

Three Apocalypses

T. S. Eliot suggested that the world would end either with a bang or a whimper, but since he later retracted that claim, I'd like to propose the three-fold taxonomy below. While these apocalypses (thank Buffy for the pluralization) aren't entirely distinct in terms of social movements, they are fairly distinct as habits of mind. And that overlap is what interests me.

The Escapist Apocalypse

Key phrase: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will die."

The primary function of the escapist apocalypse is to remove people's responsibilities and social inhibitions. Most often this is a nebulous doomsday, used to justify one's own delinquency, because when the shit hits the fan, none of it will matter anyway. In this role, the apocalypse can be a sort of aggrandized version of personal self-destruction. *It doesn't matter if I smoke cigarettes because the heroin will kill me first* becomes *it doesn't matter if I use a condom because the whole world will end in 2012, anyway*. Still, versions of the escapist apocalypse do make an appearance in some organized movements.

Vermont is home to one of the most notorious of these groups, the Millerites, who gathered in bedsheets, on October 22, 1844, for what is now known as the "Great Disappointment", arguably the prototype for many overhyped American Armageddons to come. Contemporary accounts, clucking in a predictably protestant fashion, suggest that many of the Millerites had neglected their fields, and failed to harvest crops or chop firewood, because after all, the world was ending. An article in the *Vermont Phoenix* suggests that many of them wound up in poorhouses, on public assistance, during the ensuing winter. Ultimately, many of them converted to Quakerism.

We don't have much record of how the individual Millerites viewed their upcoming apocalypse. On the one hand, it must be quite refreshing to skip the hassle of harvesting and preserving crops, chopping and splitting firewood, saving money, and so forth. Moreover, for Miller's true believers, that cessation of work must have been especially satisfying in the context of Yankee New England, surrounded by people doing backbreaking labor to prepare for a winter that was never going to happen. On the other hand, for anyone with doubts about Miller's prophesy, the suggestion of abandoning the harvest must have come as a daunting test of faith: *if you're cool, man, take a hit of this shit*.

Cozy Apocalypse

Key phrases: "Capitalism isn't going to be sustainable when the oil runs out."
"When the UN invades Texas, you'll be sorry you didn't buy more guns."

Brian Aldiss coined the term "cosy catastrophe" (British 's' there) to refer to sci-fi scenarios like *The Day of the Triffids*, in which a small band of survivors ride out the end of the world and live quite happily amid the ruins. The usage has been expanded slightly over time, and I think it's worth restating in more political terms. By a *cozy apocalypse*, I mean an apocalyptic scenario that provides a justification for the projects and values that its adherents were *already* interested in.

For instance, a range of people today are hoarding gold and ammo and diesel and canned beans because Obama is about to unveil his Islamo/Secular/Communist/Fascist/Feminist/UN doomsday plot. But it is hard to avoid noticing that most of these people were also hoarding gold and ammo and diesel and canned beans in defense against terrorism under Bush, and in defense against computer meltdowns

under Y2K, and so on and so forth. It seems quite plausible that they just *enjoy* hoarding gold and ammo and diesel generators, and they need an up-to-date and politically acceptable rationale for doing so.

Similarly, a large swath of global-warming-doomsday proposals for action emphasize the immediate need for organic farming, shopping at health food stores, and driving Priuses. Again, it seems fairly clear that these things are not exactly viewed as hardships by the people advocating them. As cultural conservatives begin to accept the reality of global climate change, it is interesting to note that they, too, largely view it as a cozy apocalypse: it will necessitate lots of market-based solutions and American industrial/imperial leadership, and maybe some gold and ammo and canned beans.

Sweaty Apocalypse

Key phrase: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...."

When the US government initiated the Manhattan project, it was at the instigation of scientists who believed (with some degree of validity) that if we failed to do so, we would all eventually be killed by nuclear-powered Nazis. The Manhattan project was at the time, and remains to this day, a superlative example of state-sponsored R&D; much more productive in many ways than the Apollo program. It was, in other words, an incredibly huge amount of work. In retrospect, it is hard to judge its success on the basis of its original rationale, since the Nazis never did develop a successful nuclear weapons program, and in any event had been defeated through conventional means before the US was fully capable of deploying our own.

Similarly, in the run-up to Y2K (and afterwards), somewhere on the order of US\$300 billion was spent retrofitting or upgrading computer systems to deal with the predicted glitch.. Again, while it is the general opinion of historians that the apocalyptic nature of Y2K was massively exaggerated, that does not mean this work was unnecessary. Dating errors in financial software might not have been likely to cause the breakdown of capitalism, as many people feared/hoped, but they would still have been an accounting nightmare that someone, at some point, would have to address. Dealing with it in advance probably saved money, although panic pricing may have negated those savings. But let's be clear—it was a great deal of immensely boring work, just in order to keep software at a standstill.

I want to term these sorts of scenarios “sweaty apocalypses”, in the sense that their narratives are used to generate a massive amount of work that the people involved would not be doing otherwise, especially work that involves real sacrifice or opportunity cost from one's larger goals.

The Shifting Sands of Doomsday

It is a matter of record that the apocalypse has never happened. All previous efforts to safeguard ourselves against the end of the world have, thus, been at least somewhat overhyped. Grant Jeffreys, in his 1978 *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny*, takes wonderful exception to this fact:

The second reason many Christians have been warned against looking into prophecy is the historical fact that many commentators have incorrectly interpreted the time of the end in the past. Subsequent events have sometimes proved that their deductions were incorrect. The truth is that in any area of study, scholars will often make errors which will seem obvious enough to those who come after them.

Unfortunately, the area of Bible prophecy seems to be the only area where such early mistakes have led to the suggestion that the whole area of study be abandoned.

While I wouldn't want to discourage the Jeffreys of the world, I think it is worth pointing out that "subsequent events" have not upheld his own prediction that the world would end on September 24, 2000. Still, the literature that Jeffreys is trying to defend is a fascinating one, mainly for how protean it is. In the gravity well of Armageddon, entire collections of signifiers become mobile, and generally get moved to some "cozy" version of the apocalypse. For instance, in *Holocaust II* (1978), Hymers sketches a fairly boilerplate version of the end of the world via Soviet-American nuclear war. But this narrative is teeming with references to (and photos of) Hitler and Auschwitz, and by the end of the book, he has completely appropriated the holocaust narrative as *something that is happening to Christians right now*. The conclusion is that we should go to church and provide military support to Israel. Again, in the Froes' book *When Y2K Dies* (1999), they carefully and accurately dissect the hype around Y2K, only to replace it the "true story" of an all-knowing computer aligned with the European Union that is evolving into the Beast of Revelations. At a literary level, this is sheer schizophrenia, but at a political level, it is almost a land-grab for the rights to the next big apocalypse.

[A paper coming out](#) in *Political Science Quarterly* highlights the fact that about three-quarters of Republican voters believe that we may be living in the end times, and this belief is predictive of their disinterest in global warming as a serious concern. Thus far, that suggests an escapist apocalypse: as John Shimkus (R-IL) put it, "*the Earth will end only when God declares it to be over*". (Shimkus is head of the Congressional Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy, which should not so much give one pause as put one in a coma.) However, it seems unlikely that this demographic is equally indifferent to, say, changes in US defense policy, or immigration policy, or even health care policy, all of which are going to be just as moot as the climate when Gabriel's trumpet sounds. In these arenas, there is either a logical disconnect, or a claim that the details of the upcoming apocalypse (God's wrath, in this case) necessitate the things we were already enthused about--in this case the GOP platform. So that looks more like a cozy apocalypse. Similarly, John Wesley White's relatively successful book *Re-Entry* (1971) heads off in the usual world-government-mark-of-the-beast direction, concluding that the end is definitely coming within thirty years...but he's also quite excited about space exploration, even comparing it to Jesus' phrase "laying up treasure in heaven" from Matthew 6:20.

Again, some segment of the apocalyptic Republican voters are almost certainly "preppers", who spend an enormous amount of time and effort in infrastructure planning for the upcoming Armageddon. While doomsday preparedness has deep roots throughout American frontier and homesteading culture, its taproot has probably been Mormonism. The Mormon church encourages believers to have a year's supply of food on hand, and it has been a stock aspect of Mormon folklore that you *really* need two years (see the title story of Brunvand's excellent study *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*). Arguably, large aspects of preparedness fall into the cozy-apocalypse genre: the people stockpiling guns tend to love guns; the people stockpiling goats love goats, and so on. But no one loves eating canned food for two years, and the cost and logistics of even *storing* two years worth of canned food are rather daunting. So in that sense, we are talking about a sweaty apocalypse.

What fascinates me is that these three genres, which are very distinct in terms of emotions and practicalities, seem to blur together seamlessly at the discursive level. Is the [recent fear-mongering](#) about asteroid impacts a sweaty apocalypse (*we must fund NASA!*) or a cozy apocalypse (*we must continue funding NASA!*)? It's hard to tell, and it depends on who is speaking.

I live on a more or less organic farm with sheep and apple trees and a vegetable garden, and for that matter generators and canned food and guns and ammo. But I'm not sure these things will be especially helpful in the face of massive climate change, or zombies, or insurrection, or nuclear winter. I have no use for escapist apocalypses, and I am generally suspicious of cozy ones. I find it hard to trust a man that tells me it's going to rain while trying to sell me an umbrella. On the other hand, if I thought it was sure to rain, I might well go into the umbrella business. So there's that.