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## **Post-apocalyptic film and the post-modern apocalypse, by Dr. Eric Dodson ( [edodson@westga.edu](mailto:edodson@westga.edu) )**

Here's a little something I wrote for fun, after hearing some of Scott Churchill's lectures on the psychology of film. It's probably pretty goofy of me to focus all of these high-falutin existential and post-modern concepts on something as consistently B-grade as post-apocalyptic films. In doing so, I'm perhaps overstepping the bounds of academic propriety.

Still, it seems to me that one of academic intellectuality's greatest failings lies in its habitual insistence on an atmosphere of sobriety. Certainly life's compass passes far beyond the confines of that narrow mood, and so why shouldn't intellectuality also partake of the broader expanse? Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, I feel that life's deeper lessons often lie in "laughter and dance," in joyous science. After all, what do all of our great psychological insights matter, if in the end they don't call us to revel in our human condition more deeply?

And so, usually when nobody's looking, I sneak-off to experiment with things like the following:

There exists within the broad spectrum of modern cinema a curious and relatively new genre, post-apocalyptic film, whose recent examples include "Waterworld" (1995), "The Road Warrior" (1982), and "The Omega Man" (1971) (see footnote 1). This paper seeks to explore the puzzling popularity of these films in terms of their social-psychological significance -- especially as our world shifts from a modern, existential world-tendency to a more post-modern world-tendency.

### *I. Post-apocalyptic film: some preliminary observations and existential themes*

While the word "apocalypse" commonly refers to an eschatological "great or total devastation; doom," it is worthwhile to recall that the word also bears the etymological resonance of the Greek αποκαλυψις (revelation), which in turn derives from απο (sometimes given as "letting" or "allowing," but perhaps "away from" is better here) and καλυπτειν (to cover, to conceal). Post-apocalyptic film bears these more ancient, more latent significances within its subtext; post-apocalyptic film concerns life after a certain kind of revelation -- after a figurative veil (καλυπτρα) has been lifted. "Apocalypse" in this sense finds commonality with the existential philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of truth as αληθεια (unconcealment), as well as with his consequent formulation of phenomenology in terms of "αποφαινεσθαι τα φαινόμενα." Ultimately, both apocalypse and the Heideggerian truth of Being unfold as interplays of revealing and concealing.

Furthermore, post-apocalyptic film concerns the theme of humanity's possible demise -- when the modern world lies broken and fragmented, and its remaining vestiges struggle for their very survival. In post-apocalyptic film, mankind itself hangs in the balance -- a reality which lends the post-apocalyptic action its urgency. It is precisely insofar as the future of mankind is at stake that heroism becomes a sensible and important theme in post-apocalyptic film. Post-apocalyptic film suggests that being-unto-death can be not only an individual phenomenon (a la Heidegger), but can occur for mankind in toto. In parallel with Heidegger, post-apocalyptic film suggests that mankind's possible not-being possesses a great power to call the human race into realizing its most powerful possibilities for being.

However, this Heideggerian parallel is true not only for the characters within the post-apocalyptic film's story-line, but also for the film's audiences, who are presented with the possibility of mankind's extinction (the intimations of which they probably already feel), and who typically identify with the post-apocalyptic hero. For the viewer, the real thrill of post-apocalyptic film is feeling the heroic in him or her being called out into a world that in many ways already feels post-apocalyptic. Thus, part of the revelation of post-apocalyptic film concerns what is illuminated in the viewer's own person and world-situation.

In calling out the heroic in its audiences, post-apocalyptic film implies the further startling idea that a technology destructive enough to annihilate the human race has the power to call mankind into a more deeply and genuinely humane way of life. Curiously, the bomb is not only a horrible monster; it also offers the human race a great, positive value -- the bomb's very existence has the potential to motivate mankind to attain greater wisdom in life. Post-apocalyptic film suggests to its audiences that the time has come to grow beyond mankind's age-old self-absorbed territoriality, and to seek out a deeper, more heroic interrelatedness with each other and the world in which we live.

## *II. The post-apocalyptic hero as post-modern cowboy*

As in the general case of action-adventure film, post-apocalyptic film usually features a heroic male protagonist moving in a world of violent, kinetic action. However, post-apocalyptic film shares the greatest commonality with the Western cowboy-films so popular in decades past. Indeed, it seems no accident that post-apocalyptic films began appearing in popular cinema just as the Western's popularity was waning (see footnote 2).

In a number of significant ways, post-apocalyptic film seems an outgrowth of the Westerns that preceded it. Post-apocalyptic film embodies many of the same themes and dynamics present in the Western, but also offers a number of critical differences. In today's post-apocalyptic film we find the post-modern cowboy. Like his modern predecessor, he is laconic, self-sufficient and individual. A lone male hero-figure, he moves capably and admirably in a brutal, unforgiving world fraught with sudden violence. Like the Western cowboy, he lives the life of an existential hero; his stakes at every moment are life and death, the reality of which he acknowledges and accepts with a taciturn equanimity. He lives his life on the hard edge, in the midst of immense threats and forces, and seems to embody a kind of greatness as a consequence.

Still, the post-apocalyptic hero differs from the Western hero in a number of critical regards. A product of modernity, the more existential Western hero chooses his world (at least implicitly) over and against the comfortable safety of the east. His immersion in a world of primitive forces and threats lies within the purview of his agency. Although compelled by his world's various exigencies, he retains his individual, subjective choice as his world's central meaning. In contrast, the more post-modern post-apocalyptic hero has his world thrust upon him. He lives in the deconstructed remnants of a world that at one time did offer its manifold possibilities for his choosing, but which has since transformed into a world of uniform and unremitting threat. He finds himself cast into a prison-house of violent significances with no escape. His is a subjectivity de-centered, as his world no longer invites his meaningful choice, but sweeps him away in its vast, engulfing current. As in Yeats' vision, "

...the center cannot hold;  
mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
the blood-dimmed tide is loosed,  
and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned..."

### *III. The post-apocalyptic plot: a tension between existential and post-modern elements*

In post-apocalyptic films, the hero typically first encounters only others intent on his destruction. Whether they be the neo-Visigoth hordes of "The Road Warrior," or the diseased zealots of "The Omega Man," these others provide a distinct and tensional contrast to the lone figure of the post-apocalyptic hero. They constitute a loose tribal assemblage of the animal and the anarchic, and are well adapted to a world at last freed of modernity's meta-narratives of legitimation (to put it in Lyotard's terms). In contrast, the post-apocalyptic hero stands alone, and clings ambivalently to modernity's vestiges. Despite his prodigious capabilities, he remains but one against many, and it is clear that the odds are stacked against him.

At the same time, however, the post-apocalyptic hero has much of the animal in him. He meets the horde on its own terms, and metes out violence and destruction with a similar lack of regret. Following Nietzsche, he fights monsters, but risks becoming one himself (Beyond Good and Evil, p. 89). Yet, in keeping with his modern morality, the post-apocalyptic hero's posture is essentially defensive, in contrast to the tribal horde's indiscriminate push to efface the remaining vestiges of the past. The post-apocalyptic hero thus finds himself suspended between two worlds. On one hand, he clings to a distinctly modern morality. On the other hand, he feels the post-apocalyptic world's pull, and finds the savage in him welling-up.

Within this tension, the post-apocalyptic hero eventually encounters another group of others -- the battered remains of the old, modern world. Being children of modernity, they are decidedly ill-suited to surviving in the post-apocalyptic terrain. They lack the post-apocalyptic hero's savage self-sufficiency, and live in imminent danger of annihilation. Yet these people speak to the modern in the post-apocalyptic hero. They call out that part of him that still cherishes the outmoded narratives that once legitimated life in the more existential past (see footnote 3). However, these hapless people represent more than the last remnants of a moribund age. Their greater significance lies in the fact that they offer the promise of another world-transformation: the reconstruction of the modern world. They, and not the post-apocalyptic hero, are the potential reconstructionists of that world. The post-apocalyptic hero is thus neither a deconstructionist nor a reconstructionist, but one who, in embodying two opposing world-tendencies, preserves the possibility of a shift in the world's direction -- a shift away from the post-modern landscape of perpetually squabbling tribal pluralities, and toward a world that holds out the possibility of converging upon a powerful existential destiny.

As he remains a man suspended between two worlds, he takes up the task of leading modernity's children to safe haven with a grudging ambivalence. He feels the temptation simply to turn away, and to continue on his solitary path in relatively uncomplicated safety. As he knows his post-apocalyptic world well, he recognizes that helping these people can be nothing but a hard, dangerous task that will yield him no advantage in his world. He realizes that leading them to safety is an absurd, quixotic undertaking, as measured by the pragmatics of survival in the post-apocalyptic arena. Yet these vulnerable innocents appeal to the hero's connection to the old world. They call him beyond himself and into relation to them and their project -- even as he sacrifices his own safety and comfort in joining them. In this decision, the hero enters fully into the absurdity of his situation (being suspended between worlds). At the same time, the task calls out the very depth of his heroic skill and cunning. Only at this point does the hero reach beyond being merely a competent survivor; only now does he attain an authentically heroic stature -- when all that he is as a capable individual finds a potent and meaningful engagement with others, as together they establish a shift in their world's structure.

In the completion of his heroic task, the post-apocalyptic hero attains redemption, both for modernity and for himself. This theme is perhaps most evident in "The Omega Man," whose hero

literally gives his pure blood to provide for mankind's future salvation (against deadly bacteria), and then expires in a final Christ-like pose. The most common denouement however, mirrors that of the Western. The hero feels the desire to join his new comrades in reconstructing the old world. However, he eventually recognizes that his nature lies between their modern world and post-modernity's trackless expanses. And so, he takes his leave, riding out once again into the solitude of the post-apocalyptic wasteland.

#### *IV. An illumination of our social-psychological world*

What is it about post-apocalyptic film, or any other genre for that matter, that makes it popular across the land at a particular time? Films become popular insofar as they speak to the psychological spaces many of us inhabit. A popular film, even the most fantastical popular film, appeals to us because at some level it gears into what matters to us (of course, the converse is not necessarily true). In one way or another, a popular film resonates with what we think and feel -- with what attracts or repels us, with our desires or fears. In short, films are popular insofar as they appeal to our current collective social-psychological state. Consequently, popular films can serve as indicators of important social-psychological dynamics, and an interpretation of popular film offers the promise of illuminating those dynamics.

What then is the social-psychological import of post-apocalyptic films, which initially seem so fantastical, and so distant from the everyday reality of our lives? Most obviously, post-apocalyptic films invite a fairly immediate identification with the post-apocalyptic hero (see footnote 4). Like the post-apocalyptic hero, the viewer feels himself suspended between two worlds, but without the hero's cool equanimity.

On one hand, the viewer feels a part of the post-modern world, which often seems to him to be a dangerous and foreboding place. Seemingly bereft of his own kind, he often finds himself trapped in a chaotic, crazy world that inflicts its senseless violence on him in many ways, large and small. His individual choice and agency seem to matter less and less. He feels de-centered -- a helplessly disengaged spectator on the world's important events, which flash across his television screen in a strobe-like phantasmagoria of images and sound-bites. The meta-narratives of legitimation that once quietly lent his life sense and direction no longer provide terra firma, and he finds himself wandering aimlessly through a vast, clamorous, discursive wasteland.

On the other hand, the viewer still feels a connection to the battered structures of the more modern, existential world. In the midst of a world running riot, he still clings to his outmoded existential values. His own subjective experience of the world still matters more to him than does the multiplicity of discourses babbling around him. He still cares about his own individual freedoms and responsibilities, and he still cherishes the potentials he can yet fulfill in life.

Ultimately then, the appeal of post-apocalyptic films is not that they depict distant, utterly outlandish realities, but that they illustrate a critical tension that is part of the world in which we are already living, where we find ourselves suspended between existential and post-modern world-tendencies. In a sense then, we are the real post-apocalyptic heroes, whose uncertain drama still remains to unfold.

Still, unlike the post-apocalyptic hero, most of us do not live easily or even capably between these world-tendencies. We more often feel ill at ease with the emerging post-modern world -- even as it offers us new freedom from modernity's oppressive structures. To many of us, the post-modern landscape seems unfamiliar, dangerous and forbidding, and modernity seems safe and secure (if confining) in comparison. Post-apocalyptic film appeals to us in part because it speaks to our nostalgia for modernity, in the face of a new, disconcerting world-tendency that we often

experience as senseless, chaotic, and groundless. Post-apocalyptic films are thus expressions of both our tendency to recoil before our world's evolution, as well as our collective desire for a mass world-regression (or at least stasis) (see footnote 5).

However, the most interesting and psychologically complex motif of post-apocalyptic film lies in the post-apocalyptic hero's ultimate preference for the hardship of the wasteland over the security of the newly re-established modern world. As we see the lone hero (like the Western hero before him) returning once again to the wasteland, and forsaking the comforts and charms of the reestablished modern world, most of us realize at some level that we would probably not do likewise. This moment thus typically marks a break in our identification with the post-apocalyptic hero.

At this point, post-apocalyptic films offers us not only an exhilarating identification with a heroic figure, but also a crucial and multifarious otherness that calls us beyond a simple identification. The hero's return to the wasteland possesses a number of concurrent significances that admit multiple interpretations. From a modern, existential perspective, the hero's return to the wasteland is an expression of his character's final crystallization. Here the hero realizes that his autochthony ultimately lies between worlds. He realizes that he is as much a child of the wasteland as of modernity, and his final act is to choose that way of being -- his most powerful destiny. In this moment, the post-apocalyptic hero's own existential choice transcends what modernity offers him, even as modernity remains an inextricable aspect of his person. For us, part of the significance of the hero's return to the wasteland is that it implicitly challenges us to find our ownmost potentialities-for-Being -- even in the midst of our nostalgia for the modern world, and our concomitant disquiet with post-modernity. In the apocalyptic hero's final existential turn we witness a powerfully authentic choice in life, and are thereby called toward a more thoroughgoing appropriation of our own existences. The critical issue at this point is not simply whether we agitate for the reestablishment of the modern world, or whether we join with our world's post-modern evolution, but whether we choose to respond to what calls to us powerfully in life -- be it modern or post-modern. Perhaps, not unlike the post-apocalyptic hero, we find ourselves suspended between worlds, but that state of affairs is precisely where our first and best potentiality-for-Being lies.

From a more post-modern perspective, however, the hero's return to the wasteland signifies both his final overcoming of his nostalgia for modernity, as well as his acceptance of the reality of the post-modern world. At this point, he moves from the position of existential hero to that of post-modern antihero. By the same token, we too are offered the position of antihero; we too are invited to abandon the oppressive and illusory project of trying to reestablish the modern world's hegemony. We too can accept that each one of us is but a small voice within post-modernity's great chorus, but now, like the post-apocalyptic antihero, a voice tolerant of other voices -- a voice no longer seeking to call the world's tune for the sake of existential values.

#### *V. The post-modern inversion*

Despite the fact that today's post-apocalyptic films admit post-modern interpretation, it is clear that for the most part they favor the modern, existential world over and against the post-modern world. The protagonist is the self-sufficient individual rather than the social, pluralistic horde. Throughout most of the film, the protagonist sides with the modern world, even if he ultimately returns to his own origin between worlds. As we have already seen, post-apocalyptic films speak both to our nostalgia for the modern world, as well as to our disquiet about a post-modernity that appears barbaric and foreboding. And so, the post-modern world comes to be represented in post-apocalyptic film by the antagonistic horde.

However, as our own world becomes more and more post-modern, perhaps our world-attitudes will shift far enough so that tomorrow's post-apocalyptic film will naturally favor the post-modern perspective, and the post-apocalyptic hero will assume the antagonist's role (precisely as a function of his heroism). For instance, instead of focusing on preserving and reestablishing modern existential values, tomorrow's post-apocalyptic film may focus more explicitly upon how the horde finally manages to deconstruct modernity's final remnants, despite the unenlightened efforts of the last few puppet-heroes of the dying power status quo. Instead of calling out the feeling of individual heroism in its viewers, tomorrow's post-apocalyptic films may call out the exhilaration of being a part of a plurality of equally valid social/linguistic/political discourses (of course, it may be argued, as above, that post-apocalyptic film already does this).

Of course, any genre of film is not only an expression of the age in which it is produced. Any genre, especially any popular genre, also contributes to the shape and evolution of its age. Seemingly, today's post-apocalyptic film aims toward modernity's preservation -- toward a retreat to modernity's particular comforts and constraints. Yet, the tide of times is a complex and powerful thing. And the complex, powerful currents that constitute it will no doubt pass far beyond modernity's province. Yet, in underscoring some of our world's social-psychological tensions, post-apocalyptic film implicitly poses for all of us a question of timing: is perhaps now the moment for us to enter forthrightly into both the dangers and the promises of a new age, or on other hand, is now the moment for us to seek shelter in a retreat to a more comfortable, more secure age? In the final analysis, this may be post-apocalyptic film's greatest message; perhaps post-apocalyptic film's ultimate significance is that it implicitly asks each of us how he or she is participating in the larger revelation, in the larger apocalypse.

### *Footnotes*

1. A more complete list would include "A Boy and his Dog," "Damnation Alley," and "Exterminators of the Year 3000," among numerous others.

2. We draw a distinction here between post-apocalyptic films and the apocalyptic films (such as "Fail-safe" and "Dr. Strangelove") of the late fifties and early sixties. Post-apocalyptic films present the apocalypse itself as a *fait accompli*, whereas apocalyptic films focus upon the events surrounding the unfolding of the apocalypse. Furthermore, post-apocalyptic films explicitly present the post-apocalyptic world as the primary milieu wherein the action takes place. This attribute further differentiates the true post-apocalyptic film from films which merely possess a post-apocalyptic element, such as "Planet of the Apes," or "The Terminator." Finally, it may be argued that myriad other futuristic films (such as "Logan's Run" or "Blade Runner") belong in the post-apocalyptic genre, since these films feature action in a anti-utopian world that has undergone a social or technological degeneration -- an apocalypse of sorts. For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall take the word "apocalypse" in its more literal sense: "great or total devastation; doom," as per the American Heritage Dictionary (1992).

3. For instance, that human beings can make incarnate a powerful interweaving of genuine individuality and community -- and that life's possibilities and actualities can thereby constellate an ever-deepening pattern of experience that adumbrates something of a grand human destiny.

4. It is probably no accident that the post-apocalyptic hero, like the Western hero that preceded him, is almost always male. Relatedly, post-apocalyptic film's audiences seem to be disproportionately male. It may well be that post-apocalyptic film speaks more to the modern male world-view than it does to its female counterpart.

**It may also be useful to note that modern existentialism has recently been attacked as an essentially phallogocentric philosophy organized around the logocentric standing out (εκ + στασις) of an individual subjectivity. In contrast, feminist writers seem much more aligned with post-modernism's emphasis on a de-centered, relational, pluralistic social/linguistic/political fluxion. Of course in Greek, η αποκαλυψις is grammatically feminine (although η στασις is also -- a minor marker of the importance of relation in existentialism, whose meaning and implications critics often neglect).**

**5. This growing sense of nostalgia, along with disquiet with the emerging world, is also evident in the political arena -- especially in its recent emphasis on traditional "family values," etc.**