binaries. It is the ghost's deconstructive capacity that allows Hamlet to see the ghost while Gertrude cannot.

### **3. Ghosts in the Flesh**

After examining both the visible and invisible encounters with the recognised ghost of the play, that of Hamlet's father, we have developed a basis from which to argue for the various ways in which the protagonist is himself a ghost. An analysis of Ophelia's encounter with Hamlet will begin to reveal Hamlet's ghostliness. This will be followed by a re-assessment of the famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy in light of the view that deems Hamlet a corporeal ghost. Following this an analysis of the prayer scene, supported by quotations from Derrida, will outline another ghost in the play, the ghost of the undecidable.

In Act 2 Scene 1 Ophelia recounts to her father a distressing visit she has received from Hamlet; she exclaims, '[M]y lord, I have been so affrighted' (*Ham.* II. 1. 73). She then goes on to explain how a '[p]ale' Hamlet came into her chamber looking as though he had been 'loosed out of hell' (*Ham.* II. 1. 78–80) and without speaking grabbed her by the wrist and stared at her face whilst making sounds 'so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being' (*Ham.* II. 1. 92–93). Hamlet is the walking dead, and this silent encounter with Ophelia depicts his ghostly return to haunt the woman he loves. Following Hamlet's conversation with the ghost, where he is given the task of avenging his father's death, Hamlet is a dead man walking. He cannot carry out his task without it resulting in his own demise. The scene that Ophelia recounts to her father shows Hamlet as a corporeal ghost, he is alive but destined to die. His visit to Ophelia is a ghostly one, but one with the difference of corporeality.

On learning Horatio has seen the ghost of his father, Hamlet asks Horatio if the ghost is '[p]ale, or red?' Horatio replies, 'Nay, very pale' (*Ham.* I. 2. 231–32). When Ophelia

later remarks on Hamlet's pale countenance when she and he met, the audience can associate this with the earlier paleness of the ghost seen by Horatio; Shakespeare thus offers the audience a means of identifying the spectre in the later scene through the parallel between these ghostly encounters. Another instance of this spectral identification in the later scene can be found in Ophelia's observation that, as well as having an appearance that is ghostly pale, Hamlet looks as though he has been 'loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors' (*Ham.* II. 1. 80–81), which again harks back to the earlier ghost scene on two counts: although he is not a ghost released from hell, the origin of the ghost of the father is questionable: 'Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell' (*Ham.* I. 4. 41); whilst Hamlet, in Ophelia's eyes, looks as though he could 'speak of horrors', the ghost of Hamlet's father does return to speak of one particular horror, that of his murder by his brother.

By making these associations between the return of the ghost of Hamlet's father and Hamlet's visit to Ophelia we can recognise Hamlet's own spectrality in this scene. However, Hamlet is a ghost in a sense different from that in which his father is a ghost: although Hamlet is a spectre, he is a corporeal one; Ophelia pronounces, 'He took me by the wrist' (*Ham.* II. 1. 84). Despite being a silent, pale-faced spectre Hamlet is corporeal; he can touch people and interact with the world. Ophelia's comment of how Hamlet's sighs *seemed* to 'end his being' remind us of Hamlet's earlier retort to his mother, 'Nay it is, I know not "seems"' (*Ham.* I. 2. 76). At the start of the play Hamlet can be certain of the distinction between what is present and what is absent. However, following his encounter with the ghost he is no longer convinced by the metaphysics of presence (that is the privileging presence over absence), as he can no longer be certain of what is and is not. Hamlet's being as he knew it has ended. He is no longer certain of reality, which leaves him as a ghost himself, haunted by the task that his father has set him and destined to die at the end of the play. The spectacular ghostly return of the recently dead King Hamlet and the protagonist's ghost-like encounter with Ophelia are not the only spectral visitations that Shakespeare offers us: there is yet another from Prince Hamlet in Act 5. After discovering that Hamlet has (albeit unintentionally) murdered Polonius, King Claudius decides to send Hamlet away to England (*Ham.* IV. 3. 40–46); unlike us, Hamlet is, of course, unaware that the King's 'sovereign process' is the 'present death of Hamlet' (*Ham.* IV. 3. 61–63). After Hamlet has been sent away, as it seems, to his death, we next see him appear, as if by a miracle, on stage in a graveyard, a miracle elucidated

when he recounts his journey to England to Horatio and explains how he surreptitiously discovered a letter bearing the command that his ‘head should be struck off’ (*Ham.* V. 2. 25). Yet, in a sense, Hamlet *is* already dead; Horatio’s companion in the graveyard is a revenant. Having witnessed both the ghost of his father and his own death warrant, Hamlet, says Derrida in his essay ‘The Time is Out of Joint’, has ‘seen the impossible and he cannot survive what he has survived’ (1995: 36); Hamlet cannot survive but his existence continues as a corporeal ghost. Just as the ghost of Hamlet’s father identified himself earlier, not in response to Horatio’s question, ‘What art thou [...]?’ (*Ham.* I. 1. 45) but to Hamlet himself: ‘I am your father’s spirit’ (*Ham.* I. 5. 9), so Hamlet, as a spectral entity, now feels it necessary to identify himself in the graveyard: ‘This is I, / Hamlet the Dane’ (*Ham.* V. 1. 246). In *Specters of Marx* Derrida notes the necessity for people to ‘ontologize remains’ (2006: 9) in order to commence the work of mourning. Denial that Hamlet is in fact a ghost stems from his corporeality, we know what space he occupies, and there is no need for the audience to ontologise his remains, as his self-proclamation gives us a satisfactory understanding of his existence and bypasses the work of mourning. However, this prevents us from looking further into a hauntological understanding of Hamlet, who has just been sent to death and resurfaced in a graveyard.

By returning to Act 3 Scene 1 at this point and examining the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, where Hamlet muses extensively on death, we can gain a new understanding of both the famous soliloquy and the nature of Hamlet’s existence in the play. In the speech Hamlet draws parallels between death and sleep ‘to die: to sleep — / No more,’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 59-60). If death is ‘to sleep no more’ then it is pertinent that, as he tells Horatio, when Hamlet is travelling to England, there is in his heart ‘a kind of fighting / That would not let [him] sleep’ (*Ham.* V. 2. 4-5). Hamlet cannot sleep as he is destined to live in a death-like state of corporeal ghostliness. Elsewhere in the soliloquy Hamlet asks ‘who would bear the whips and scorns of time’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 69), which brings to mind Hamlet’s earlier phrase and one Derrida with which himself is preoccupied: ‘the time is out of joint’ (*Ham.* II. 1. 186). The arrival of the ghost at the beginning of the play prompts Hamlet to make this statement; the ghost disrupts the chronology of the play as, in terms of hauntology, it brings the past alongside the present, thus deconstructing any logical understanding of time.

In his essay ‘The Time is Out of Joint’ Derrida notes that ‘is’ is ‘the third person singular present indicative of the verb *to be*’ (Derrida, 1995: 24). Time and being are

inextricably linked. Our understanding of what it means to exist is bound up with our understanding of a linear chronology of time. The ghost disturbs our understanding of time as well as of being. When Hamlet questions ‘who would bear the whips and scorns of time’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 69), we can therefore consider the ways in which Hamlet, as a ghost, defies the constraints that time places upon him. As he is a spectre, Hamlet haunts the play without giving a term to his mourning and without setting himself a strict time limit for exacting the vengeance that his father requests of him. After questioning why people suffer ‘To grunt and sweat under a weary life’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 76), Hamlet suggests that man might himself ‘his quietus make / With a bare bodkin’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 74–75). Why does Hamlet not simply commit suicide? He suggests it here and already in Act 1 Scene 2 he has wished that the ‘Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ (*Ham.* I. 2. 131–32). At the start of the play it is because God has forbidden it, later it is because of ‘the dread of something after death’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 77). Hamlet’s personal fear of the unknown as opposed to denial on religious grounds is what later prevents him from taking his own life.

The most telling suggestion that Hamlet is a ghost that we learn in this speech is that death is ‘[t]he undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns’ (*Ham.* III. 1. 78–79). However, Hamlet’s father *does* return; he returns as a ghost in search of vengeance. Similarly, Hamlet travels to an undiscovered country, he is sent away with his signed death warrant to England. Hamlet also returns from the undiscovered country, as his ghostly existence continues in his quest for revenge. Hamlet comes back from England and is next seen again in the graveyard talking to the Sexton; as the gravedigger sings to the dead skulls he unearths, he also converses with Hamlet, the living dead. Hamlet lives as a ghost, he is both doomed to die and cursed to live until he has attained his unfinished business in killing Claudius, at which point he will be able to die and his ghostly presence is no longer necessary.

#### **4. Bearing Witness to the Ghost**

After looking at the ghost of the dead walking (Hamlet’s father) and the walking dead (Hamlet himself), it is now time to make visible the invisible ghost of the play. Hamlet has an opportunity to murder the king whilst he is praying, and he refuses to do it. The following analysis of this ‘prayer scene’ in the context of Derrida’s writing on the ghost of the undecidable will help to illuminate this invisible ghost. First of all it is important to define what we mean by the ghost of the undecidable. In his essay on ‘Force of Law’

Derrida states that '[t]he undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost — but an essential ghost — in every decision' (1992: 24). In order to make a difficult decision one must go through the ordeal of the undecidable, and Derrida describes this necessary uncertainty as a ghost. The ghost of the undecidable deconstructs the opposition between yes and no. The prayer scene in *Hamlet* allows the audience to bear witness to the coexistence of certainty with uncertainty in the ghost of an impossible decision.

Left alone at the end of Act III Scene 3, the King guiltily begins to pray, giving voice to his crimes as he does so. While Claudius is thus engaged, Hamlet enters behind him, declares, 'And now I'll do it' (*Ham.* III. 3. 74) and, as he prepares himself to kill his step-father, draws his sword. At this moment in the play as Hamlet hovers behind Claudius with the sword raised above his head, ready to bring it down on him and kill him, the ghost of the undecidable presents itself, and Hamlet reconsiders murdering Claudius whilst he is praying, as he does not want '[t]o take him in the purging of his soul / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage' (*Ham.* III. 3. 85-86). Hamlet goes from decided action (drawing the sword to kill Claudius) to uncertainty and inaction (talking himself out of killing Claudius and sheathing the sword). Through a deconstructive analysis we can see how this moment in the prayer scene combines the presence of the action of raising the sword with the absence of inaction. Although intangible, the act of faltering brings together presence and absence in a process of deconstruction that the ghostly provides. The ghost of the undecidable is present and visible in the raised sword but at the same time is invisible, and no tangible object can be pointed to and labelled as a ghost.

This discussion of spectrality within the play leads to an analysis of the spectrality of the text itself. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida notes: 'A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost' (2006: 20-21). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has itself become a ghost through its enduring reputation; for example the phrase 'To be or not to be' is recognised worldwide. Just as a ghost is timeless, the play itself is timeless and continues to haunt the English language in the twenty-first century. 'The ghost is as much *event* as *object*' (Attridge, 1995: 224), which is certainly the case here. The timeless text of *Hamlet* has moved beyond being a physical object and is now an event that has haunted the whole of the English language and continues so to do. *Hamlet* acts like a ghost in the way it haunts the very language we use and, in this sense, is a ghostly event as Attridge suggests the ghost can be.

*Hamlet* is a play filled with ghosts. Although they are often sidelined and cast aside as a strange supernatural phenomena, ghosts are actually integral to the plot and actions in the play, as an analysis of the various types of ghostliness that Shakespeare uses throughout the play helps us to understand. Had the ghost of Hamlet's father not returned from beyond the grave to set Hamlet the challenging task of murdering his own uncle, then Hamlet would have stuck with the decision he made before learning the true nature of his father's death; that being: 'But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue' (*Ham.* I. 2. 159). Instead the ghost acts as a catalyst to the plot, giving Hamlet motive to break his silence and take action against his uncle. Without the ghost of the undecidable interrupting Hamlet as he is about to take his revenge the play would be over before Act 4 even begins.

Our protagonist Hamlet himself is a revolutionary ghost, he is a walking dead man, haunting the play to bring about the necessary changes for the state. Hamlet is simultaneously living and dead, and this brings the very nature of being into question: in his paradoxical state of existence Hamlet is an agent of revolution. Revolution is itself a spirit untouchable yet present, and in *Hamlet* the state of Denmark is on the cusp of revolutionary change. With young Fortinbras and his army, and Laertes and his mob of protestors, the monarchy is about to change hands.<sup>3</sup> We can also identify Fortinbras as a ghost as he also haunts the play; although he is rarely present on stage, his name spectrally recurs, and he is a haunting threat to Claudius throughout the course of the action. The spirit of revolution, as a spectral presence in the play, is given a corporeal actuality through the actions of Fortinbras. Hamlet also acts as an agent to the spirit of revolution; as a ghost himself Hamlet is not bound to life but as a being neither living nor dead can propel the spirit of revolution to the logical endpoint of the play. The death of Claudius during the play's final scene brings about advantageous changes to Denmark.

## 5. The End

This leads us to consider the denouement of *Hamlet*. The command of his father's ghost, that Hamlet '[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be. / A couch for luxury and damned incest' (*Ham.* I. 5. 82) acts on him like a curse, since the vengeance to which Hamlet commits himself will ultimately result not only in his killing the King, his uncle, but also

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<sup>3</sup> The spirit of the revolution is apparent from the uneasy commencement of the play. Horatio explains to Marcellus and Barnardo the reason they are on watch is due to anxieties over young Fortinbras gathering an army against Denmark to reclaim the land his father has lost (see *Ham.* I. 1. 94–105).

his own death. In his chapter on 'Hamlet and the Living Dead', Christofides examines the final scene of the play and insightfully proposes that:

revenge takes us to a liminal point between life and death [...] close to death, still alive but fatally poisoned, [Hamlet] delivers justice from a place neither living nor dead (2012: 63)

In order to be the agent of the spirit of revolution and the minister of death Hamlet must himself be a ghost. However, Hamlet not only is a ghost in the final scene of the play in order to take his revenge but also has been a ghost throughout the majority of the play, since his own encounter with the ghost of his father. Derrida in his essay 'The Time is Out of Joint' says:

one must stop believing that the dead are just the departed and that the departed do nothing. One must stop pretending to know what is meant by "to die" and especially by "dying." One has, then, to talk about spectrality (1995: 30).

Both King Hamlet the father and Hamlet the son have been haunting the play. Death is not a barrier to the spectres in *Hamlet*, as, regardless of their state of existence, be that spirit or corporeal ghost; they walk the stage and interact with the living in order to bring about revolutionary changes in the world. Once those revolutionary changes are achieved the ghosts are no longer required. By the end of the play, the corporeal ghost of Hamlet has, in killing Claudius, carried out the task for which he has been kept in his ghostly state; this allows Hamlet finally to achieve the peace of death, and his ghost is thus laid to rest.

In arguing that ghosts can be corporeal, as we see the protagonist is in the play, the certainty of our knowledge of reality and unreality, of life and death, of presence and absence, is deconstructed. The ghost is more than a liminal entity that strangely appears then disappears; it is an integral part of the play and necessary for our understanding of it. *Hamlet* needs the ghost of the King to appear in order that it acts as a catalyst to the action that follows; it requires Hamlet himself to act as a ghost and an agent of revolutionary change. As the ghost of the undecidable surfaces, a ghost is also an absent presence in every difficult decision, as we saw in the prayer scene. In his analysis of the ghost scene in *Hamlet* Derrida recognises Barnardo's 'irrepressible desire for identification' (2006: 11) of the ghost. In arguing for corporeal ghosts we are in part falling into the trap of the metaphysics of presence, that is, privileging presence over absence, in what Derrida terms our 'irrepressible desire' to identify the unknown. However, in its examination of the ways in which ghosts are simultaneously both alive and dead and present and absent, the deconstructive analysis considers not only the opposing sides of these binaries in order to contemplate the ways in which they coexist

but also that neither is superior to the other, thus dispelling any privilege of presence in favour of deconstruction. This article has shed light on our understanding of the terms we use to discuss life and death and has engaged with applying those terms to *Hamlet* in order to gain a new way to understand spectrality.

We have also considered the ghostliness of *Hamlet*, as the text itself is a ghost. Certain phrases from the play have been adopted into our contemporary idiom, such as ‘method in the madness’ and ‘every dog has his day’; through these Shakespeare is present in the twenty-first century. However, the idiomatic expressions we use today have been contracted down, and the original phrases: ‘Though this be madness yet there is method in’t’ (*Ham.* II. 2. 202–03) and ‘The cat will mew and dog will have his day’ (*Ham.* V. 1. 281) are not used as they were originally written. *Hamlet* is both present in our modern language, through the adoption of phrases from the play, but is also absent as these phrases have been transformed from their original wording. In this way *Hamlet* is both present and absent and is a spectre that haunts the English language.

Discussing ghosts in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has led us to consider the nature of human existence and the notion of ghostliness. We are all the walking dead, alive for a time but destined to die one day. Ghosts are corporeal, as all people are ghosts. Our work of marginalising ghosts of the spirit is a work of easing our own conscience. The spectre acts as a reminder of our own ghostliness; in attempting to keep ghosts distinct from ourselves we simply try to distance ourselves from the dead, privileging ourselves as living beings over ghosts when in fact we are one and the same. Our only understanding lies in the hauntological difference between the dead walking and the walking dead.

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## The Projection of an Ending and Systems Theory: a Sociological Reading of Apocalypse as a Genre

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### Abstract

The narratives of the end, particularly the Bible-inspired ones containing apocalyptic imagery, have been studied for centuries. Sociological treatment of this subject has been primarily focussed on apocalyptic communities and millenarian movements, or their social setting (*Sitz im Leben*). The treatment of apocalypse in this article differs in that it is a sociological contribution which focuses on the aspect of genre in its systemic effects from the standpoint of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. The main interest is to point to the structural issues springing from the idea of imminent ending and its social potential. The author's thesis is that fictions about the purpose and the flow of history from the beginning to the end satisfy, among other potential social functions, our systemic social needs. Various historical imaginings and projections of the world out of existence, despite their different content or politics of representation, seem to share a common systemic logic concerning operational closure and structural openness. Even though the system always seemingly tries to offer solutions to a variety of crises, the real systemic autopoietic interest is to ensure the mechanism that will continue generating new problems, new crises that it can try to solve – that way enabling us to imagine our significance in the space between our present existence and our always imminent non-existence. The projection of an ending is an inherent feature functionally operative in systemic auto-reproduction. The extraordinary historical resilience of the belief that the end is coming despite historical disconfirmations (practised by various transformations of the belief or by deferrals of the end) springs from the recurring systemic need for adjustments in the interest of 'reality' and the control thereof. Thus, by looking into the narratives of the end, the article aims to investigate the systemic logic behind the sense-making process, without losing the materiality of sociological ideas from sight or implying the map of the experience of the Other.

**Keywords:** apocalypse, Luhmann, systems theory



The narratives of the End, particularly the Bible-inspired ones containing apocalyptic imagery, have been studied for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Sociological treatment of this subject has been primarily focussed on apocalyptic communities and millenarian movements or their *Sitz im Leben* [social setting]. The treatment of apocalypse in this article differs in that it is a sociological contribution which focuses on the aspect of genre in its systemic effects from the standpoint of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory.<sup>2</sup> The main interest is to point to the structural issues springing from the idea of imminent ending and its social potential. However bizarre, frightening or consoling the Word might be, its effects can be interpreted from the point of view of systems theory as the part of autopoietic logic of (sub)systems. The need to make the world (the time flow) and our own selves orderly is satisfied by producing fictions about the Beginning and the End from the middle position (present). Or, in the words of systems theory, to maintain the difference between the environment and the system it is necessary to keep oneself asymmetrical from the Other: to self-invent oneself from the past remnants of oneself.

Our thesis is that fictions about the purpose and the flow of history from the Beginning to the End satisfy, among other potential social functions, our systemic social needs. Various historical imaginings and projections of the world out of existence, despite their different content or politics of representation, seem to share a common systemic logic concerning operational closure and structural openness. Even though the system always seemingly tries to offer solutions to a variety of crises, the latent systemic autopoietic interest is to ensure the mechanism that will continue generating new problems, new crises that it can try to solve and thus enable us to imagine our significance in the space between our present existence and our always imminent non-existence. The projection of an ending is an inherent feature functionally operative in systemic auto-reproduction. The extraordinary historical resilience of the belief that the End is coming despite historical disconfirmations (practised by various transformations of the belief or by deferrals of the End) springs from the recurring systemic need for adjustments in the interest of 'reality' and the control thereof. Thus, by looking into the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as a paper at the conference *Don't Panic! The Apocalypse in Theory and Culture* organised by Skepsi and held at the University of Kent 25–26 May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> This article uses the term 'apocalypse' (without any article) in the sense of 'the literary genre of apocalyptic writings', 'apocalyptic writings' being both 'apocalypses' in the sense of prophetic disclosures or revelations and narratives which focus on apocalyptic events or 'apocalypses' in the sense of events of great importance or violence, like those described in apocalypses (in the first sense), particularly the Apocalypse, or the Book of Revelation. The term 'the apocalypse' always means 'the End of the world as we know it'.

narratives of the End, this article aims to investigate the systemic logic behind the sense-making process, without losing the materiality of sociological ideas from sight or implying the map of the experience of the Other.

### 1. Sociology and apocalypse

Maybe 1970 was the year for the statement that the scholarly world is ‘*ratlos vor der Apokalyptik* [helpless before the Apocalyptic]’ (Koch), but we have witnessed the expansion of academic interest in apocalypse as a genre ever since. Milestones in critical scholarship were for instance, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Hanson 1975), *Semeia 14* (Collins 1979) and *Apocalyptic Imagination* (Collins 1984). Generally, there were three different foci of attention: on the phenomenon of apocalypticism, on the literary genre of apocalypses and on the sociology of apocalypticism (DiTommaso 2007: 236). In particular, there has been a notable increase in the practice of applying the insights of social sciences to apocalyptic writings (i.e. narratives which focus on apocalyptic events), it being specially apparent that, even when the focus of attention was not strictly or explicitly sociological, studies have tended to draw on sociological or anthropological research or to rely on certain sociological assumptions (Grabbe 1989: 27).

The initial concern of the modern study of apocalypses was with definitions and taxonomy. Apocalypses were predominantly studied in social sciences as the basis for motivating so called ‘millennial’ movements or ‘apocalyptic communities.’<sup>3</sup> ‘Apocalypse’ as a literary genre and ‘apocalypticism’ as an ideology were early on recognised as distinct entities (DiTommaso 2007: 239). Most cited are the definitions by Collins (1984) of apocalypse as a literary genre

of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisions eschatological speculation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world (5);

and of apocalypticism as

the ideology of a movement that shares the conceptual structure of the apocalypses’, and endorses ‘a worldview in which supernatural revelation, the heavenly world, and eschatological judgment played essential parts (13).

But both ideologies and genres defy strict definitions as they need to encompass complex historical evidence (DiTommaso 2007: 241). It has been pointed out that ‘we should be wary, however, not to erect a false dichotomy’ between ‘social-scientific approaches and

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<sup>3</sup> Grabbe defines these as ‘[r]eligious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly collective salvation’ (1989: 28).

close literary readings of the text' as 'the social sciences raise questions which can only be answered after careful literary examination' (Esler 1994: 101).

Grabbe (1989) made a summary of proposals and implications in different studies. As mentioned above, some of these intend to differentiate between literary and social aspects of research on apocalypse, while also warning against the reductionism of simplified dichotomies. He also mentions the connections made between apocalypse and apocalyptic communities but stresses that the connection is not a necessary one. He continues by advancing the proposal that apocalypticism arises in times of crisis, that it is opposed by the establishment and that there are social functions which it meets. Each point of view has, however, been subject to criticism, as there are many exceptions. Thus, apocalypticism is neither necessarily the product of the oppressed nor can it be fully explained by relative deprivation, and it may as well be produced by the established institution.

By way of an historical and ethnographic example, The Apocalypse (or Revelation) of St. John the Divine was, in its *Sitz im Leben*, namely the time of Roman persecution of Christians, a 'countercultural code for dissent' (Keller 2005: 10), similar to much of the cultural apocalyptic script used in politics as a narrative of doom for the dominators and hope for the oppressed. As Christianity became institutionalised and apocalypticism became increasingly marginalised, the Church Fathers, such as Origen in the third century and Saint Augustine in the fifth, were obliged to provide allegorical interpretations of the text.<sup>4</sup> However, apocalypticism and millennialism were historically utilised to legitimise both the vision of world conquerors as millennial saviours, the last kings to defeat the Antichrist, Charlemagne, for instance, and the vision of holy anarchy. The main tropes of medieval millennialism revolved around providing anti-apocalyptic chronologies (to postpone the End) or transforming the empire into a positive eschatological force. Joachim of Fiore's revitalising the non-allegorical reading of the apocalyptic texts of the Bible in general and the Apocalypse in particular did much in the twelfth century to both inspire the Crusades and influence those, such as Richard the Lionheart, who participated in them.

Many ideological and political projects have been fuelled by the same matrix, although they do not explicitly rely on the discourse of apocalypse and the millennium.

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<sup>4</sup> The historical data mentioned in this paragraph are taken from the entry on Millennialism, Encyclopædia Britannica 2006 ultimate reference suite DVD.

For instance, ‘the fanatical Jacobins in France thought of themselves as the Elect and tried to bring about a complete transformation of society, creating a Republic of Virtue through a Reign of Terror’ (Sickinger 2004: 186). This is also the case with the Nazi movement (Waite 1993), and Sickinger (2004: 190) claims that ‘when one examines the Nazi Movement, a more perfect model of millenarianism is hard to find’. Furthermore, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression and the Cold War have been analysed as instances of twentieth-century millennialism, proving that apocalyptic and millennial discourse may be peaceful or violent, religious or secular (Sickinger 2004: 187). The victims created by these events are extremely prone to millennial thinking, because it promises at least some kind of control and hope. Out of destruction always comes new life and new hope (Leeming 1990: 85-88); *Die Götterdämmerung* or the Twilight of the Gods intensifies the creative role of man (Sickinger 2004: 191).

The twenty-first century has so far shown that issues concerning the apocalypse in the sense of the End of the world are just as popular: the so-called ‘Y2K’ issue as the dawn of the year 2000 approached resulted in the appearance of many an apocalyptic scenario, as did the year 2012 as regards the interpretation of the Mayan calendar. Numerous films on the End of the world or the period after it also bear witness to the popularity of apocalyptic narrative.<sup>5</sup> One constant theme of apocalyptic texts is the Second Coming: Saint Paul, notably in his two letters to Thessalonians, anticipated that arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth was imminent; about two thousand years later, a quarter of the present day U.S. population believes that the Second Coming will occur in its lifetime (Keller 2005: 8).

Another phenomenon, and one which has something to say about ourselves and about the moment in which we live, is the rise in popularity of not only utopias but also dystopias, created in the face of crises and encompassing fears of the consequences of overpopulation, global capitalism, potential eco-disasters, rapid technological changes and similar issues. In order to demystify the narrative underlying not only many such fears and social worries but also the subsequent hope, we need to start from the fact that this underlying narrative has but rarely been acknowledged as being apocalyptic. Notwithstanding this, even those people who do not believe in it seem to be influenced by the apocalypse, in the sense of the End of the world, such a belief being something of a

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<sup>5</sup> For example, *The World’s End*, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, *After Earth*, *4:44 Last Day on Earth*, *Terminator*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Children of Men*, and dozens more.

‘civilizational habit’ (Keller 2005: 8). Consequently, this implies that apocalyptic and related messages can express something widespread in the community; they need not represent the thinking of a connected community and can even be the product of an individual or of the intelligentsia. People of all ranks and classes seem to have been susceptible to the need for transcendental meaning; there seems to be no strict rule. To conclude, Grabbe points out that much of the sociological work on apocalypses has been circular: ‘social situation is first hypothesized from the literature, then this hypothesized situation is used to understand and interpret the literature!’ which is why it seems that ‘all possibilities must be allowed for’ (1989: 39). The apocalyptic imaginary seems to be characterised by an operative ambiguity capable of both revolution and reaction. We seem to be unable to provide an essential subtext but can recognise the performance of something that can be called the cultural apocalypse script (Keller 2005: 4), which literalises itself in history in different ways through our different performances of it. Apocalypse is here seen as similar to Scott’s *hidden transcript* (Scott 1990), operating at the very core of centuries-long processes of modernisation.

The systems approach to apocalypse used in this article also distances itself from the endlessly varied uses and abuses of the apocalyptic narrative and focuses on its persistence, resilience and functional relevance to the material habits of the world. In what follows my aim is to problematise the position of my analysis auto-reflexively. An article discussing fictions of the End of the world from a sociological perspective could use a variety of approaches, with a focus on either actors or the system, the *Lebenswelt* [life-world], structure, etc. This article will apply systems theory and will conclude the analysis with a critique. The analysis therefore focuses on the apocalyptic writings in a specific way, with attention being paid to its form and its social functions from a systemic point of view. As the narratives of the End, apocalyptic writings are studied as an instantiation, or a synecdoche (i.e. the use of a part to refer to the whole), of the human need to make things orderly by producing fictions about beginnings and ends. Using Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, I will demonstrate that the need to make sense or to create fictions of the End, a need I will paradigmatically call ‘apocalyptic’ in this article, is aimed at satisfying, at least among other things, systemic social needs.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will present Luhmann’s main concepts of system theory and then outline the notions of fiction and the apocalypse within this systems theory perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> Primarily the need to keep going, to continue its existence.

## 2. Systems theory

There is no one, single systems theory; it was first developed in biology and physics, from where it influenced, or migrated to, other disciplines.<sup>7</sup> As a result, there are many different theoretical approaches under this label, such as general systems theory, cybernetics, meta-mathematics, systems analysis in engineering or chaos theory, and they all read the world as a system of material and symbolic correspondences and interrelations (Cramer 2001: 1). A general systems theory aims ‘to provide an overarching terminology and a generic description of processes [...] common to differing scientific disciplines’ (Bausch 2001: 9). There have been attempts to find certain commonalities between all systems approaches, such as the view of all phenomena as a composite web of relationships formed from building blocks (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009: 103). The accent is put on a whole (Herting and Stein 2007: 3), which possesses properties that arise as a combination of individual components and is not the sum of individual parts (Sieh 2012: 1344).

The systems theory has also appeared in a sociological version, most notably authored by Luhmann. There are other systems approaches in sociology, such as that of Talcott Parsons, who wrote *The Social System* as an exposition of a conceptual scheme for the analysis of social systems in terms of the action frame of reference (1951: 3); this is to say that the interaction of actors is the underlying component of the system (when looked at holistically) (Sieh 2012: 1347). This is not the case where Luhmann is concerned, as he excludes actors from the social system (Gershon 2005: 99) and includes them in a separate one. The key distinction for Luhmann is not between the actor and the system but between the system and its environment (Gershon 2005: 100). Social systems are for Luhmann autopoietically closed, i.e. they work by their own code, reproducing themselves from the past remnants of themselves, recreating themselves in infinite loops.

The notion of autopoiesis that Luhmann used was first developed by biologists Maturana and Varela (1980; 1987). Maturana and Varela made a major systems theoretical paradigm shift in the 1970s by challenging the traditional distinction between open and closed systems. Bertalanffy (1968), the founder of the general systems theory, claimed that all systems have to be open in their communication with and adaptation to the environment in order to survive. Closed systems are, in his general systems theory,

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<sup>7</sup> Sommerlatte (2002) states that the German scientific community has agreed to reserve the notion of *Systemtheorie* for the use in the sociological sense.

treated only as an analytical possibility. Maturana and Varela, however, did not categorically rule out the viability of closed systems but stressed the auto-reproduction of systems. The model they took to illustrate how closed systems construct their world through their own medium and interaction with themselves is the brain, which reconstructs the external world in terms of internal states (Knorr Cetina 1994: 15). Autopoiesis is the trope for recursion or self-reference, processes that are crucial for the self-reproduction of living organisms and thus serve to differentiate between the living and the non-living (Mingers 2004: 404). Autopoietic systems are organisationally closed, a statement that ‘can be misleading if it is taken to imply that these systems do not interact with their environment’, because the closure is meant ‘in the sense that the product of their organization is the organization itself’ (Pearson 1997: 56).

Another significant influence on Luhmann came from constructivist cyberneticians, primarily Heinz von Foerster. Two of von Foerster’s views were particularly relevant here: first, von Foerster sees humans as non-trivial machines, due to which we have to accept the ‘autonomy’ or ‘autopoietic manner’ of humans and social systems (Herting and Stein 2007: 6; von Foerster 1992);<sup>8</sup> secondly, he understands communication as a process of individual sense-construction, whereby the processing of signals to information makes sense to us.<sup>9</sup> Also, the Biological Computer Laboratory, founded by von Foerster at the University of Illinois in 1957, was the ‘cradle of the concept of second-order cybernetics’ (Herting and Stein 2007: 5). Second-order cybernetics is considered to be the founding place of radical constructionism, as it considers the role of the Observer in the research process. It also reflects on her role and influence on research results, claiming that ultimate objective observation is impossible (von Foerster 1995). Luhmann built his theory of autopoietic systems largely on the fundamentals of second-order cybernetics.

In Luhmann’s view, the system always relies on its own internal tools to reproduce itself: it is autopoietic (Luhmann 1984). In order to be autopoietic, the system must observe and judge its functioning (Luhmann 1984), because the act of making distinctions, so relevant in the emergence of the system, is the act of observation

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<sup>8</sup> This means that their operations cannot be calculated in the same way as those of physical ‘trivial’ machines.

<sup>9</sup> Herting and Stein warn, however, that these interpretations are not necessarily different between individuals: ‘We are living in a culture that directs us to develop a stable behavior and to interpret certain signals in a very similar way. The similarity of our interpretations leads us to the illusion that there must be the same information available to everybody, thus concealing our own interpretative work’ (2007: 6).

(Gershon 2005: 101):<sup>10</sup> acts of observation keep the system alive. The first distinction that the system makes is between itself and the environment; this creates the boundary between inside and outside and is a first-order system-establishing observation. The system, however, continues making distinctions on the second level, where the system-establishing distinction is by recursion introduced into the system again, observing the act of observation (of making distinctions), noticing the categorisation. All observation is always internal to the system. Thus, systems theory is one of society's self-observations (Gershon 2005: 101).

As the central distinction in Luhmann's theory is between system and environment, the system is only possible as one side of this distinction (1984: 176). Systems challenge their boundaries, but they can never exceed them: they cannot observe from outside of the system. The environment is thus always just another system. The change in one system (the environment of other systems) causes the changes in surrounding/interdependent systems. Other systems or the environment supply the system with adequate disorder. The border between the system and the environment is the limit between the order that the system is always trying to establish, and the overly complex environment. Thus Luhmann's social theory revolves around the attempt to answer the traditional sociological question of the possibility of society (1981), a concern going back to the old Hobbesian problem of order (Bjerg 2006: 50). The noise and the chaos of the environment are constantly made internal to the system: they fall within a constructed social order. Luhmann (1984: 181–85) speaks of the *Komplexitätsgefälle* [the reduction in complexity] of the system compared to the environment. The capacity of systemic self-reproduction involves the reduction of complexity that is present in the environment, achieved by actual selections and actualisations of potential observations in the environment (Bjerg 2006: 51). Complexity works as a generator for system creation and Luhmann speaks of a 'complexity pressure' (1990a: 68) whereby the system is 'being forced to select' (1984: 25) among many possible observations in the environment. The selections that the system makes, thereby filtering observations and reducing environment complexity to order, do not take care of the environment but only of internal systemic needs, primarily the need to reproduce and continue itself, which is why the observations are selected in a way that they can be connected to subsequent observation (the ultimate

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<sup>10</sup> Participation is not considered to be a system-establishing instance, because Luhmann treats systems as functionally closed and subject-free.

end or purpose of every system). This is what Luhmann terms *Anschlussfähigkeit* [the ability to be a connection] (1984),<sup>11</sup> a characteristic central to the notion of autopoiesis.

Claiming that complexity of the environment is just another systemic observation reveals a paradox. Complexity of the environment is treated in Luhmann's systems theory as a catalyst for the creation and reproduction of systems, so we have to assume that complexity in the form of potential observations (the system can select from) is *older than* the system; that it exists prior to it.<sup>12</sup> If environment complexity emerges posterior to the system's observation of the environment, it cannot catalyse the creation of the system. Consequently, it makes no sense to see the system as complexity-reducing.

Luhmann's treatment of paradoxicality might seem postmodern, but he actually dismisses the problem of postmodernity, claiming that systems theory is already well-equipped to incorporate the problem of paradoxicality (1997). Luhmann bases his theory on difference and sees paradoxes as intrinsic and unavoidable parts of life (i.e. of systems operations). Paradoxicality is, however, not a question of existence for the system (Luhmann 1985), but is one of the mechanisms of the system's auto-reproduction. Paradoxes appear only on the meta-level, the level of observation and not on the level of the observed or the existential level, which is why the system can ignore or avoid them by switching between the levels of observation. This is so because the process of autopoiesis is not a logical process, which means the system can tolerate the situation in which the conditions of possibility are at the same time the conditions of impossibility.

Bjerg (2006: 63-64) provides an example from the world of art to illustrate this position. Art system (subsystem) functionally operates on the distinction art/non-art. In 1986, an unknown artist Gerard Jan van Bladeren destroyed, with a knife, Barnett Newman's modernistic masterpiece painting *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967). He was arrested for the act and the painting was restored to the original state. In 1997, van Bladeren attacked another of Newman's paintings, *Cathedra* (1951), and cut it seven times. The question is whether van Bladeren's act is vandalism (non-art) or a productive artistic comment on the abstract art (art in its own right). If it is rejected as

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<sup>11</sup> Customarily translated as 'connectivity', although the inability of English translation to capture the meaning of ability to connect has been pointed out (Bjerg 2006: 66).

<sup>12</sup> Habermas and Luhmann led passionate year-long debates on the meaning and functioning of systems and the life world. The criticism of systems theory as social technology founded on the paradoxes upon which Luhmann bases his assumption that the environment is always more complex than the system, and that the system always selects from the environment and thus reduces its complexity, was advanced by Habermas relatively early on (1971).

vandalism on the grounds of the integrity of the original artwork, how can the restoration of the destroyed painting (no longer an original) be justified? Van Blederen wanted to repeat his (self-proclaimed) artistic act by the second slashing because he thought the conservators had done damage to his first artistic act. In this scenario, the status of the act is ambivalent and creates a paradox within the art system. The system duplicates itself here, as we cannot decide if the act is art or non-art, and the paradox cannot be escaped by creating a subsystem (introducing the distinction on another level).<sup>13</sup> The complexity of the environment cannot be said to be *reduced* in this case, but on the contrary, it seems that a great deal of complexity is *produced* by the very system, i.e. a legal, moral and ethical system created by social actors.

Such cases are referred to as ambivalent complexity by Bjerg (2006), who furthers the explanation by applying Baudrillard's (1999) distinction between crisis and catastrophe. Complexity itself brings about crisis for the system,<sup>14</sup> but ambivalent complexity brings catastrophe. Baudrillard defines the postmodern state by differentiating between crisis, which means 'tensions and contradictions' and presents 'the natural movement of our history', and a catastrophic process in which we are now, though 'not in the sense of a material apocalypse, but in the sense of an overturning of all rules', which means that we have to function 'by rules we do not know', and 'nothing is simply contradictory or irrational in this state', but 'everything is paradoxical' (Baudrillard 1999: 18). This can further be associated with the distinction between risk and danger (Luhmann 1993): risk is a threat produced within a system, it is related to the fact that a system has to select; it might not select the best option, but it will still make a selection, and perpetuate itself. Contingency contained in the very process of selecting means risk (Luhmann 1984: 25). Crisis and risk do not bring the very existence of the system in question: the system, one might say, paradoxically, remains possible both because and in spite of them. Ambivalent complexity, which brings the system into the state of catastrophe, opens, again, perhaps paradoxically, the possibility of the impossibility of the system by discovering that the continuity of the system is possible only as a discontinuity

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<sup>13</sup> Although the legal system was used to judge this act, paradoxicality remains, because the nature of items belonging to the system of art cannot be decided legally in this way, despite the punishment of vandalism.

<sup>14</sup> Kuhn's paradigm (1996) can be interpreted in this vein from the systems theoretical position: science as a system accumulates crises that it internalises into ordered, comprehensible, systemic notions, which it then resolves in a way and ensures its continuation as a system. Crises are thus something that the system needs, because it can autopoietically continue itself around the attempts to solve them.

from its formative rules, and this discontinuity is a void in the autopoiesis of the system (Bjerg 2006: 64-65). It seems that complexity is not reduced but produced by the system, or perhaps it is repressed by environment complexity that creates uneasiness in the system. This is the irreducible complexity which brings the existence of the system in danger.<sup>15</sup>

This danger is the danger of *Anschlussunfähigkeit* or the inability to find solutions that could be connected to the previous ones, because connectivity rests upon meaningfulness. Although not necessarily logical, autopoiesis involves the creation of a meaningful reality; it is fundamentally the process of the signification of the unsigned or a sense-making process.

If the environment is only imagined (a present absence), its complexity and the very distinction between inside and outside, system and environment, are not unambiguous. Paradoxicality is a constitutive, if not *the* constitutive, feature of all systems. Every system has a blind spot as it is challenged on the level of its constitutive selectivity, and it cannot see the unity of the distinction underlying its operations as a form that produces both sides of the code, i.e. it cannot see that it does not see what it does not see (Knodt 1994). By stressing both the exhaustion of the binary logic of classical ontology and the irreducibility of paradox, as contained in the structure of observation, which gives any system an inherent blind spot, Luhmann seems, once again, to be at one with postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard or Derrida. Paradoxically, however, Luhmann's complexity is such that he cannot easily be categorised as either modernist or postmodernist. The accusation of performative contradiction, namely that critics of modernity from Nietzsche to Lyotard used discursive rationality to state the dilemma, was systemically rethought by Luhmann: he put the relationship between cognition and paradox within the framework of constructivist epistemology. This was one of the most rigorous attempts to challenge the binary structure of classical logic and its prohibition against paradox (Knodt 1994: 79–80).

To introduce the challenges with which systems theoretical interpretation of apocalypse presents us, we need to focus on the systemic functions of projecting the End with the awareness that there needs to be the End in order for the Beginning to appear.

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<sup>15</sup> Luhmann (1993) considers the difference between risk and danger not in the sense of Baudrillard's crisis and catastrophe but in terms of how people imagine their relation to nature or others i.e. how they imagine the relationship between responsibility and contingency. Danger comes from the environment and is thus uncontrollable, which means that people are not responsible for the possible threats it may bring.

Or, there must be a criterion to direct the process of selection, i.e. to make actualised observations connect. We need to know both values of the distinction, in order to know the first one. A rationale interior to the system (its purpose or *end*) governs the process of selectivity, crucial for the self-reproduction of the system. To illustrate this, we can take time as an example. A second as an interval of time, a system in its own right, cannot be determined without the primacy of *tock*, i.e. *tick* cannot find its meaning without its relation to *tock*.<sup>16</sup> Even if it appears that *tick* precedes *tock*, it is actually vice versa in terms of their systemic emergence or in terms of the duality of the distinction necessary to establish both/any. *Tick-tock* becomes an ordered construction, a way of comprehending time in the form of reduced complexity. It should not be forgotten that the End is always projected (and consequently that futures are construed) from the vantage point of a system.

The need to make time orderly (the need to grasp time, to signify the present moment as the meaningful progress from the Beginning to the End) is a systemic need *par excellence* and it finds its correlative in narration (fiction). The *tick-tock* construction is a fiction; apocalypse is too. Though aware that their meanings rest upon the essentialist void, i.e. that there is no unambiguous meaning to be recovered, our interests do not find their rest once it has been shown that there is only the mechanism of differentiating or making distinctions at the heart of meaning-production but find new stimuli in research on the modes of possible enchantment springing from the knowledge that the world, including science, is run on fictions (Knorr Cetina 1994: 5).

### **3. Apocalypse as a systemic mechanism or on the fictional projection of an end**

The discussion of the general conceptual apparatus of systems theory reveals that the notions of complexity, fictionality and autopoiesis enable a researcher to treat apocalypse, in this case specifically meaning a fictional representation of the end of the world as we signify it, as a system-internal and autopoietic mechanism aimed at system-maintenance. The perspective of systems theory enables us to avoid the problems that much research on apocalypse faced, the problems arising from an attempt to provide a monolithic explanation of a complex literary, religious and social phenomenon. Crises and paradoxes provide the system with the material to continue its autopoiesis, and it is the system itself that creates them. Apocalypse is here treated as a synecdoche of that mechanism, as it

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<sup>16</sup> A similar argument was made by Kermode (2000: 45).

brings crisis and catastrophe into the system; it absorbs them, makes them system-internal and thus orientates much of the system-reproduction. It is a *pars pro toto* representation of the mechanism every system needs to ensure in order to continue itself.

Apocalypse illustrates the operational unity of the system, i.e. operational closure as the condition of structural openness. A self-referential system in its own right, apocalypse is a totalising system in the sense Luhmann (1990b) referred to it, as the inclusion of all exclusions. Apocalypse introduces into the system a possible observation of the end of time and the end of the system. In other words, it introduces the image of the environment (which is always ultimately unrepresentable) into the system. As such, it represents an 'actualized inactuality' (Luhmann 1992: 106), whereby paradoxes reappear and indicate systemic blockages that need to be resolved in new, creative, not necessarily logical ways (Knodt 1994: 87). To remove these blockages the system reintroduces the distinction, unfolds the paradox, by allowing for self-reference. Temporal dialectic is especially important as it enables the distinction between what something is and what it is not to be reformulated as something that it has not yet become but cannot deny it will become without denying itself (Knodt 1994: 87). According to Luhmann (1992: 7), *Wiedereintritt der Leitdistinzenz* or re-entry of the leading distinction is a strategy for undoing the paradox contained in any use of a binary code, a second-order observation is needed for the blind spot to become visible as self-observation. However, the re-emergence is also possible only as a new paradox, as the very structure of observation or the act of drawing distinctions is irreducibly paradoxical and marked by constitutive blindness.

Regardless of whether apocalypse is seen as an expression of the oppressed and marginalised or the established or whether it serves system-changing or system-continuing purposes in different social studies, the interpretation of the genre from the perspective of systems theory does not change. A consequential constructionist position needs to be taken as the one best suited to penetrate the domains that appear unitary and homogenous, to see how factual or at least authoritative meanings are constituted. There is no one true interpretation of the apocalypse, it is a void that can never be found. To claim that one meaning is the true one means forgetting the fictive nature of the world construed on the basis of drawing distinctions, and marks the 'return of myth' in the act of disavowing the mythical (Wellbery 1986: 79). Knorr Cetina (1994: 3-6) outlines a sociological notion of fiction, pointing out that constructionist studies marked the rise of the notion of fiction and suggested the pervasiveness of fictionality as a routine aspect of

social life, whereby modes of fiction can be seen as enchantment mechanisms of cultural imagination or in a wider sense as symbolic technologies embedded in or constitutive of performance. Constructionism has emphasised contingency, negotiation, rupture, discontinuity and heterogeneity in social life, and is thus continuous with deconstructionism, even though its focus is not solely on texts but a wider notion of practice is taken into account. Examples of the mentioned *sociological fictions* are, for instance, that husband and wife are one person or that family relations can be created artificially, which are fictions in law (Knorr Cetina 1994: 8). Fictionality seems to operate as an ideal system-reproducing mechanism, as it introduces order by creating greater inner viscosity, bridges the gaps between different parts of the system (where necessary) or changes focus. In other words, it is instrumental in systemic autopoiesis. Fictions reconfigure relationships between ourselves, others and the (sign of the) world. The ontology of the objects represented is always the ontology of the past and the absent (Knorr Cetina 1994: 16).

The study of apocalypse is an illustration for complexity theory: it is an instance of a situation in which order is intertwined with chaos (Urry 2003: 106). Complex systems are very dynamic, which is crucial for their connectivity and autopoiesis. Apocalypse is an example of temporal complexity (Luhmann 1978); temporally unstable components increase the systemic complexity and consequently the stability of the larger system. Continual disintegration of components seen on the level of content creates the space for successor-elements, which increases the chances of survival of the overall system. The temporalisation of elements constantly changes the ways in which elements relate to each other and connect, which is an important factor in the successful reproduction of the system. Imagining a transcendent time, in other words, the end of the present time, is a component of parallel living, which comes to define one's world by re-differentiating the content of one's past and future (Dreyfus 1993). Both the prospect of the Second Coming and the question when it will come give a possible solution to the problem of how to cope with the situation of waiting (Knorr Cetina 2005: 218). This is living from the future, from the perspective of the promise, which makes the living of time orderly, simplified, pulled back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities (Guignon 2000). The world must not change in its content, everyday activities continue, but the structure of feeling and the living of time have changed due to this futural mode (Knorr Cetina 2005: 218). Lived time appears to transcend ordinary time by shadowing it with a second future that embeds

everyday activities within a new meaning structure (Knorr Cetina 2005: 219). A projection of an ending stirs, stimulates and orients action, and the projection of an ultimate ending represents an attempt to go beyond the system, to find an instrument for seeing the true nature of the system. In other words, apocalypse is a system's observation of its blind spot, a reflexive mechanism of self-observation and projection (past its borders, but all within its borders). Systematically speaking, such futural end projection has world-making effects: it constructs the past as we know it (Goodman 1978).

We can thus refer to apocalypse as a radical instance of this systemic mechanism. It reflects our deep need for intelligible ends which springs from the need to project ourselves past the End so as to see the whole structure (or to be objective, neutral and free from ideology). If time flowed in a meaningless fashion, if there were no intervals into which to divide, we could not say it flows at all. This is a demythologised view of both apocalypse and the apocalypse (as these terms are defined in footnote 2) as a mechanism that helps us to find order in chaos. Historical disconfirmations of apocalypses serve as an additional argument that it is patterns and not facts that we need.

Apocalypse can be defined in the framework of systems theory precisely by its failure to happen; it never confirms an expectation and it is fascinatingly resilient to the fact of historical disconfirmation. Its operation is thus systemically ideal: it can transform itself or defer in the interest of continuing itself (as apocalypse). Hence, apocalypse may be seen as either a tool or a story of how individuals make sense of the world. It is closely related to our need to speak ontologically about our lives, providing clues to the ways in which fictions whose ends are concordant with their origins satisfy, among other things, social systemic needs. The End determines the view of the Beginning; it is inherent, within, necessary for the story of our lives to begin. The mechanism of imagining and projecting the End can never be permanently removed, though it must be readjusted to be functional. Systems seek maximum interior complexity of making sense of the world or of system-making. Paradigms of apocalypse thus continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world.

#### **4. The problem of ideology or can there be a critical systems perspective?**

Taking a position from which, in social sciences, one speaks about an object is bound up with criticism, the purpose of which is to reveal an immanent ideological position. The interpretation of a social and cultural phenomenon like apocalypse from the point of view of systems theory commonly evokes the problem of the lack of critical dimension.

Luhmann's theory of social systems was criticised on many levels, predominantly for methodological antihumanism, descriptivism, reductionism (e.g. of sociology to the logic of instrumental reason) and the lack of a normative perspective that could provide guidelines for action (social problems approach).

Mingers (1995), for instance, addresses the problem of the absence of human agency from Luhmann's theory that sees the social system as consisting of communications and not humans. Although this approach may function analytically, it cannot, claims Minger, show how communications are produced or generated; social systems may be self-referential in the sense that communications are linked to each other and always result in further communications, so this approach cannot explain that the social system is self-productive or autopoietic.

Giddens's critique of functionalism (1984) can be said to hold good for Luhmann, as both perspectives are unable to see human beings as agents at the centre of social reproduction and both claim that there are social needs and functions that have to be satisfied, which results in a subject-free view of historical driving forces independent of human activity (or awareness). A good example to illustrate the rationale for such criticism is Luhmann's perspective on social movements as alternatives without alternatives that protest against the functional differentiation of society, fetishise opposition without any analytical depth and stage provocation as an end in itself (1996: 75–212). Such theoretical conceptualisations by Luhmann were received as totalitarian in that they forestall critique and consider opposition undesirable (Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2009: 114). Also, Luhmann's theory has been seen incapable of answering the challenges of ecological problems because, being based on the duality of system and environment, it only deals with how society communicates ecological problems and even, based on the radical constructivist epistemology, argues that they are problems only as long as society communicates them as such (Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2009: 114).

However, the superficial level of the debate seems to misinterpret many of Luhmann's contributions, which is one of the reasons why Luhmann's theory of social systems can even be said to figure in critical overviews as *the* uncritical perspective. A more properly posed question would be whether the theoretical position which stresses the inability to see one's blind spot is uncritical or actually more critical than the perspectives trying to advocate the need of taking a specific future perspective (of the ghostly promise, absent presence, utopia, *Zukunftsbild* [picture of the future]). Similar to

treating apocalypse as a synecdoche of systemic autopoietic sense-making, Luhmann's theory of social systems can be treated as a synecdoche of the uncritical in contemporary social theory, revealing an unsurpassed centuries-old *Methodenstreit* [debate over methods]. We no longer term the sides of the 'fight' over methods as positivistic versus anti-positivistic, nomothetic versus ideographic, *naturwissenschaftlich* [scientific] versus *geisteswissenschaftlich* [humanistic], but the remnants of the fierce debate that comprises the foundations of modern social sciences, particularly via the neo-Kantian perspective of Max Weber, can still be recognised in the opposition between qualitative versus quantitative methods, functionalist versus reflexive sociology, consensus versus conflict perspectives, or the critical versus the uncritical.

Put in this context (of the critical treatment of Luhmann as uncritical), the critical seems to imply the normative aspect of social sciences and to call for the unity of theory and practice, knowledge and will, ethics and politics, system and life-world. In an attempt to reveal pseudo-critical attempts, Schroyer (1973) stresses that one needs to undertake a painful return 'to the origins of critique' not in the sense of 'the antiquarian exercise in the exegesis of the sacred texts of the critical tradition', but with acute awareness that there is no *telos* of critical theory to be recovered (30).

Pondering on the ideological functions of social theory, Schroyer points to an alliance between technocracy and social theory, especially in conceiving our chances for development in terms of the internal needs of the system, a position which has led to the view of internal dynamics of social change in postmodern societies as a cybernetic process (1973: 33). This approach sees liberation and emancipation as the capacity to adapt to an externally imposed necessity, passivises actors, and sees itself as the historical realisation of the ideal of reason, because the production of knowledge has in technocratic societies become fundamental to socio-cultural change, it has unified knowledge and production (Schroyer 1973: 34). However, the crux of crisis of modern society is the identification of knowledge and/or reason with science because this mystifies the world by replacing social values with technical rules. Schroyer (1973) claims that from Socrates' conception of critical knowledge as the process of arriving to truth through negating and trying to see the invisible in the visible (or the essential in the appearing), which recognises mystifications of conventions that dominate human potentialities, through Hegel's critique of reified consciousness that binds life to habitual social forms to Marx's and (neo)Marxist theories, critical theory has been characterised by the attempts

to reconstruct the constitutive genesis of the existing in order to recognise the actual possibilities that are objectively present in the existing. This is to say that critical theory seems to be incapable of ignoring the utopian anticipation of objectivity.

However, the question of the possibility of a dominant consciousness remains. Aware that mental schemes map our reality (make orderly the relation to each other between theory and reality and theories), we must admit that structures (at least to a high degree) determine how we perceive reality. This awareness calls for the theory of the duality of agency and structure (of downward reductionism or individualism versus downward projectionism or structuralism) (Fuchs and Hofkirchner 2009: 120). In other words, critical theory needs a systematic anticipation of socially emergent alternatives, as there is no universal recipe for emancipation. Among the attempts to theorise the interconnection of agency and structure is the so called critical systems theory, which starts from the complexity theory but with the emancipatory interest of responsible theory to salvage the idea of utopia. It is a negotiation between a critical theory and the systems theory. For the purposes of this article, the main points of discussion between the opposed perspectives of the systems theory and a critical theory can best be exemplified by the Luhmann-Habermas debate.

Based on Marx's *Weltanschauung* and in the spirit of rational debate and mutual understanding, which are the parts of the universalizing tendency of *Diskurs*, Habermas offers a critical theory that, accepting and absorbing the influences from other theoretical traditions, anticipates consensus as its result. Habermas diagnoses modernity as a decoupling of system and life-world, whereby he borrows from systems theory the principle of functional differentiation and its evolutionary framework (Knodt 1994: 97). But what is missing from Luhmann's theory from Habermas's point of view is the idea of a normative centre that would allow modern society to form a critical consciousness of itself as a whole, the construct of a public sphere that could fulfil this function and the ideal of autonomy and human self-determination that he hopes to preserve, not realizing that he thereby tries to ground his theory in the Archimedean point of rationally motivated consensus (Knodt 1994: 98). This is partially why it is so hard, or even impossible, to refute Habermas' position. He refuses to give up the normative ideal implied in the communicative practice of the life-world, as we would otherwise be left with no standards by which to judge, thereby attempting to reunite ethics and

epistemology. In this context, Habermas sees Luhmann's theoretical position as a cynical affirmation of the *status quo*.

However, the question of the possibility to transcend ideology from within discourse is deeply problematic. Luhmann sees the theory of communicative action as a self-referential autopoietic system and discourse as the effect of the operational closure of a system that observes itself from within and thus conceals its contingency (circularity of the orientation towards coherence and consensus and constitutive systemic selectivity springing from this orientation). Concealing the operation underlying one's observation can be seen either as ideological or as the return of myth, because the clear-cut distinction between strategic and communicative action cannot be maintained by the very discourse that postulates this distinction as fundamental. Habermas's ideal speech situation is in this sense comparable to Marx's promise of communism, and they both function as spectres from the future trying to make themselves present in their absence.<sup>17</sup> To see the future or to know the world, to reflect the environment in the system, they are all impossible glimpses into exteriority, as the distinction observation operates by is itself the product of observation. Luhmann thus sees discourse as one of the social system's reproductive mechanisms, i.e. normative integration as only one special case of functional integration. Habermas's political critique of systems theory is, in Knodt's argument (1994: 100), a protest against the vision offered by techno-science of a self-regulating semi-autonomous machinery, in which the aspirations of practical reason are reduced to a functionally necessary deception; this is a protest that must repress the contingency of its selectivity as the conditions of its possibility but without facing the paradox as its necessity, namely the theory characterised by a desire for unity (of theory and practice, reason and idea of reason) that in the end produces differences and thus becomes utopian in the literal sense of the word. The critical view can therefore be said to reside in the reflection on the differences underlying unity, aimed at preventing fiction turn into myth, which makes the distinction made in theoretical overviews between Habermas as critical and Luhmann as uncritical theorist problematic.

A demythologised view of the apocalypse is in line with the need to demythologise our deep need for an intelligible flow of time or of system-making. Making sense of the world is characterised by ever greater complexity, fuelled by immanent paradoxes and systemic ways of deparadoxication. If we cannot break free from the form (or see our

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<sup>17</sup> See Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994)

blind spot), we must make sense of it. Whatever the sense, the systemic interest of autopoietic reproduction is satisfied. System is a plot, though not more human than its apparent antithesis, reality. The possibility of revolution is questioned from the perspective of order—reproducing instances which stage imagined resistance. But there can be no one without imagination, literally speaking. Imagination, that is, the ability to visualise things which are not, is thus seen as both a function of freedom and a methodological suggestion, because real ideology lies in what is left in the background by some visualisation of an end, for instance, political passivity invoked by fear. One must not forget, however, that no fiction is supreme; all fictions should be regarded as contingent fictions, as otherwise they turn into myths and obscure actual social relations. The objective world of myths is to be replaced by the subjective consciousness of fiction. This means realising that a complex structure is actually reductionist. Fictions only become agents of change if their fictionality is considered as a way of making sense or of system-making. If this is overlooked, fictions turn into myths and become agents of stability.

## 5. Conclusion and summary

This article has offered a sociological reinterpretation of apocalypse from a particular point of view, namely, that of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, with the result that the fictional status of apocalyptic texts has been stressed in terms of systemic autopoietic operations. The main conclusion is that fictions about the purpose and the flow of history from the Beginning to the End satisfy, among other things, our systemic social needs with cultural and historic specificity. Sociologists have studied apocalypse primarily as being connected to the *Sitz im Leben* or social settings of apocalyptic communities and millenarian movements, with social, literary and ideological aspects studies separately. The rise of postmodernist theory has raised an awareness of the need to avoid strict dichotomies between social-scientific approaches and close literary readings of the text.

The discussion of the general conceptual apparatus of the systems theory reveals that apocalypse, here meaning fictional representations of the end of the world as we understand it, can be studied as an autopoietic mechanism aimed at system-maintenance. The perspective of the systems theory enables us to avoid the problems that much research on apocalypse faced, namely, the problems arising from an attempt to provide a monolithic explanation of a complex literary, religious and social phenomenon. To deal with the challenges of systems-theoretical reading of apocalypse, we need to

stress functional closure and structural openness as produced by the projection of the End, with the awareness that the End is needed for the Beginning to appear; alternatively, there must be a criterion according to which the process of selection or actualisation of observations can be directed in order to be able to make them connect. A rationale integral to the system (its purpose or *end*) governs the process of selectivity, crucial for the self-reproduction of the system. As a narrative of the End, apocalypse is studied as an instantiation of the human need to make things orderly by producing fictions about beginnings and ends. The constructionist epistemology of Luhmann's systems theory orientates the study towards the notion of fictionality as a routine aspect of everyday life. The world is made of fictions and runs on them, but to forget the fictive nature of the world construed on the basis of drawing distinctions would be to mythologise (and reify) the world. The need to make sense or to create fictions of the End is paradigmatically referred to as apocalyptic in this article, and it is aimed at satisfying (at least among other things) systemic social needs. Thus, apocalypse is here a synecdoche of the mechanism every system needs to ensure in order to continue itself: apocalypse illustrates the operational unity of the system, i.e. operational closure as the condition of structural openness. A self-referential system in its own right, apocalypse is a totalising system: it introduces into the system a possible observation of the end of time and the end of the system. In other words, it introduces the image of the environment into the system. Regardless of whether apocalypse is used by the oppressed or the power holders, whether it serves system-changing or system-continuing purposes in different social studies, the interpretation of the genre from the perspective of systems theory stays the same.

The study of apocalypse is an example of complexity theory. Complex systems manifest an observational and temporal dynamics fundamental to their *Anschlussfähigkeit* and auto-reproductive principles. Apocalypse can be viewed as an instantiation of temporal complexity, where temporally unstable components increase the (inner) complexity and thereby the stability of the larger system. Continual disintegration of components seen on the level of content creates the space for new elements, which increases the chances of survival of the overall system. The temporalisation of elements leads to a continual change of patterns of relatedness, and this is an important factor in the successful reproduction of the system. Imagining a transcendent time, that is, the end of the present time, reorganises the content of one's past and future and thus defines the world. Both the prospect of the Second Coming and the question when it will occur give a

possible solution to the problem of how to cope with the situation of waiting, in which there are many functionally equivalent possibilities. A projection of an ending stirs, stimulates and orients action, and the projection of an ultimate ending represents an attempt to go beyond the system. In other words, apocalypse is a system's observation of its blind spot, a reflexive mechanism of self-observation and projection.

We can thus refer to apocalypse as a synecdoche of this systemic mechanism. This is a demythologised view of apocalypse as a mechanism helping us find order in chaos. Historical disconfirmations of apocalypse serve as an additional argument that it is patterns and not facts that we need. Apocalypse can be defined in the framework of systems theory precisely by its failure to happen; it never confirms an expectation and it is fascinatingly resilient to the fact of historical disconfirmation. Its operation is thus systemically ideal; it can transform itself or defer doing so in the interest of continuing itself. This is why apocalypse is a story of how we make sense of the way in which we make sense of the world. The mechanism of imagining and projecting the End cannot be permanently removed, though it must be readjusted to be functional. Systems seek maximum interior complexity of making sense of the world or of system-making. Paradigms of apocalypse thus continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world.

Finally, the interpretation of a social and cultural phenomenon like apocalypse from the position of systems theory commonly evokes the problem of the lack of critical dimension. Our question in analysing the (un)critical dimension of systems theory was whether the admitted inability to step out of the system is uncritical or actually more critical than various attempts that advocate the possibility and the urgent need of utopia or revolution. The Habermas-Luhmann debate was problematised as an example. Habermas critiques systems theory as techno-science of self-regulating semi-autonomous machinery in which the aspirations of practical reason are reduced to a functionally necessary deception. However, Habermas's protest must, like any protest, repress the contingency of its selectivity as the conditions of its possibility. But without facing the paradox as its necessity, Habermas's theory, characterised by the desire for unity (of theory and practice, reason and idea of reason), in the end produces differences and thus becomes utopian. Luhmann sees the theory of communicative action as a self-referential autopoietic system and discourse as the effect of operational closure of a system that observes itself from within and thus conceals its contingency (circularity of the

orientation towards coherence and consensus and constitutive systemic selectivity springing from this orientation). Concealing the operation underlying one's observation can be seen as ideological or as the return of myth, because the clear-cut distinction between strategic and communicative action cannot be maintained by the very discourse that postulates this distinction as fundamental. The critical view can therefore be said to reside in the reflection on the differences underlying unity, aimed at preventing fiction from turning into myth, which makes the distinction in theoretical overviews between Habermas as critical and Luhmann as uncritical theorist problematic.

If we must fulfil our need for order, we should not forget that any order is just one of many (functionally equivalent) possibilities. To demythologise both apocalypse and the apocalypse (as these terms are defined in footnote 2) is to demythologise our deep need for an intelligible flow of time or of system-making. The stubborn resilience of the belief that the End is coming despite repeated historical disconfirmations has been maintained by either varying the belief or putting off the End. This fascinating resilience stems from the continual need of the system to adjust. Imagination is seen as a crucial faculty of human existence. The methodological suggestion is to replace the objective world of myths by subjective consciousness of fiction. The way to make fictions become agents of change is to reflect upon their fictionality and to influence the world by changing them.

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## From Hungry Ghost to Phallic Mother: Linda Lê's Doubling of the Vietnamese Ancestor in French Exile

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### Abstract

The mother figure in the work of Linda Lê, an exiled Vietnamese writer of French expression, is either absent or maleficent (Bacholle-Boskovic). In her novel, *Les trois Parques* (1997) [*The Three Fates*], compensatory grandmothering takes a spectral form for three Vietnamese refugees in contemporary France. Their spectral forebear is first represented as a hungry ghost of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, that is to say, a departed soul lacking descendants willing to provide for her spirit. As an outsider the ghost thus stands as a metaphor for the familial abandonment of the subaltern exile.

The contrapuntal vision of the refugee, who looks at the present through the lens of the past (Saïd), in turn incurs a ghostly doubling. I demonstrate that Lê can be seen to add a second, Western aspect to her spectre in the shape of a Freudian phallic (grand)mother, an inherently ambivalent maternal/paternal figure (Ian Brooks). In the context of colonial mimicry, her guise as a *mère-patrie* [mother-fatherland] is shown to destabilise the authority of the European Other in the lives of her French-Vietnamese progeny (Bhabha).

The potency of the ghost's real-world presence is most evident in her provocation of ambivalent feelings in practices of identity in her primary culture, such as cooking and eating. For this reason, and owing to her propensity to act as a vessel for split selves, I argue that Lê's spectral double-figure is representative of the disturbing ambivalence endured by the subaltern who faces having to manage a double sense of belonging in exile.

**Key words:** Linda Lê, Vietnamese-Francophone writing, phallic mother, hungry ghost, ambivalence



Whereas the ubiquitous paternal figure in the work of the Vietnamese writer of French expression, Linda Lê, has been much discussed,<sup>1</sup> mothers and characters who substitute for them in her work have never been the subject of scholarly consideration. Paradoxically, it is by means of a maternal figure, albeit a spectral one, that Lê deals with the

<sup>1</sup> For articles on the father figure in Lê's œuvre see: Assier 2008, Bacholle-Boskovic 2002, Bui 2012, Kurmann 2013, Lay-Chenchabi and Do 2008.

death of her father in Vietnam in *Les trois Parques*, arguably her most widely-read novel:<sup>2</sup> it is an enraged ancestor who returns from the dead to take vengeance on her offspring, while Lê self-reflectively criticises these Vietnamese-French characters for abandoning their father's language and culture.<sup>3</sup>

In the novel, the ghostly grandmother assumes two distinct forms, one associated with ancient Chinese custom and the other with Western psychoanalytic thought. The first is characterised as a hungry ghost, a spirit doomed to wander the afterlife unfed for lack of descendants to carry out funeral rights, the second is, as depicted by Lê, a ghost having the same role as a Freudian phallic (grand)mother, a maternal figure who in the eyes of her child retains the symbolic power of the phallus. By using a dual view of ghostliness in the context of exile in France, Lê is able to represent the refugee's, or exile's, contrapuntal view of his/her environment, through the double lens of a primary and secondary belief system.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that both depictions of ghostliness evoke sentiments of cultural ambivalence in Vietnamese and French characters alike suggests to me that the insubstantial figure of the ghost serves as means to illustrate the unseen internal conflict of a character who is in the subaltern position of an exile or refugee. My argument is divided into three parts: the first and second are devoted to explications of the role of the hungry ghost and the phallic mother's phantom in *Les trois Parques*; thirdly, I consider the effect of a resulting two-fold ambivalence on the subaltern characters of the novel.

### 1. Aggrieved Ancestors

In the first novel of 'une trilogie consacrée à la mort du père [*a trilogy dedicated to the death of the father*]' (Argand 1999: 28), it is the death of a fearful grandmother figure which gives rise to a ghostly haunting.<sup>5</sup> Although *Les trois Parques* (1997a) and its successors, *Voix: Une crise* [Voices: A crisis] (1998) and *Lettre morte* [Dead letter] (1999), were written in response to the exiled author's loss of her beloved father, he only appears in the second book of the trilogy as a primary ghostly figure in the cycle of novels and then without the sense of presence in the real world enjoyed by the grandmother's phantom. Furthermore, although Lê admits that writing her trilogy helped her to deal with feelings of guilt at having failed her

<sup>2</sup> After twenty years of exile in France, in 1995 Lê's father died in Vietnam without having seen his daughter again.

<sup>3</sup> Lê has admitted to having committed these very crimes (Kurmann 2010: 6; Lê 2011 40).

<sup>4</sup> 'Contrapuntal' is a musical term employed by Saïd to denote the double vision of the exile, who looks at the present through the lens of a pre-exilic past, so as to see two realities at the one time (Saïd 2000: 186).

<sup>5</sup> All translations from French are the author's, apart from those from *Les Parques*, which are from the published translation, *The Three Fates* (1997b; trans. by Polizzotti).

filial duties with regard to her father (Kurmann 2010: 6), accusations of abandoning an ancestor are voiced first and foremost by a treacherous grandparent. If, indeed, the dead return because they have something important left to say to us (Davis 2007: 152), albeit seemingly displaced, the spectral grandmother's message ought not to go unheeded.

Lê reverses clichés associated with grandmothering in *Les trois Parques* to portray a despotic *materfamilias*. *La grand-mère* [the grandmother], a wealthy funeral director, flees war-torn Vietnam with all of her worldly possessions and three of her granddaughters: two sisters whom she has kidnapped from their widowed father and their cousin, who has been put into her care as a result of the girl's being in an incestuous relationship with her brother. She takes refuge in France 'où [elle] avait ses placements immobiliers, son compte en banque et une partie de sa progéniture, envoyée en éclaireuse [where (she) kept her real estate investments, her bank account, and a portion of her progeny, sent ahead as scouts]' (Lê 1997a: 31; 1997b: 18). Instead of providing an emotionally secure environment for her grandchildren as their new (illegal) guardian, her home in exile recalls childhood images of the fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel,' situated near a deep, dark forest. In the same way, the warmth normally associated with the food that traditional grandmothers are said to prepare for their grandchildren is contrasted with this grandmother's special recipes, such as 'le sang de canard parfumé au basilica [ducks blood infused with basil]' (Ibid: 117; 78–79), dishes which leave her granddaughters cold. It is hardly surprising, then, that when she dies some years after their abduction, her by now adult granddaughters feel little sadness; indeed, it is their behaviour at her funeral that arouses the wrath of a ghost whom they have left hungry, which in turn leads to confrontation.

The young women abandon their grandmother's body to 'les langues de glace [the icy tongues]' of death (Lê 1997a: 64; 1997b: 41), while they go out to celebrate. A reader familiar with both ancient Buddhist customs and the familial expectations involved in Chinese funeral rituals, which are also adopted in Vietnam, will be aware that this is an offence on the granddaughters' part which exposes them to danger. Not only do the granddaughters fail to offer their ancestor at the very least a bowl of rice, in order to prevent her from becoming a hungry ghost in the afterlife, they celebrate her death by consuming the very traditional foods they ought to have given her as a sacrifice. Rubbing salt in the wound, the three cousins rejoice in rebelling against the dictates of their well-bred grandmother. Seeking out a 'gargotte bondée, surchauffée, où les baguettes et les cuillères étaient [...] fourrées dans un récipient malpropre [a packed, overheated dive, where the spoons and chopsticks were at the

*end of the table, jumbled together in a filthy container]*' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 40–41), they take pleasure in 'avalant goulement le potage au tamarin et au poisson, le plat préféré de grand-mère [*greedily gulp[ing] [...] down the fish and tamarind soup, Grandmother's favourite*]' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 41). Not only is the ghost left hungry, she is left salivating on the edge of the world of the living by the very kin who are meant to satisfy her hunger.

A hungry ghost is said to be a wandering spirit of a person who has died without heirs to carry out his or her burial rites. Condemned to roam the earth 'forever hungry,' such ghosts are appeased with food offerings each year during the Festival of Hungry Ghosts, or the Chinese All Souls' Day (Lai 2001: 35). Not surprisingly the grandmother becomes such a spectre and haunts her progeny in order to have her bodily cravings satisfied by their filial duty. When they fail to oblige her by either cooking from the book of her traditional Vietnamese recipes or honouring her with these same dishes at the eldest granddaughter's wedding banquet, as would be ordinarily respectful to the bride's side of the family, the 'fantôme affamé, [*hungry ghost*]' returns to wreak her vengeance (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b: 73). With 'l'énergie exterminatrice à revendre et un plan d'enfer pour gâcher la noce [*the vindictive energy to burn and an infernal scheme to spoil the celebration*]', her rage is not just directed towards the Vietnamese bride and her cousins. The starved grandmother takes vengeance on everything that is foreign to her in the celebrations: the Swiss-German groom's guests, the 'authentique auberge normande [*authentic Norman inn*]' in which the reception takes place (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b: 73), the traditional European foods served, and in particular 'la folie crémeuse [*the buttercream folly*]' of the wedding cake (Ibid). Plunging the room into darkness, the grandmother's ghost literally pulls the rug out from under the wedding guests to send the cake flying 'avec un abandon majestueux dans les bras de la petite band [*with majestic abandon into the crowd*]' (Lê 1997a: 109; 1997b: 74). The hungry ghost is determined to destroy all representations of Western 'authenticity' at the event, all of which both deny her own cultural heritage as (grand)mother of the bride and obliterate the 'authenticity' of her progeny's ethnic difference.

True to her characterisation, the havoc-causing spectre in this novel stands as 'the epitome of social disorder, contravening the most valued elements of orderly existence' (Ahern 1978: 284). Famished ghosts may be appeased by the living with food offerings, but what they really hunger for is their lost sense of belonging: 'They have no one to carry on their lines of descent, they are without resources, and they are excluded from any social group' (Ibid). From this perspective the grandmother's ghost may be seen as a quintessential

representation of the refugee she was when alive. Culturally excluded, lacking in resources, having been duped into giving away her valuables to a conman and needful of descendants to tend to her funeral rites, the grandmother has, in taking the form of a hungry ghost, simply assumed the societal ghostliness of her subaltern position in life.

As well as the losses caused by her exile, *la grand-mère* has also suffered being banished by her own 'line of descent,' a fate which is avenged by her haunting her own kin. Chinese tradition, says Wolf, makes a distinction between 'ghosts' and 'ancestors': '[o]ne man's ghost is another man's ancestor' (Wolf 1978: 148). In other words, 'ancestors' are deceased members of a particular person's family (Ibid.); 'ghosts', on the other hand, can include 'the souls of people who die as members of some other group' (Wolf 1978: 172). As Wolf puts it:

The category 'ghosts' is always a relative one. Your ancestors are my ghosts and my ancestors are your ghosts, just as you relatives are strangers to me, and my relatives are strangers to you (Wolf 1978: 173)

So long as ghosts have living descendants to care for them, they are not malicious, but they are all 'potentially dangerous because they are all strangers or outsiders' (Wolf 1978: 172). A malicious ghost, therefore, must either be the ancestor of a person other than the person who sees it or must have lost or been abandoned by its living descendants. The frightful vengeance that their own grandmother wreaks on the cousins indicates that she is punishing her offspring for having made her a stranger to the family. By their repudiation of her culture, language and customs and their having become assimilated into their European country of exile, their grandmother has been doubly estranged, from both her nation and her kin.

It is perhaps this very two-fold world view held by the living descendants that gives rise to a Western reading of the ghostly figure. In addition to her express references to a *fantôme affamé*, Lê also creates in the spectral ancestor a double to Freud's phallic mother.

## 2. The Phallic (Grand)Mother

Evidence of the phallic mother in *Les trois Parques* is directly connected to Sigmund Freud's somewhat convoluted formation of the term, first used in his 1933 work, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, with reference to a pre-oedipal and powerful maternal figure who has escaped castration in the child's mind (Freud 1965: 24). Freud initially associates this figure with the dominant female black widow spider, after Karl Abraham's 1922 essay, 'Die Spinne als Traumsymbol [*The Spider as Dream Symbol*]' (Ibid), thus situating the phallic mother right from the outset in the realm of fantasy and dream work. However, Freud's thoughts on the subject of the uncastrated imaginary mother may be traced back to his 1910 biographical study of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he considers the artist's recollection of an event from his very early childhood, namely that 'when [he] was still in [his] cradle, a vulture came down to [him], and opened [his] mouth with its tail, and struck [him] many times with its tail against [his] lips' (Freud 1990: 82). Declaring this story to be a fantasy memory created in adulthood and transposed to childhood (Ibid), Freud turns to mythology to support his case for reading the vulture as the child's phallic mother. 'In the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians,' he writes, 'the mother is represented by a picture of a vulture. The Egyptians also worshipped a Mother Goddess, who was represented as having a vulture's head' (Freud 1990: 88). Coupled with his discovery of an ancient Egyptian 'fable' that states there were thought to be no male of the vulture species (Freud 1990: 90, 61), the vulture-mother becomes 'a representation of parthenogenesis,' or of asexual female reproduction in Freud's text (Sprengnether 1990: 77). Three years later, Freud's interpretation of da Vinci's recollection was reinforced by Oskar Pfister who claimed that it is possible to trace the outline of a vulture in the way that the garments of Mary, the mother of Christ, are draped in the version of da Vinci's painting *Virgin and Child with St Anne* held by The Louvre in Paris, and, moreover, that the bird's outspread tail touches the Christ-child's mouth in a nursing gesture (Freud 1990: 115).

Freud explains the creation of such a maternal fantasy by once again employing evidence from da Vinci's early childhood. It has been suggested that the artist was born out of wedlock, since his father married another woman, Donna Albiera, in the very same year his son was born (Freud 1990: 91, 113). At the age of five Leonardo was adopted by his affluent father and wife, indicating that the child must have spent the first years of his childhood alone with his birth mother, without a father (Freud 1990: 92). In his biographical case study, Freud therefore identifies the artist as having had an empowered mother, one who had to perform

both parental roles for the sake of her child, and who could only but retain the symbolic phallus, since there was no paternal Other to disappropriate her of it.

Both the details of da Vinci's personal history and the story of the phallic vulture-mother resonate with the parental narrative in *Les trois Parques*. In the first instance, like the artist, the sisters of the novel have been brought up fatherless, in spite of having knowledge of a distant paternal figure. Secondly, the exiled sisters also have two mothers, their surrogate mother in the form of their grandmother and their deceased biological mother. In the artist's case, he, as Freud points out, also 'had had two mothers: his natural mother, Caterina, from whom he was separated at some point between the ages of three and five, and a young, affectionate stepmother, Donna Albiera, his father's wife' (1990: 91, 113),<sup>6</sup> who can be seen as a surrogate mother.

This brings us back to the narrative of surrogate mothering in *Les trois Parques*, where *la grand-mère* is usually referred to as either 'lady chacal [*Lady Jackal*]' (Lê 1997a: 30; 1997b: 18) or a bird of prey, a 'rapace' [*raptor*] (Lê 1997a: 61; 1997b: 39). However, there are two and only two depictions of her and the children together when she is called by another name: once when she and her granddaughters are on the seashore at Vung Tàu when leaving Vietnam (Lê 1997a: 28; 1997b: 16), and again when the grandmother is dying in the family apartment in France; on these occasions alone she is called 'le condor [*the condor*]', towering menacingly over 'sa couvée [*her brood*]' (Lê 1997a: 62–63; 1997b: 39). The significance of this will be appreciated when it is realised that the condor is classified as a New World vulture, having physical traits and behaviours similar to those of the Old World vultures.

Calling the grandmother a condor is thus critical to the portrayal of her as a phallic (grand)mother, and it is, in my opinion, no accident that this should occur in the novel for the first time at the very moment that she escapes from Vietnam to the West. The comparison of the mother/child relationship to 'de petits poussins jetés dans le nid d'un condor [*chicks tossed into a condor's nest*]' paints mothering as menacing and leads seemingly without detour to the Freudian representation of the phallic mother (Lê 1997a: 31; 1997b: 18).

Three subsequent connections seem to bolster this postulation further; first, Lê admits to being conversant with psychoanalytic discourses, which she has been shown to incorporate

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<sup>6</sup> He also had a grandmother, Monna Lucia, his father's mother (Freud 1990: 91). Freud demonstrates that, although the picture *St Anne with the Madonna and Child* depicting a grandmother (St. Anne) and a mother (the Madonna) might be intended to depict Leonardo's paternal grandmother and his stepmother, in fact the figure of St. Anne corresponds to Caterina, his natural mother (Freud 1990: 113).

into this very text;<sup>7</sup> secondly, she admits to being a frequent visitor of art galleries in Paris, among which the Louvre, where da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with St Anne* is displayed with an accompanying reference to Freud's theory about the painting;<sup>8</sup> lastly, from fear of their seemingly uncontrollable power, 'phallic' women in literature are said to be subject to 'ghosting' by means of 'spectral metaphors' (Castle 1993: 6). In the light of such revelations, I contend that Lê specifically utilises the symbolisation of the condor-mother in her novel *Les trois Parques* to imply Freudian, phallic mothering. Her purpose, as an exiled individual who admits to feeling 'duelle, même plurielle [...] et la plupart du temps habitée par des fantômes [dual, even plural [...] and most of the time inhabited by ghosts]' (Bui 2012: 320), is, I argue, to capitalise on the unifying qualities of this fantastical figure.

As Marcia Ian insists, Freud's 'phallic mother is an attempt at resolution of a unitary nature' (Ian 1993: 10), a 'both/and' fusion which aims to resolve the child's fear of castration (Parker, A 1986: 102). As a 'full-grown female [...] possessor' (Freud 1961: 24) of the 'fully fledged phallus' (Brooks 2006: 12), the phallic mother has reached adulthood with *both* her femininity *and* masculinity intact. While castration as such is not of specific interest to this discussion, the ability of a subject to retain that which is threatened with eradication, such as the subaltern's primary language and culture in exile, certainly is. It is for this very reason that I contend Lê houses her Vietnamese refugee turned hungry ghost, in the shell of a Western psychoanalytic imago. The phallic mother in *Les trois Parques* is the only character able to retain her subalternity in a Western context, and moreover, by assuming such a bi-cultural guise she acquires an unrivalled power over all other figures in the novel, whether they be alive or dead.

### 3. Double the Ambivalence

The capacity of the grandmother's ghost to cause tangible havoc in the lives of the living is perhaps the greatest indicator of her superior potency as a spectral figure in Lê's paternal trilogy. As already mentioned, even the central ghostly figure of the late father is unable to affect the world of the living, his only recourse to power being the filial guilt his memory generates in the psyche of his daughter. Invested with the power of the Gods, it seems, *la grand-mère* conjures a great tempest to cause farcical, but nonetheless frightening, chaos the

<sup>7</sup> During an interview I conducted with Lê in late 2010, she strongly agreed with my analysis of Lacanian paternal foreclosure in her trilogy (Kurmann 2010: 5; 2013: 126). Lê has also confirmed the presence of psychoanalytic thought in her work, stating: 'Je n'ai jamais cru en l'écriture qui remplacerait une psychothérapie ni en une psychothérapie qui remplacerait l'écriture' [*I have never believed either in writing that replaces psychotherapy or in psychotherapy that replaces writing*] (Guichard 2007: 19).

<sup>8</sup> After our interview, Lê mentioned that she enjoyed visiting art galleries in Paris on a regular basis.

day of her granddaughter's union with a European, as is seen in the ship wreck of the couple's wedding cake:

Les mariés, unis face au pire, firent l'autruche, se couchèrent sur le ventre, enfouirent la tête dans l'oreiller de crème [...]. Les noceurs [...] firent cercle autour des mariés flottant dans la crème, la croupe rebondie. [...] cette petite chose en sucre éjectée de son piédestal, mais pas un ne se pencha pour la repêcher (Lê 1997a: 113).

[The wedding couple, joined for better or worse, lay on their stomachs and buried their heads in the frosting pillow [...]. The revellers [...] formed a circle around the floating couple with its backsides in the air. [...] the poor little sugar creatures ejected from their pedestal, but no one bent over to fish them out (Lê 1997b: 75).]

That 'le chacal affamé [*the famished jackal*]' should seek to destroy the union of cultural and linguistic oppositions in the exilic narrative that throughout the novel she has attempted to foster (Lê 1997a: 108; 1997b: 72), reveals the fundamental ambivalence of the 'double appartenance [*double belonging*]' of the subaltern in European exile (Van der Poel 2004: 247). The phallic mother, akin to mothering itself (Parker, R 1995: 1), is fundamentally ambivalent, being both feared and desired at one and the same time (Brooks 2006: 26; Ian 1993 9).<sup>9</sup> In this way, I argue that the ghostly phallic (grand)mother is employed as a vessel of the refugee's ambivalent double existence: living in the present in a foreign country, while having to grapple with past memories made in a distant homeland.

Vietnamese and French, Asian and Occidental, torn between the motherland and a French *patrie* [fatherland], the characters in Lê's novels are known for struggling with their postcolonial duality, as is the author herself (Chau-Pech Ollier 2001: 244). Taking the form of a 'father-mother conglomerate',<sup>10</sup> the phallic mother's ghost represents the 'mère-patrie [*homeland/mother-fatherland*]' of the French state (Guichard 1995: 5; Selao 2007: 275), a principal that sees the nation as mothering its people. The metaphor of a mother-child relationship between the nation and its citizens is also seen in the mothering dictum of the *mission civilisatrice* [civilising mission] or programme of re-education in colonial Indochina set up by the French administration (Selao 2011: 15). Just as the first mission of colonial rule was to re-educate the peoples of Indochina by imparting knowledge of the French language, so too the grandmother makes sure to teach her grandchildren 'à parler propre, en français [to speak correctly, in French]' (Lê 1997a: 63; 1997b: 40). Her mimicry quickly slips to mockery, however, when, having converted to Catholicism, taught by French colonial

<sup>9</sup> From the child's perspective, mothering is experienced as equally ambivalent. Melanie Klein's appellations of the 'good' and 'bad' breast refers to the uncertain feelings the child has towards the woman who is perceived as loving if she satisfies one's hunger and hateful if she unwittingly does not (Klein et al. 2002: 200).

<sup>10</sup> This is a universal parental figure with dual maternal and paternal functionality proposed by Julia Kristeva to counter the authoritarianism of Lacan's Symbolic father. I do not argue, however, that Lê's phallic mother has the same 'loving' quality (Kristeva 1987: 40).

missionaries, the living grandmother says her new found prayers on a rosary and adopts the symbol of the cross for the reason that '[d]eux protections valaient mieux qu'une [(t)wo kinds of protector were better than one]' (Lê 1997a: 68; 1997b: 44). From this one can see how the grandmother's hollow cultural mimicry makes a mockery of the French state and its religion. As 'almost the same, but not quite' these partial imitations of the former coloniser are instances of ambivalent slippage in postcolonial discourse which Homi Bhabha asserts destabilise the very authority the postcolonial subject seeks to appropriate (Bhabha 1994: 86).

If the grandmother's ghost were only to be associated with ambivalent feelings in the context of representations of French and European authority she could be seen as a symbol of subaltern subversion. However, as we have observed in the wedding scene, the omnipresent spectre unleashes a barefaced and all-encompassing rage on all who cross her path. It is not simply the former coloniser who is made responsible for the disenfranchisement of the hungry, phallic (grand)mother's ghost from her heritage and heirs; everyone is to blame. Similarly infected with culpability, rage, but also love is the traditional Vietnamese cuisine made from the grandmother's recipe book by the eldest cousin, *le ventre rond* [Potbelly] (Lê 1997a: 10; 1997b: 5).<sup>11</sup> If food can be seen 'as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity' (Montanari 2006: xii), then the self-perception of those who prepare and eat Vietnamese dishes in the text is a state of constant, extreme flux.

Food is the ambivalent entity *par excellence* in *Les trois Parques*. In a novel that centres on an afternoon of food consumption and preparation of grandmother's recipes with their secret ingredients, the three cousins notably do not once eat together in the eldest sisters' home. Instead, the household cook, *le ventre rond*, hoards her left-overs, snacking on them alone rather than eating at a mealtime, which would be more appropriate to both Vietnamese and French eating habits. Her younger sister, with whom *le ventre rond* does not share her delicacies, salivates at the smell of 'des odeurs oubliées' [*long-lost aromas*] of 'patates douces fumantes [...] saupoudrées de sucre [*steaming yams [...] dusted with sugar*]' and 'fruits verts à la croquet-au-sel et au piment rouge [*green fruits sprinkled with salt and red pepper*]' (Lê 1997a: 115; 1997b: 77), and the emaciated cousin refuses outright to touch what she calls '[l]e poison de chacal [*jackal poison*]' (Lê 1997a: 119; 1997b: 80). It is plain to see that these

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<sup>11</sup> The character is thus named as she is pregnant with her first child. All three cousins are named after body parts: *les longues jambes* [long legs] is the Lolita-like younger sister, (Lê 1997a:10; 1997b: 5), while the narrating cousin, *Manchote* [Southpaw], had her left hand cut off as punishment for incest, (Lê 1997a: 10; 1997b: 3).

cousins are distancing themselves from traditional culinary activities — eating and cooking together, perhaps because the performance of a shared cultural activity leads inevitably to a collective remembering. All three young women know the waft of delicious food aromas leads back to the lost world of Vietnam, to war and putrifaction. Olfactory senses being strongly associated with the unlocking of memories, Lê invokes the past in an inverted Proustian manner by turning allure into revulsion. She makes a game of enticing then repelling her protagonists from memorialisation, resulting in variable isolation from their primary culture.

In *Les trois Parques* Vietnamese culinary heritage is ‘sanglant [*bleeding*]’ (Do 2002: 152). Cooking may be traditionally seen as a loving activity, but here, with good reason, it is torturous and murderous, as the grandmother’s ghost that haunts her recipe book brings forth the phantom ‘traces, marks, and scars’ of victims of the Vietnam War (Derrida 1998: 61). In the hands of *le ventre rond* and her ancestor, the pink flesh of a prawn becomes that of a prisoner of a re-education camp:

[L]a carapace arrachée, les pattes coupées, la tête tranchée [...] supplice ordinairement infligé aux plus accortes [...] passer par le chaudron électrique (Lê 1997a: 234).

[The shell torn off, legs cut off, head sliced off [...] the torture normally reserved for the comeliest ones [...] [to] suffer the electric cauldron (Lê 1997b: 161).]

Lady chacal noyait une à une les crevettes roses dans une farine mélangée à des ingrédients à son cru [...] puis elle les jetait dans l’huile bouillante, comme on jette le chatons dans une rivière (Lê 1997a: 231).

[One by one, Lady Jackal plunged the pink shrimps into the mixture of flour and her special blend of spices [...] then tossed them into boiling oil the way one tosses kittens in a river (Lê 1997b: 159).]

All the while the sisters wait impatiently for their prawns in batter. Following her influence in the reproduction of her recipes, *la grand-mère* fades in the text, making room for the far less corporeal ghost of the father figure to rise at beginning of *Voix: Une crise*, the sequel to *Les trois Parques*. It could be argued that his death at the close of *Les trois Parques* signals an end to uncertain feelings about the homeland, in preparation for a daughter’s reckoning with filial culpability.

The way in which the ghost of the grandmother can evoke such ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and repulsion in her descendants with regard to food and eating as both a disruptive hungry ghost and fear-evoking phallic (grand)mother is testament to her capacity to contain diametrically opposed parts within a mutable, shifting whole. My contention is that the ‘unitary nature’ of phallic ghosting in the text allows for the conglomeration of two disparate

selves,<sup>12</sup> one subaltern and the other French. Yet it is the image of the excluded, disenfranchised hungry ghost in Chinese Buddhist belief that permits us to recognise the so called spectral 'outsider' as a representation of the socially marginalised in the novel (Wolf 1978: 175). Lê herself attests to having two souls, one oriental and one occidental (Văn 2010: 2): 'Je n'ai pu trouver mon unité qu'en écrivant [*I have only been able to find my wholeness in writing*]' (Lê 2011: 41), she has once said. While writing allows the author to meld together her divided selves, only the ancestral ghost in *Les trois Parques*, one of both Eastern and Western origin, enables the reader to see the exiled subject as a composite whole.

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<sup>12</sup> See footnote 8.

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<sup>13</sup> Translated from the Vietnamese.

**Apocalypse as Religious and Secular Discourse in *Battlestar Galactica* and its Prequel *Caprica***

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The concept of the end of the world is inherent in religious discourse. Illustratively, in Medieval Christianity, a divine power was held responsible for cataclysmic events. In the post-Hiroshima era, the concept of apocalypse has taken on secular meaning. Not surprisingly, given recent history, the apocalypse has become a prominent component of popular television epics; broadcast narratives, such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica*, entwine both Biblical and secular versions of the apocalypse, thereby creating a novel apocalyptic discourse which, instead of establishing the apocalypse as an end, uses it as a foundation, as a thought-provoking means of conveying a political message of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, of encouraging self-reflectiveness; and as a way of denouncing the empty rhetoric of religious extremism.

**Keywords:** Television series, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Caprica*, religion, Book of Mormon, Bible, Book of Revelation, John of Patmos, Genesis, Adam, Garden of Eden, Heaven, God, fall of man, the beast, false prophet, angel, Second Coming, resuscitation, apocalypse, end of the world, nuclear apocalypse, Hiroshima, post-apocalyptic, genocide, intertextuality, parody, pastiche, religious satire, 9/11, America, religious terrorism, suicide bombing, cyborg, robot, humanity, monotheism, polytheism.



The television series *Battlestar Galactica*<sup>1</sup> establishes its chronology between a nuclear apocalypse that has just taken place and the threat of a potential future apocalypse,<sup>2</sup> both at the hands of human-looking cyborgs called Cylons. *Caprica*, its prequel series, set fifty-eight years before the nuclear detonation, unfolds the events leading up to the apocalypse in *Battlestar Galactica*. Indeed, *Caprica* functions as if it were part of a puzzle, supplying the missing pieces which gradually fill narrative gaps purposefully left open by *Battlestar*

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of convenience, individual episodes are referenced in the following abbreviated manner (full episode references appear in the bibliography): BSG 1x01 refers to *Battlestar Galactica*, season 1, episode 1; CAP 1x19 refers to *Caprica*, season 1, episode 19. Episode titles are only provided when specifically relevant; for instance, if they reference the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the term 'apocalypse/Apocalypse' is used in this article in its secondary and popular sense of an event of great importance, violence, etc. like those described in the Book of Revelation, the term being lower case throughout when used in a secular context and having an upper-case first letter when used in a scriptural context.

*Galactica*. In both series, whether explicitly or implicitly, the apocalypse is omnipresent and structures the narrative, be it with the permanent threat of extinction that the characters face in *Battlestar Galactica*, or through the general sense of doom and gloom that viewers experience watching *Caprica*, as they are driven to investigate and over-interpret each detail and line of dialogue in an effort to make sense of the apocalypse to come.

*Battlestar Galactica* is a remake of a 1978 series by the same name, created for ABC by Glen A. Larson, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Woolfe 2008: 303);<sup>3</sup> the original series accordingly incorporated numerous Mormon references.<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Mormon* does not depict an Apocalypse per se, but it indirectly refers to the Revelation of Saint John in the First Book of Nephi, in which Nephi speaks of an Angel who appeared before him and told him that the Apostle John would write about the end of the world (Nephi 14. 18–27). Glen A. Larson's original title for *Battlestar Galactica* was 'Adam's Ark', which appropriately conveys two of the show's most prominent themes: exodus after annihilation (symbolised by the Ark) and the birth of the human race (embodied by Adam).<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence, religious discourse pervades both series. Recognisable features of the Book of Revelation are intertwined with the characters' personal religious agendas, as well as more trivial and profane agendas, leading to confusion, imposture or even parody of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Apocalyptic discourse in *Battlestar Galactica* and its prequel *Caprica* thus hinges on a deliberate confusion between the religious and the secular: neither of the series attempts to provide a faithful visual illustration of the apocalyptic events foretold in the Book of Revelation and, as such, neither adheres to identifiable end-times prophecy belief systems (such as for instance premillennialism, dispensationalism or preterism) nor promote eschatological discourse at large. The monotheistic 'One true God' to which allusion is made in both series remains a mysterious entity, wholly disconnected from the Judæo-Christian God of the Holy Bible. Striving to make sense of the strange collage of religious

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<sup>3</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also abbreviated as LDS Church) is the official and formal name of the Mormon Church.

<sup>4</sup> These references have been discussed at length in two prominent articles: see Neumann (2013: 226–43) and Wolfe (2008: 303–17).

<sup>5</sup> Glen A. Larson was not involved in the remake developed by Ronald D. Moore but the bulk of the storyline, the religious themes and the main characters lived on in the remake, so that he was credited as 'Consulting Producer' on *Battlestar Galactica* as well as on *Caprica* as an homage.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon provides the following definition of parody: 'Parody [...] is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied [...] usually signalled by irony. [...] It can be critically constructive as well as destructive. [...] Parody is transformational in its relationship to other texts' (Hutcheon, 2000: 32, 38).

intertextuality within the series,<sup>7</sup> the viewer is led to understand that religious references here fulfil two complementary objectives. First, they legitimise the two opposing religions (monotheism and polytheism) depicted in both series by referencing easily identifiable real-world religions; from a narrative standpoint, this has the advantage of escaping the lengthy and complex exposition that would have been entailed by the invention of two entirely fictitious religions bearing no resemblance to existing ones. Secondly, by choosing not to adhere to the real-world Judæo-Christian apocalyptic belief system, the writers of these series are left free to link the apocalyptic narratives they unfold to whichever meaning best befits their agenda. This ‘pick-and-choose’ attitude towards references from both the Judæo-Christian Bible in general and the Book of Revelation in particular serves to introduce a key ingredient of distance from religious doctrine, which in turn enables parody, irony and satire to creep into the apocalyptic discourse of the series,<sup>8</sup> thereby creating, as this article will demonstrate, a novel apocalyptic discourse which, instead of establishing the apocalypse as an end, uses it as a foundation, as a thought-provoking means of conveying a political message of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, of encouraging self-reflectiveness; and as a way of denouncing the empty rhetoric of religious extremism.

### 1. Apocalypse as punishment: appropriating the Book of Revelation

*Battlestar Galactica* opens *in medias res*: a nuclear apocalypse has just taken place — a nuclear detonation which destroyed the Twelve Colonies and triggered the Second Cylon War, forcing humans from the twelve planets (each planet forms a Colony) into exile. The narrative initially provides no clues as to why the Second Cylon War began. A caption at the beginning of the pilot simply states that the Cylons ‘decided to kill their masters’ (*Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*). We are then gradually given to understand that the Cylons revere the ‘One true God’, whereas humans worship Gods (plural), who bear a striking resemblance to the Gods of the Greek Pantheon.

When we examine religious themes and references in *Battlestar Galactica*, we discover clear analogies with the Holy Bible; for example, the apocalypse is popularly known as ‘the

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<sup>7</sup> Gérard Genette defines intertextuality as ‘*la présence d’un texte dans un autre* [the presence of one text within another]’, a textual relation which includes quoting, plagiarising and making allusions, and whose field of application is the whole body of the work (Genette 1982: 8–9; author’s translation).

<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon defines satire by contrast to parody: ‘Satire is extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction. [...] The obvious reason for the confusion of parody and satire [...] is the fact that the two genres are often used together. Satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes. Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgments, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized’ (Hutcheon, 2000: 43–44).

Fall', which clearly suggests the Fall of Man and Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3;<sup>9</sup> this reverses the Biblical sequence of events, according to which the Apocalypse is the final event, described in the last book, not a trigger of events, described in the first. Incidentally, this parallel with the Fall of Man implies that man's sin in *Battlestar Galactica* predates the beginning of the series, thereby justifying the creation of its prequel *Caprica* in order to explain the reasons leading to the Fall.

*Caprica* offers sharp tonal and thematic contrasts with the darker post-apocalyptic *Battlestar Galactica*: wide-angle shots of lush sceneries and dreamy seaside landscapes surrounding the opulent designer house of the main characters (the Graystone family) alternate with vibrant street scenes from the eponymous planet and thriving city of Caprica; the colour scheme is radiant and, after the teaser sequence, the pilot episode begins with a frivolous game of tennis between Amanda and Daniel Graystone as their friendly butler robot Serge watches. In this respect, the settings of Caprica City function as a kind of utopia, as the proverbial Garden from which the humans will be expelled after the apocalypse in *Battlestar Galactica*. Nevertheless, the seeds of dystopia are immediately sown: they are apparent in the teaser sequence of the pilot, which immerses the viewer in V-Club,<sup>10</sup> a clandestine virtual nightclub fraught with sex, debauchery and violence, which enables young Capricans to enact vicariously their most decadent fantasies, as ennui pervades their lives. Religious terrorism is also introduced in the pilot, as Ben, a teenager, detonates his suicide vest aboard a train, saying, 'The One true God shall drive out the many', and killing hundreds in the process (among which, the protagonist Zoe Graystone), thereby infusing the series with feelings of grief and loss that foreshadow the Fall. This early juxtaposition of human hubris and sin with punishment (in the form of an explosion and in the name of religion) serves to produce a primitive watered-down echo of the global nuclear apocalypse brought about by religious terrorism in *Battlestar Galactica*. In addition, it contributes to the establishing of thematic continuity between the two series and to the linking of secular and religious discourses revolving around the apocalypse.

The opening titles of *Caprica* show a graveyard on a densely clouded night (the surname 'Graystone' is highly evocative of gravestones). One tombstone is inscribed with 'Adama', the family surname of the other family which features prominently throughout the series, a

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<sup>9</sup> All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Bible of 1611.

<sup>10</sup> In the series, V-Club is one of the many universes generated by Caprican hackers inside V-World, a virtual game created by Daniel Graystone, that the characters access by putting on 'holobands', which are computerised eyeglasses.

discreet Biblical allusion, in that mortality is one of the consequences suffered by Adam as a result of the Fall and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.<sup>11</sup>

Genesis, which describes the Fall, is followed by Exodus, which describes the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt and their years of wandering before reaching the Promised Land. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the Fall is also followed by an Exodus; the characters face trials and tribulations on their way to a promised land called Earth, and many episode titles refer to the Bible in general and the Book of Revelation in particular; for example: 'Rapture' (BSG 3x12), 'Revelations' (BSG 4x12) and 'He That Believeth in Me'<sup>12</sup> (BSG 4x3). Specific allusions to symbols present in the Book of Revelation also abound. Throughout the series, reference is made to the Sacred Scrolls, which form the basis of the Twelve Colonies' polytheistic faith. The Sacred Scrolls discuss the Exodus from planet Kobol as well as the legends of Earth. One of these scrolls is the Book of Pythia, which foretells the events that the 47,000 or so human survivors of the Cylon-triggered apocalypse face. In Revelation 5. 1 John says that he 'saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne [God] a book written within and on the back side, sealed with seven seals',<sup>13</sup> which contained God's message. Among other things, it consists of a prophecy about the future of humanity and hints that humanity's path is predetermined. In the case of the Sacred Scrolls, the allusion is fairly faithful to the spirit of the Book of Revelation.

However, elements of the Book of Revelation can also be subjected to distortion, parody, irony and satire in *Battlestar Galactica*. For example, Commander Adama is referred to as 'the beast' by Cavil, after the former has been shot by Boomer: 'Thus is the beast decapitated' (*Battlestar Galactica: The Plan*). Revelation 13 mentions a beast who speaks 'in blasphemy against God' (Revelation 13. 6) and who must be killed like he has killed: 'he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword' (Revelation 13. 10). The irony here is that it is not Commander Adama who is the false prophet metaphorised by the beast of Revelation but Cavil the Cylon.

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<sup>11</sup> God warns Adam that eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge will make him mortal (whereas eating of the tree of life will make him immortal): 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (Genesis 2. 17). As a consequence, when Adam and Eve share the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God expels them from the Garden and makes them mortal: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Genesis 3. 19). Adam dies after having lived 930 years (Genesis 5. 5).

<sup>12</sup> 'Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die' (John 11. 25–26).

<sup>13</sup> At the time that the Book of Revelation was written, books were written in scroll format.

Another example is the reference in Revelation 1 to the ‘Son of Man’: ‘And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the son of man’ (Revelation 1. 13); this is speculatively interpreted as a reference to Jesus. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the Cylons are called ‘the Sons of Man’ (or, alternatively ‘Humanity’s Children’ (*BSG: The Miniseries* and CAP 1x19)) and the drama initially introduces seven Cylon models. In this context, their being likened to Jesus Christ appears altogether ironical given their robotic nature. This could also be interpreted as an element of religious satire: the iconoclastic parallel drawn between Cylons and Jesus Christ might be construed as a criticism of the way religion can, in extreme cases, dehumanise people: one only has to think, for instance, of religious terrorists who commit senseless acts while blindly following their interpretation of religious doctrine.

Moreover, in Biblical numerology, the number seven symbolises perfection:<sup>14</sup> in the Book of Revelation, the beast, the personification of evil, has seven heads, and this use of the number seven to describe evil constitutes a symbolic warning that evil can take on many faces, especially appealing ones;<sup>15</sup> this is echoed by the casting of beautiful and sexy women to play humanoid Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*, all of which at some point commit acts of terrorism. A further instance is that of the pregnant woman in Revelation 12; Cylon n° 6, Sharon Agathon, will become pregnant with a daughter.

Finally, Revelation 10 and 11 evoke an angel. Traditionally, in religious apocalyptic literature, angels bear the revelation of God, which occurs in the form of dreams or visions and prophesies events to come (Apocalypse-soon.com). In *Battlestar Galactica*, three characters are openly referred to as angels: Caprica Six, Kara Thrace, also known as Starbuck, and Gaius Baltar.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in *Caprica*, Sister Clarice reveals, in a discussion with Amanda Graystone, that Zoe Graystone received the word of God from angels: ‘Oh, you think I led her? No. Oh, no. She led me. She was the one who talked to angels. They guided her. Zoe saw it all’ (CAP 1x18). Both Kara Thrace and Zoe Graystone act as messianic figures: Zoe Graystone is the first humanoid Cylon who will pave the way for all future Cylons;

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<sup>14</sup> For a lengthy and extremely thorough discussion of the meaning of the number seven in the Bible, see Adela Yarbro Collins (1996: 55–138).

<sup>15</sup> ‘John sometimes uses the numbers seven or three to highlight the kingdom of evil’s hollow mimicry of the divine’ (Beale 1999: 64).

<sup>16</sup> In the finale of the series, Baltar sees himself and Caprica Six as angels: ‘I see angels, angels in this very room. Now, I may be mad, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not right. Because there’s another force at work here. There always has been. It’s undeniable. We’ve all experienced it. Everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can’t fathom, let alone explain by rational means. Puzzles deciphered in prophecy. Dreams given to a chosen few. Our loved ones, dead, risen. Whether we want to call that ‘God’ or ‘gods’ or some sublime inspiration or a divine force we can’t know or understand, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. It’s here. It exists, and our two destinies are entwined in its force’ (BSG 4x20).

before dying in the train bombing, Zoe Graystone had created an avatar copy of herself in V-World. This later enabled her to download her avatar self into a Cylon robot prototype created by her father and therefore perpetuate her own existence. The epilogue scene ‘The shape of things to come’ of the series finale of *Caprica* (CAP 1x19) thus shows Zoe being reborn in a birthing tank (also referred to as a ‘resuscitation tank’ in the series) as a humanoid Cylon, a parody of Messianic Resurrection and of the Second Coming.

Kara Thrace’s status as an angel is more ambiguous: seen first as a foul-mouthed insubordinate pilot who enjoys drinking, gaming and recreational sex, she progressively gains enlightenment after she returns from the dead. Cylon n° 2, Leoben Conoy, tells her: ‘I look at you now. I don't see Kara Thrace. I see an angel blazing with the light of God, an angel eager to lead her people home’ (BSG 4x07). Her messianic role is established in the series through cryptic negative prophecies spoken by the Cylon Hybrid: ‘Kara Thrace will lead the human race to its end. [...] She is the herald of the apocalypse. The harbinger of death. They must not follow her’ (*Battlestar Galactica: Razor*). The etymology of the word ‘harbinger’ provides useful insight as to why she was labelled ‘Harbinger of Death’: the term comes from the French word *héberger* (to welcome under one’s roof), and as a resurrected character, Kara Thrace arguably harbours death inside her. The cryptic message would then be that humans must not follow her in death, as only she will be resurrected. Indeed, in a true parody of Jesus’ death, of the resurrection and of the Second Coming,<sup>17</sup> Kara Thrace dies as her plane crashes (BSG 3x17) and is resurrected two months later (BSG 3x20) as a real corporeal person to fulfil her mission and lead the survivors to Earth. Another archaic meaning of ‘harbinger’, also derived from French, is someone who is sent ahead to provide lodgings, which is what Kara Thrace does by leading the survivors to Earth (TV.com, *Battlestar Galactica* Forums). Having completed her mission, Kara Thrace eventually vanishes in the series finale (BSG 4x20), presumably to return to Heaven.

It would therefore appear that this recycling of Biblical motifs within the series serves an objective of distancing: the dramas firmly and repeatedly establish their spirituality, perhaps in order to appeal to the 92% of American audiences which, according to Gallup polls, believes in God,<sup>18</sup> while at the same time offering perspective through the use of parody of

<sup>17</sup> All four Gospels say, or imply, that Jesus’ tomb was discovered to be empty ‘on the first day of the week’ (Matthew 28. 1, Mark 16. 9, Luke 24. 1–3 and John 20. 1), he having risen from the dead. Kara Thrace rises two months after her death but her remains are discovered along with her crashed plane on planet Earth (BSG 4x11).

<sup>18</sup> 2012 Gallup Poll on religious practices in America: 92% of American adults believe in God, 77% of American adults in 2012 identify with a Christian religion and 69% percent of American adults are very religious or moderately religious (Gallup Polls).

religious apocalyptic themes. The justification for both dramas' adopting such a strong religious stance while simultaneously distancing themselves from traditional religiosity appears to be rooted in the producers' desire to establish them as thought-provoking political shows. In particular, the events surrounding 9/11 and their aftermath seem to have played a decisive part in establishing the dramas' message, as Executive Producer David Eick explains in an interview for the DVD bonuses of *Caprica*:

When we were breaking the original story for *Battlestar Galactica*, it was shortly after 9/11 of '01. And so there was a great deal of discussion about how this religious strife had led to these horrible acts of violence. And that greatly informed the agenda of the antagonists, the Cylons, in *Battlestar*.

Speaking of the elaboration of the dominant theme of the series *Caprica*, Executive Producer Jane Espenson likewise adds: 'The idea of religion and the fervent action that can come out of religion seemed like a natural' (*Caprica*, Season 1, Part 2). In the light of these two producers' observations, we shall see how both series draw a parallel between iconoclastically appropriating Biblical apocalyptic prophecy and the way religious terrorism and false prophets divert religious texts to justify the unjustifiable: in short, how do the series strategically develop fictitious apocalyptic narratives in order to cope with the real-life trauma of 9/11?

## **2. Revelation: denouncing the false prophets of a profane apocalypse**

The narrative structure of *Battlestar Galactica* relies on a complex chronology, based on the eternal return of the apocalypse. Their monotheism or polytheism notwithstanding, there is common ground between all the characters in the shared belief in the 'Cycle of Time', a belief that parallels the myth of eternal return (or eternal recurrence), a concept found in many religions and philosophies, both present day and ancient. The belief in the Cycle of Time is expressed very early on in the series, when Cylon Leoben, talking to Kara Thrace, says: 'All this has happened before, and all this will happen again' (BSG 1x08), a quote from the human's canon of scripture, the Book of Pythia, referred to earlier. The quote, which recurs at regular intervals throughout the series and is also echoed once in *Caprica* (CAP 1x09), serves as a cautionary tale: another apocalypse is just around the corner if the characters do not modify their behaviour. Indeed, this is illustrated during the humans' space Exodus: as they search for a new habitable planet, they come across the ruins of two previously inhabited planets, Kobol (BSG 1x12) and Earth (BSG 4x10, 'Revelations'), which both suffered destruction following nuclear apocalypses in times that predate the *Battlestar Galactica* diegesis. As the characters finally land on a New Earth in the series' finale, a narrative twist

reveals by way of a flash-forward of 150,000 years that this New Earth is actually *our* Earth: we see the present-day Time Square and realise that the futuristic story we have watched occurred in our past (BSG 4x20). As pictures of Cylon robots flash across the electronic billboards of Time Square, the viewers are left to ponder: are we doomed to repeat endlessly the cycle of apocalypses?

This dominant philosophy within the series can be interpreted on two levels. The first is intrinsic to the drama: the revelation that the characters are, at any point in the story, simultaneously immersed in a pre-apocalyptic and a post-apocalyptic cycle serves as a catalyst; it is only when they become aware that they are trapped in this cycle that the characters finally attempt to seek the necessary enlightenment that will enable them to break it. The second is external to the drama: the recurring apocalypses serve as metaphors for America's repeated failed attempts to deal with the enduring trauma of 9/11; as the audience witnesses the obvious visual similarities between the charred ruins of the skyline of Earth (BSG 4x10, 'Revelations') and the Manhattan skyline and Ground Zero after 9/11, there can be little doubt that what *Battlestar Galactica* seeks to achieve is nothing short of a *catharsis*.

Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature features many works (ranging from the well-known canonical apocalypses of Daniel and John, to the lesser known apocryphal or pseudepigraphal apocalypses of Enoch, Baruch, Ezra, Zephaniah, Abraham, and of the Testaments of Abraham and of Levi, etc.), which differ radically in theme and content. One theme common to all, however, is the judgment/destruction of the wicked; which in some works is paralleled by the judgment/destruction of the world (Collins, J. 1998: 7). Another common feature is transcendent eschatology (Collins, J. 1998: 11): in these works, the power to end the world solely rested in God's hands. Thus, in the New Testament, after God ended the world in an Apocalypse, the souls of the faithful would be saved and forever dwell in the celestial New Jerusalem, the kingdom of Heaven (Revelation 20–22). As such, New Jerusalem symbolised a return to the Garden, especially in its mention of 'the tree of life' (Revelation 22. 2), which echoed 'the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil' mentioned in Genesis 2. 9.

Hiroshima marked a turning point in apocalyptic literature: mastering nuclear technology gave humans God-like powers of destruction and precipitated the evolution of apocalyptic literature from the religious to the secular (Flori 2008: 5). The corollary of this secularisation of the apocalypse was the disappearance of the promise of Heaven. German philosopher Günther Anders refers to this process as 'apocalypses without kingdom' (Anders 2006: 294).

From this perspective, both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica* are thematically rooted in a secular post-Hiroshima world. Humans are responsible for creating Cylons as limited robotic beings and then enslaving them. For the Cylons, this constitutes the cardinal sin for which humans are to be punished and which justifies genocide by means of a nuclear apocalypse. Their desire to crush the human race hides behind a veil of religiosity, but this desire is in truth compounded by social grievances and by a very trivial and secular anger.

Another reading of Revelation in the series may be based upon the Greek etymology of the word ‘apocalypse’, *apokalupsis*, which means ‘lifting the veil’. Both series seek to denounce religious fanaticism and racism. As such, the events of 9/11 constituted an avowed source of inspiration, and visual references to 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror abound in *Battlestar Galactica*. These references include visual pastiches of famous, widely circulated, and highly recognizable press photographs illustrating the consequences of 9/11 and of the ensuing ‘War on Terror’ led by George W. Bush;<sup>19</sup> for example: scenes depicting skyscraper ruins (BSG 4x10, ‘Revelations’ and *BSG: The Plan*), people covered in dust (*BSG: The Plan*), memorial walls with the photographs of the missing and deceased along with flowers and miscellaneous memorabilia (BSG 3x10), formal tributes paid to flag-draped coffins (*BSG: The Miniseries*), posters illustrating fear-mongering tactics (‘Remember, anyone could be a Cylon!’)<sup>20</sup> and, last but not least, torture, water-boarding (BSG 1x08) and terrorist summary execution scenes, for example, the episode with which Cylon Leoben Conoy is ruthlessly airlocked out of the Battlestar ship (BSG 1x08). Ronald D. Moore’s deliberate choice to use a handheld camera to achieve a gritty documentary feel while shooting *Battlestar Galactica* was specifically designed to contribute added realism to the drama. This stylistic choice was intended to help render the series’ message exemplary in its depiction of the consequences of religious terrorism; it was also partly meant as a homage to ‘cinéma-vérité’ and highlights the fact that 9/11 created a turning point in representation of apocalyptic narratives.

The events surrounding 9/11 and their aftermath played a decisive part in establishing the message of both series, as was widely relayed, notably by the online entertainment press:

['Sci Fi's 'Battlestar Galactica' remake'] may have taken place in a galaxy far, far away, but it was one of the TV shows most heavily inspired by 9/11. [...] Wrapped up in science-fiction drag, [...] what had been a cheesy 'Star Wars' rip-off in the 1970s was transformed into an unapologetic 9/11 allegory, in which a content and secure civilization tries to rebuild after a devastating attack by a bunch of religious zealots. [...] Because it had the added remove of

<sup>19</sup> Linda Hutcheon sums up Genette’s definition of pastiche in the following manner: ‘Pastiche is imitative [‘in its relationship to other texts’] [...] Pastiche [...] aims at similarity’ (Hutcheon, 2000: 38–39; Genette, 1982: 34).

<sup>20</sup> *Battlestar Galactica* promotional posters designed by Sci-Fi Channel.

science-fiction, it could be blunter or more provocative than many fictional takes on post-9/11 life set in the real world (Sepinwall).

By taking arms against a religiously tolerant society practising a different religion, the Cylons both express religious intolerance and fanaticism: their desire to punish metaphorises terrorism in the name of religion as well as the way religious texts can be hijacked to serve fanatic agendas.

The Cylon apocalypse is referred to as genocide of the human race and constitutes a fantasised extinction of moderate societies once fundamentalism takes over the world. President Roslin encapsulates this disaster scenario of extinction as she attempts to make Commander Adama realize the extreme gravity of their plight:

The human race is about to be wiped out. We have 50,000 people left, and that's it. Now, if we are even going to survive as a species, then we need to get the hell out of here and we need to start having babies (*BSG: The Miniseries*).

One of the prominent features of apocalyptic literature is the idea that people fighting on the side of good are an oppressed minority resisting evil legions and that, as such, their self-righteous actions are justified (Stevenson 2013: 97). It is well known that until Emperor Constantine granted freedom of religion with the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., Christians were an increasingly oppressed and martyred minority, suffering persecution first, in the middle decades of the first century, by Jews and later, within a pagan dominated Empire, by the Romans; there are several references to such persecution in the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in both series, the notion of oppressed minority repeatedly shifts perspective. In *Caprica*, monotheists are the minority, and Sister Clarice, through a series of fallacious self-justifications, rationalises mass murder and suicide bombing in the name of her religion. She heads a terrorist faction, the Soldiers of the One (also known as 'S.T.O.'), the fundamentalist strong arm of the monotheist Church. The narrative reveals that Cylons grew in numbers and went from minority (as enslaved robots and as the followers of a new fringe religion) to oppressors of the human race, which they attempted to exterminate. Thus, in the course of seasons 1 to 3 of *Battlestar Galactica*, humans become the oppressed minority, but their fate changes in season 3, episode 7 (*BSG* 3x07), as they regain the upper hand and face the opportunity to commit genocide themselves against the Cylons by destroying the Resurrection ship, the ship, which should they fall into harm's way, enables Cylons to download their

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the account of Stephen's arrest and stoning to death by Jews in Acts 6. 8–8. 1, and the references in the Book of Revelation to the sufferings of the Seven Churches of Asia and the martyrdom of individuals (at the hands of Romans in the late first century), as in Revelation 6. 9–11. Persecution is foretold in Luke 6. 22–23.

knowledge and consciousness into new identical copies of their bodies, through the use of ‘resurrection tanks’, thereby allowing them to cheat death.<sup>22</sup> Through this reversal of perspective, the viewer comes to understand that if both sides believe in the righteousness of their actions as oppressors, then the logic upon which they operate must be flawed (Stevenson 2013: 116).

Both dramas, then, reveal that the monotheists as well as the Cylons are not collectively duped by the ideology they convey. In *Caprica*, a member of the established monotheist church, Obal Ferras, confronts Sister Clarice: ‘So you really want to serve God? [...] or do you want to be God?’ (CAP 1x11). Indeed, in the series, false prophets and cliché guru figures abound. Sister Clarice’s terrorist plan involves killing 30,000 people in a stadium using martyrs who, thanks to V-World, will gain eternal virtual life in avatar form. She calls this plan ‘Apotheosis’ and tries in the following terms to convince the monotheist church to embrace it:

Imagine a world in which death has been conquered. In which eternal life isn’t a dream, but a reality. 30,000 Capricans will die in the fire. A select few will be reborn, those who have accepted the One true God into their hearts. Only they will savour life everlasting in a virtual heaven that we have built. (...) I offer you a religion that removes the need for faith (CAP 1x11).

Sister Clarice’s rhetoric with its promise of ‘life everlasting in a virtual heaven that we have built’ for the ‘select few’ clearly mirrors that used by fanatics down the ages to radicalise potential adherents, such as radicalised Muslims, who are, it is popularly believed by some, indoctrinated to believe that suicide bombing will earn them seventy-two virgins in Heaven.<sup>23</sup> Apart from this, her assertion that ‘death [will have] been conquered’ is in Christian terms unthinkable; the mere idea of obliterating death also eliminates the Final Judgement and, therefore, constitutes blasphemy, an offence against the Deity, since it denies the power of God to be the sole arbiter in these matters. Removing ‘the need for faith’ also defeats the general purpose of religions in the first place and appears particularly satirical here.

Etymologically, ‘apotheosis’ means being deified. After discovering that she can manipulate the computer code of V-World to suit her needs, the Zoe Graystone-Avatar declares that she is God on two different occasions (CAP 1x16 and 1x19). The Book of

<sup>22</sup> Their Resurrection ship grants Cylons immortal lives by automatically downloading their consciousness into a brand new copied body once the previous one has been destroyed.

<sup>23</sup> The seventy-two virgins are not mentioned in the Quran as such, however, they are mentioned in the Hadith (a collection of traditions and narratives which feature the sayings of Prophet Muhammad and his daily practice of religion (‘the sunna’), which Muslims must obey and emulate). For a list of quotes from the Hadith relating to the 72 virgins, see: [http://wikiislam.net/wiki/Authenticity\\_of\\_72\\_Virgins\\_Hadith](http://wikiislam.net/wiki/Authenticity_of_72_Virgins_Hadith).

Revelation warns repeatedly against false prophets, who will burn in a lake of fire for their sin (Revelation 20. 10). The most explicit reference to false prophets, however, can be found in the First Epistle of John: ‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world’ (I John 4. 1). As further embodiments of the false prophet, two Cylon n° 1 copies, called Cavil, who pose as polytheist priests among humans, have no qualms, once discovered, in denouncing the existence of the very God in whose name they have committed genocide or ordered suicide bombings against the human ‘cockroaches,’ as they call them: ‘There is no God. Supernatural divinities are the primitive’s answer for why the sun goes down at night’ (*BSG: The Plan*). One of the more enlightened Cavil copies, after spending some time on planet Caprica with the human resistance, completely demythologises Cylon spirituality and the way Cylons hide behind a pseudo-religion to perpetrate genocide by confronting a more fundamentalist Cavil copy aboard the Battlestar ship:

Fleet-Cavil: Do you really believe it was a mistake to attack the humans?

Caprica-Cavil: Rather intensely, yes. [...] We had a temper tantrum in the form of a cataclysm because we wanted [the Final Five Cylons] to treasure us, the [number] Ones, more than humanity [...] (*BSG: The Plan*)

In truth, Cavil’s grievances are anything but religious. They belong to the realm of the profane and constitute a mixed expression of hubris and neurosis. We ultimately learn the true source of his self-centred desire to punish the humans: he deeply resents them for creating him as a limited robotic being who could not perceive the wonders of the universe the way he secretly wished to.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, at the beginning of the series *Caprica*, Zoe Graystone’s rebellion, though masquerading as religious fervour, does not truly stem from religious concerns: it appears as a futile adolescent outburst of rage against her parents. It takes time before her teenage fury evolves into a sense of her true purpose and a desire to use her newfound power to manipulate the computer code in order to reshape V-World into a better place by purifying it. Once she has achieved her goal, she destroys Sister Clarice’s false prophet heaven in a fit of very God-like anger: skies darken and fire erupts from the ground (CAP 1x19), in a fitting illustration of the ‘lake of fire’ of Revelation 20. 10. The elaborate

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<sup>24</sup> Cavil:

I don’t want to be human! I want to see gamma rays. I want to hear x-rays and I want to ... I want to smell dark matter. Do you see the absurdity of what I am? I can’t even express these things properly, because I have to ... I have to conceptualize complex ideas in this stupid limiting spoken language. But I know I want to reach out with something other than these prehensile paws ... and feel the solar wind of a supernova flowing over me (*BSG* 4x15).

visual effects of the computer-generated scenes of Zoe reshaping V-World appear particularly striking: Zoe shatters the corrupt town of V-World and replaces its fallen buildings with majestic mountains, wild landscapes and waterfalls; she instils warm colours and greenery; in short, she makes the world enchanting once more and offers what could be deemed a possible return to the Garden.

Similarly, it is no coincidence that the characters of *Battlestar Galactica* should give the name 'New Earth' to the planet they successfully discover and colonise in the series' finale, given that in Revelation 21, John of Patmos states: 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away' (Revelation 21. 1). By infusing recurring religious references within the secular discourse, both series strive to re-establish the promise of the kingdom. Perhaps, the true underlying message conveyed by the dramas is that the trauma endured by America as a result of 9/11 can only be appeased by renewing the promise of a kingdom, after what felt like an apocalypse. Only then, once their abrupt finality has been erased, will death and sacrifice become acceptable. This message can also be inferred from the opening titles of *Caprica*: after closing-in on the tombstone inscribed with the name 'Adama', the camera travels forward to the statue of a winged angel in the cemetery, then focuses on its hand, which is cut; the wounded hand slowly appears to come alive as it fades into Sister Clarice's hand (whilst the cemetery backdrop fades into the interior of a church); she clutches it to her chest, then extends it, healed, holding out a blue infinity sign, as though to intimate that suffering in death will ensure eternal life.

## Conclusion

To conclude, both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica* combine religious elements with secular elements. In its nuclear manifestation, the Cylon-triggered apocalypse is clearly secular in nature, but the characters and motifs used bear strong similarities with the defining features of religious apocalypticism in general and directly echo the storyline of the Book of Revelation in particular. However, going beyond a simple illustration of apocalyptic tropes, both series appropriate Biblical references as they strive to dismantle the empty rhetoric of religious extremism and question America's attempts to come to terms with a post 9/11 world. One of the recurring archetypes conveyed by apocalyptic literature and cinema is the opposition between individualism and collectivism. Going beyond the fallacious justifications provided by both series for the apocalypse endured by its human characters, one of the questions that *Battlestar Galactica* repeatedly asks is why should humans survive the apocalypse and be saved? The unexpected answer provided is that they should not. In the words of Commander

Adama, 'One has to be worthy of surviving'.<sup>25</sup> How does one become worthy of surviving according to the moral of the dramas? By accepting otherness, in whatever form it might present itself, and by choosing collectivism and tolerance. In the series finale of *Caprica*, (CAP 1x19) Sister Clarice pleads for the recognition of Cylons as 'differently sentient' beings and as humans' equals. Likewise, in *Battlestar Galactica*, after having fought each other for the better part of four seasons, Cylons and humans finally overcome their racist prejudices and hatred of each other to find a middle ground and live together harmoniously. Illustratively, in *Battlestar Galactica*, the path set after the apocalypse is a journey of initiation, of progressive enlightenment, a spiritual *Bildungsroman* for the characters.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Commander Adama's speech for the decommissioning ceremony of the Battlestar Galactica:

You know, when we fought the Cylons, we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question 'Why?' Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed and spite, jealousy, and we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept the responsibility for anything that we've done, like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God, create life. And when that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play God then wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore (*BSG: The Miniseries*).

Athena Sharon Agathon alludes to his earlier speech, when she says, 'Humanity never asked itself why it deserved to survive. Maybe you don't'. This leads Commander Adama to observe to Kara Thrace: 'It's not enough to survive. One has to be worthy of surviving' (*BSG* 2x12, 'Resurrection Ship, Part II').

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