"The Voice of the Bridegroom and the Bride Shall be Heard No More": Apocalypse, Critique, and Procreation

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The ending of Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) is one of the most gorgeous and (to me, at least) emotionally affecting apocalyptic depictions. In a magic shelter that can be no shelter, that can only be a shelter through magic, the boy, his mother, and his aunt sit holding hands. "Close your eyes," the aunt says, and he does. She is a young woman; her sister, the boy's mother, is slightly older. The mother clasps her son's hand tightly. She is crying, he is calm. He trusts the shelter's magic, for it is what his aunt promised him. The mother finally reaches to her sister. Their relationship has always been difficult, but now at the end, their hands join. The mother's eyes are shut now, but her mouth is open, she is swaying; the situation is beyond her, she is consumed with terror and despair. Her sister watches her. The "melancholia," or, to use the contemporary term, *depression*, of the film's title refers in part to her psychic condition. Terror and despair have been fixtures in her life. Her expression as she watches her sister is hard to read. It seems some mixture of sympathy and contempt. She was right and her sister was wrong. When the surface of life is torn open, it reveals only the terrible abysses of obliteration. She was right to run from her marriage, to reject procreation. Her heart was always correctly tuned to the universal frequency, which is extinction. And so she sympathizes with this good woman. She knows how hard it is to open yourself to the end of everything. But it must be done, sooner or later. And here it is. The boy's eyes are still shut. The magic will only work if his eyes are shut.

The planet fills the sky. It is gorgeous, a thing, without thought. It will end all thoughts. It has been approaching, growing in the sky throughout the movie. Its being is the being of a thing; a wanderer, in eccentric orbit,

without agency or intention. The earth is full of agents, of persons, of thoughts, intentions, attachments, resentments, protections, dependencies, unbreakable bonds, cruelties, misdirected needless suffering, the beautiful creations of minds and hands, the faith in sequence and transmission, the future, memory, the documents of our time here, our offspring. When the planet hits the earth, all life will end. The planet hits the earth.

This extraordinary sequence and conclusion fills me with dread, and I've been unable to watch the movie a second time. (I did watch the ending just now on YouTube to make sure I'd remembered it correctly). It captures so vividly the encounter of a living subjectivity with death as a material force. The mother knows she will die. How is this knowledge possible? How is it possible to be fully alive and then not to be? And she knows she cannot protect her child. Her love, her knowledge, her wealth cannot protect him. He is now alive. She feels his hand. And in moments he will be swept away into nothing. How can this be tolerated? The whole thing is entirely horrifying.[1]

Melancholia presents one direction of apocalyptic imagining. It shows us eschaton as allegory for individual extinction. The end of one's life is the end of one's world. For each of us, there will be, at last, an object the size of the sky that will put an end

1. In comic form, we see this incomprehension in the face of death in DeLillo's *White Noise*, in Jack's reaction to the death of Cotsakis. "Dead. A big man like that." "What can we say?" "I thought I was big." "He was on another level. You're big on your level."... "To be so enormous. Then to die..."' (169). Rilke intended something like this in the eighth Duino Elegy:

> Never, for a single moment, do *we* have
> before us that pure space into which flowers
> endlessly open. Always there is World
> and never Nowhere without the No: that pure
> unseparated element which one breathes
> without desire and endlessly *knows*. A child
> may wander there for hours, through the timeless
> stillness, may get lost in it and be
> shaken back. Or someone dies and *is* it.

And, in a very different way, the Terry Gilliam film *12 Monkeys* understands this as well. After and beneath all the fantasizing and projection around the purported "12 Monkeys" conspiracy, the end-of-the-world comes—but from another and completely anonymous source, unrecognizable as the world's 'limit,' seemingly just another part of its landscape.

2. See Ian Bogost's argument in *Alien Phenomenolgy* for the legitimacy of non-human, non-sentient, non-biological being. From this perspective, the transition from living-organic to nonliving-inorganic matter, and from sentient or conscious being to insentient being is a material drama like any other in the universe, with none of the infinite import we humans give it. The book is fascinating, a marvelous and instructive exercise. It goes far beyond Bentham's criteria for ethical treatment of animals—that the decisive factor is not whether a being can speak or think, but whether it can suffer. For things presumably cannot suffer. Nor is Bogost's argument exactly |ecological. One's treatment of things does not depend on maintaining environmental balance. Nor is it even quite Heideggerian—a matter of "letting Being be"—or Levinasian—the imperative to not thematize the other. The argument is simply that there is no difference between conscious and non-conscious, organic and inorganic being and that we must rethink our relation to the world in order to accommodate this new understanding. But I don't know how to do this without reverting to one of the more prescriptive versions of the argument.

3. See my *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* for an extended discussion of apocalyptic thinking as totalizing social critique and as response to historical trauma. In a sense, all apocalyptic narratives are already

to everything human about us, that will change our ontology, sever our synapses, and render us wholly and bluntly material; a thing.[2] For most of us, attached to our thoughts as we are, this is a terrible thought. But as amazing an aesthetic and eschatological object as *Melancholia* is, it is, in fact, not a typical apocalyptic narrative.[3]

First, since its biblical inception, apocalyptic representation has been concerned intensively with judgements about society. The social world is corrupt, sinful, fallen, unjust, oppressive, irremediable. The world, in its entirety, is Babylon, and it cannot be reformed, but must be destroyed completely. A new heaven and new earth must replace it, which will be inhabited only by the justly redeemed. People with this sensibility feel a deep satisfaction at the prospect of the world's ending. This is obvious in the case of Christian fundamentalist portrayals. Note, for instance, the typically ecstatic tone in which Hal Lindsey describes the conflicts of the endtimes in his bestselling 'prophecy,' *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1971): "Imagine cities like London, Paris, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago-obliterated!" (166). But this sense of glee is apparent also in secular apocalyptic visions. As the protagonist asks in Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* (1939), "were all prophets of doom such happy men?" (107). Or, as Henry Miller wrote in *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), "for a hundred years or more the world, our world, has been dying. And not one man, in these last hundred years or so, has been crazy enough to put a bomb up the asshole of creation and set it off. The world is rotting away, dying piecemeal. But it needs the coup de grace, it needs to be blown to smithereens" (26). We imagine the world destroyed because, at some level, we want to see the world destroyed. The astonishing spectacles of collapsing cities and landscapes in recent films such as *Independence Day, The Day After Tomorrow*, or *2012* seem to echo the delight of fundamentalists like Lindsey at the prospect of the Fall of the Antichrist's empire.[4]

Or consider the *Doomsday Preppers* on the National Geographic television series. Assembling years' supplies of food, water, guns, ammunition, antibiotics; investing thousands of dollars in impregnable bunkers; rehearsing escape plans, training their children... It would be awful, of course, if the anticipated disasters came to pass. But one gets the sense that it would be worse, and sadder, if, after all this preparation, the disaster did *not* take place. If no doomsday arrives, the Preppers are crazy; only a massive—apocalyptic—social breakdown will vindicate them. In fact, I encountered this psychology personally. Having published a short piece that touched on the Prepper mindset, I discovered that a survivalist

post-apocalyptic: first, because apocalypse as prophecy insists on its inevitability. Once the prophecy has been uttered, it is as good as accomplished. And second, because the apocalyptic narrative so often comes in the wake of some historical catastrophe or crisis understood in apocalyptic terms.

4. The poet C.K. Williams partly delineates apocalyptic desire in his poem "Risk":

> Difficult to know whether humans are inordinately anxious
> about crisis, calamity, disaster, or unknowingly crave them.
> These horrific conditionals, these expected unexpecteds,
> we dwell on them, flinch, feint, steel ourselves:
> but mightn't our forebodings actually precede anxiety?
> Isn't so much sheer heedfulness emblematic of desire? (29)

5. I prefer not to reveal where I found these comments. I believe this man would like to be left alone.

6. Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* occupies a similar position when, incarcerated in a mental hospital, she shouts at her psychiatrist/jailor, "you're dead, don't you understand, you're already dead!" This imprecation is partly warning and partly wish.

in Wyoming had responded to it! "When an actual disaster strikes," the gentleman wrote, "I have no doubt that Mr. Berger will come crying like a little girl to the doorstep of his prepper neighbors, seeking: A.) Sustenance (since he bought a BMW 7-Series F02 instead of storage food and a water filter) and B.) Protection from the predations of his neighbors (because he thought that guns were 'evil' and he fell for the lie that self defense is encapsulated in dialing 911.)"[5]

He's right, of course. In the event of Armageddon, I most certainly will beg anyone with guns and food for help protecting myself and my family. I'm taking, however, a moral and statistical gamble that it won't happen, and that my energies will be better spent working to make this world more just, sustainable, and non-apocalyptic. Also, I do not own a BMW of any model or series—or any car in that price range.

But—that aside—what might be the objects of apocalyptic desire, and what is such desire's relation to anxiety and the sense of crisis and calamity? The apocalyptic desire is that judgment be executed. Here lies a decisive difference between the temperaments of Old Testament prophecy and of the apocalyptic outlooks that followed. The prophecies of Isaiah or Jeremiah, or of their more recent counterparts, are warnings of a destruction

that can be averted by means of moral reform. Contemporary jeremiads regarding climate change and carbon emissions fall into this category. The prophet implores his society to change; he does not wish for its destruction. The apocalyptic envoy, on the other hand, announces an absolute ending that is immutable. Once the apocalypse has been proclaimed, it can no longer be averted. Thus, Christ in the Book of Revelation speaks with a tongue that is a sword; the apocalyptic word is a destructive force in itself. And Revelation, Daniel, and other, non-canonical, apocalyptic texts end with injunctions that no word of the text be changed. The Book of Jonah well illustrates the difference between the prophetic and the apocalyptic perspectives. Jonah is instructed by God to journey to Nineveh, warn them of their imminent destruction, and urge them to reform. He resists the command, is swallowed by the whale, and so on, but reaches Nineveh at last. There, he utters his prophecy and, to his surprise, the city heeds him and embarks on penance. At this point, Jonah becomes miserable and furious. He upbraids God for failing to fulfill his word. "This, O Lord, is what I feared [...] I knew that thou art a god gracious and compassionate" (4:1–2). What's the point, in other words, of uttering prophecies of doom when God refuses to deliver? Jonah's place in the canon is mislabeled. He is not a prophet, but an apocalypticist. The story ends with God trying to teach Jonah the value of care for those under one's protection, but it is unclear whether Jonah is able to grasp this lesson.[6]

The end of the world requires violence, and violence also is required in order to survive in the post-apocalypse, at least in its secular versions. In apocalyptic fantasies since the 1980s, in particular, the status of violence has been a central concern. In these scenarios, we see again and again decent, non-violent people who have no choice but to use violence against predatory, virtually (or actually) inhuman marauders. This is the premise of texts from *Road Warrior* to *Lucifer's Hammer to Independence Day* to the *Doomsday Preppers*. It is central, of course, to zombie apocalypses. To take a recent example, in the NBC television series *Revolution* (in which a mysterious, universal power failure ends civilization-as-we-know it), a mother, father, and small child wend their way through a ruined city with a shopping cart full of food and supplies. A man with a knife—not a bad man, perhaps, but hungry and desperate; and oddly combining haplessness and malevolence—suddenly appears, grabs the child, and demands the cart. The father and mother roll the cart toward him, and he releases the child. Then, as he walks away, we see the father raise a pistol and point it toward the thief. But his hand trembles and he cannot shoot. The camera

returns to the man leaving with the cart. Then there is a shot; the man falls. The camera moves back toward the family and we see the mother holding the gun. She has performed the act of necessary violence that her husband was unable to perform. In the post-apocalypse, this is how it has to be. It is what the fantasy requires.

State power has disappeared. Electronic technology is gone. Transportation and communication systems are down. Food is scarce, and water, and medicine. Money has no value. Only ingenuity and force have currency. And gradually, survivors begin to band together and recreate versions of social life. The post-apocalypse is something like a state of nature: most often, a hybrid of Hobbes and the persistent social Darwinist misreading of Darwin. Given this parallel between post-apocalyptic scenarios and ideas of 'nature' inherited from Enlightenment and social Darwinist thinkers, it is understandable that some political scientists have begun to study apocalyptic narratives. Claire Curtis sees in these scenarios attempts to rethink different versions of the social contract from post-apocalyptic new beginnings. In some, Curtis reads brutal Hobbesian struggles; in others, more measured Lockean social arrangements. Finally, in a brilliant turn, Curtis reads Octavia Butler's urban post-apocalypses (*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*) through John Rawls' twist on the social contract in which each participant must imagine the new society from the position of its least privileged inhabitant—the thought experiment of the 'original position.' Mary Manjikian interprets apocalyptic narratives in a more clearly utopian sense. The sweeping away of existing power relations makes possible imagining new ethical and political relations; as she writes, "a more level playing field" on which others can be encountered without inherited systems of domination (292).

Curtis and Manjikian are correct in seeing the apocalyptic cataclysm as prelude for the depiction of some kind of social reconstitution. These political science approaches, however, cannot account for the ideological, emotional, and libidinal significance of violence in representations of the aftermaths of civilization. The use of force permeates nearly all depictions of post-apocalyptic social arrangements. We often see in the post-apocalypse two rival groups. One is somewhere between barbaric and fascistic, centered around a charismatic leader, and employing violence not only for strategic, practical ends, but also in ritual and purely sadistic ways. The other group might be characterized as 'liberal.' It attempts to function through consensus, though often a strong leader emerges who helps them through their inevitable crises. For the liberal group also,

however, violence is essential to survival. The liberal group uses violence reluctantly and tends to regret its use of force. Nevertheless, however measured and agonized over—as in the example cited earlier of the family, the thief, and the shopping cart—violence must be used. This pivotal ideological feature of apocalyptic narrative is the idealization of justified violence. Yet justified violence always threatens to spill over into excess—into libidinal and sadistic violence—and this is why there must be two post-apocalyptic societies. Excessive violence must be quarantined from justified violence. In this way, the post-apocalyptic narrative allows the reader or viewer to participate imaginatively in both. One form of violence can be condemned, the other approved; but both enjoyed. Indeed, the strict, sober, self-defensive violence of the good survivors achieves its legitimacy precisely through its contrast with the exuberant, predatory, even cannibalistic violence of the bad survivors. We see this split between justified and sadistic or predatory violence in many of the most exemplary post-apocalyptic texts: in *Lucifer's Hammer, The Road Warrior, The Stand, The Road*, and most zombie movies. In the *Left Behind* series—and in its model, the Book of Revelation—the most sweeping and appalling acts of violence are those enacted by God.

The impulse toward critique, judgment, and condemnation presented in apocalyptic texts does not necessarily coincide with the impulses toward justice or utopia described by Curtis and Manjikian. These tendencies are derailed by the pleasures of imagining justified violence. The post-apocalyptic scene might better be described by reference to Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception," a political condition in which existing structures of law and constitutionality are suspended in the face of some overwhelming crisis—war, civil conflict, natural disaster, etcetera. Under such circumstances, the state is compelled to use extra-legal means so as to maintain order and preserve itself and the greater portion of its citizens. The state of exception (or state of emergency, state of war; these terms are broadly overlapping) is—depending on one's critical perspective—either a genuine or an artificially induced state of anarchy that then requires the remedy of force. The violence committed as part of the state of exception is a necessary and thus a justified violence. But, as Agamben points out, "necessity" is a highly contestable circumstance. In declaring a "state of emergency" in which legal and constitutional norms are suspended, the governing authority must invoke an unambiguous necessity, a condition that is seldom the case (29–30). The beauty and utility of our post-apocalyptic fantasies lies in their absolute

clarity, for the apocalyptic event delivers a crisis that is incontestable. It is appropriate that the nuclear war that ends civilization in Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is referred to, centuries later, as "the Simplification." (59) Apocalypse aspires to be the end of ambiguity.

But just as there is "nothing so funny as unhappiness," (26) as a character remarks in Beckett's *Endgame*, so there can be little that is simple in an environment so loaded with symbols and symptoms. One of the signal post-apocalyptic acts is the search by the man who may or may not be Peter Stillman (or is one of two, or is it three, Peter Stillmans) in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* for a language of perfect correspondence between word and thing in a world of ruins—which happens to be New York in the late 1970s. A broken thing, an umbrella, for example, is a different thing from its unbroken predecessor, and so must have a different name. And each object in a broken world is unique in ways that objects in the world intact need not be. The intact world can function in a language of general categories, for one can count on things to be persistent and predictable. But each broken thing now exists as if new, outside of type, and so outside of the generalizing, tropological character of language after Babel—that is, language as we know it. Stillman works to construct a language entirely of proper names, as if this return to a language of Adam, of absolute rectitude, might accomplish the *tikkun*, the Hebrew term for the healing of the world that would prepare the way for the messiah.

Stillman's last act before his incarceration as criminally insane was to lock his infant son in a dark room without contact with language in order to try to discover the original, divine language. Then, after a few years, having recognized his experiment's failure, he burned his apartment. The rescued son, damaged beyond hope of genuine repair, grows into a variant of—in metaphorical terms—wild child-sacred fool-idiot savant-and symbolist poet; and, in practical terms, a profoundly traumatized, possibly developmentally disabled young man. The extraordinary scenes in which the novel's protagonist encounters these characters have something of the quality of a game, a set of postmodern gambles, or gambols; and they also convey genuine emotions of loss, sorrow, and waste. But this father-son relationship, tied as it is to apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic longings for the healing both of the world and of language, indicates a further turn in the currents we have been discussing: the problematics of representation, social critique, social reorganization, and violence in the wake of an imagined end of the world.

The problem that the apocalyptic imagination attempts to solve—too

obvious, it might seem, to mention—is the problem of the future. What will it look like? Or, more fundamentally, can there be one at all? We look to the end in order to establish meaning—that final cadence that will give structure to the seeming chaos of living in a present that seems always in transition. This was Frank Kermode's still-compelling argument. And yet, as Wittgenstein labored to point out, "in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)" (27). Unless, we can conceive of something on the other side of our imagined 'ending,' the end will constantly recede; it will be merely a horizon—unless, or until, we encounter it unawares and find ourselves ended. This presents us with a representational conundrum: "What lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense," (27) as Wittgenstein continued. Or, as Melville wrote in that most cynical and profoundly heretical "Pamphlet" in the text of his novel *Pierre*, to try to transport or translate some fragment of divine truth—as it were, from a time zone of absolute alterity—into ordinary, worldly language and social practice would involve the subject "eventually in strange *unique* follies and sins, unimagined before" (213).

The apocalyptic imagination—as transport, translation, transgression (all forms of crossing over)—throws away Wittgenstein's ladder and brings into convergence the varied discourses of ineffability: the sublime, the sacred, the ecstatic, the abject, the material, the unconscious, the obscene, the traumatic. The present is impossible, but what can be the alternative? We encounter everywhere the phrase, attributed either to Zizek or Fredric Jameson, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[7] Thus the fantasies, as we noted, of new societies are legitimized only through violence. But who will enter these noxious worlds? Surely, we, in the present, bound in our current impasses, are in the position of some impaired Moses, looking out onto the abyss but unable or forbidden to enter. That task will fall on our children.

In human, biological terms, the question of the future is the question of procreation, and this has always been a central problem in apocalyptic texts. In the Book of Revelation's so-called "Lament" for Babylon, the narrator-prophet lists all the objects and activities that will be no more in "that great city." There will be no more trade in precious fabrics and jewels; no more merchants; no more sea captains and sailors. The whole system of economic exchange will be gone, as will all established political power—the kings of the earth who fornicated with the great whore. But more than this, all arts and all craft work will be no more: "No more shall

the sound of harpers and minstrels, of flute-players and trumpeters, be heard in you; no more shall craftsmen of any trade be found in you; no more shall the sound of the mill be heard in you" (18:22–23). There will be, in effect, no *symbolic* exchange, and not only will large scale, global economic activity cease, but even local, subsistence work will vanish. And finally, most alarmingly, "no more shall the voice of the bride and the bridegroom be heard" (18:23). We might understand that the fornication of rulers with the Whore of Babylon would be condemned, and that political and economic exchange would be equated with prostitution. But in eliminating the voices of bride and bridegroom, the text eliminates the biological and cultural possibility of any human future. And as the culmination of this most poetic passage of Revelation, the text indicates powerfully that the end of procreation (and of the cultural rites that legitimate it)—as much as or more than the locusts, seals, falling heavens, battles of celestial hosts, and so on—is what brings the world to its ending.

This, of course, is the premise of the 2006 film and 1992 novel *Children of Men*, as well as the central problem of Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1922). Social critique, response to historical trauma, anxieties about all possible futures, and eschatological desires all find their unifying emblem in visions of universal sterility. The impossibility of the present moment is expressed through scenarios of the impossibility of procreation, and social-political aporia takes on biological form.

For Emmanuel Levinas, the *infinity* whose possibility would negate the ethically and politically stifling *totalities* that characterize modernity is finally characterized through tropes of procreation, or, as he calls it, "fecundity"

7. The origins of this quote have not definitively been identified. Zizek attributes it to Jameson. Cf. Zizek, "Spectre of Ideology." *Mapping Ideology*, Ed. Zizek, Ed Nicholas Abercrombie. London: Verso, 1994. 1–32. (p.1), but does not cite a Jameson text. One might refer, for example to *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London and New York: Verso, 2005. P. 199. But here, Jameson begins his comment with, "As someone has observed...", with the implication that it wasn't him. An anonymous blogger named "Qlipoth" makes a strong case that H. Bruce Franklin was first to utter something like that phrase. http://qlipoth.blogspot.com/2009/11/easier-to-imagine-end-of-world.html

(267ff). The child, and desire for the child, are the ways out toward a future which escapes endlessly iterative exchanges of the same for the same. But can this happen? Levinas's imagination falls short here as his vision of futurity is a strange, limited projection only of male desire. Woman is merely a vessel desired in order to conceive a liberated futurity—and desire, thus, is a shackle of a femininity that possesses power but lacks subjectivity. In effect, the Levinasian vision is parodically—horrifically—repeated in Zach Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* when a man keeps his pregnant girlfriend, who is in the process of dying and changing into a zombie, chained to a bed so that she can give birth to their child. This stubborn optimism that his fatherhood might redeem the mostly devoured world is, of course, thwarted. The stillborn infant emerges from the mother's body already a zombie. Escape through procreation is as impossible as every other effort in that film.

Problematics of procreation appear across nearly the full range of apocalyptic narratives. James Cameron's *Terminator* series is based on the survival of the child engendered by a time traveler from a future that cannot exist without him. George Miller's *The Road Warrior* divides its post-apocalyptic survivors (as is so often the case) into two groups. The 'bad' group engage in highly sexualized, but mainly homoerotic displays. Their principle heterosexual acts are rape and murder. The 'good' group is compassionate and cohesive, but appears to be entirely without sexuality. There is, moreover, only one child in the group (none, of course, among the punked-out bikers), and he seems a kind of feral child—adept with a boomerang, but seemingly without speech or parents. By the end of the film, however, there is a voice-over narrator who tells us that the good protagonists did succeed in escaping the wasteland and starting a new life… and we have a strong sense that this narrator is the feral child grown to adulthood—who else could it be? The Mel Gibson road warrior character makes this future possible through his physical action, but it is the child, not he, who inhabits it and is both its narrative and biological substantiation. The film has it both ways, of course. Yes, there's a child, and through him a future is possible. But he seems not to have emerged from any sexual, procreative act or desire. He is just there, like Peter Pan perhaps. His future is a hypothesis, a Neverland.

Thus, finally, von Trier's *Melancholia*, which I described at the start of this essay as atypical in its apparent disregard for social critique and its exclusive focus on the individual's relation to death, turns out, with regard to procreation, to adhere unmistakably to the apocalyptic standard. The

entire first half of the film is an excruciating depiction of a spectacularly failed wedding. (One might regard it as a demonstration of a remark in Chopin's *The Awakening*—very much a crypto-apocalyptic work in many ways—that "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (110). The bride and groom's car drives into a ditch on the way to the ceremony. The toasts by family and friends are exemplary in their exhibitionist, narcissistic, and sadistic ingenuity. And, needless to say, the marriage is not consummated sexually. In fact, the couple separates on their wedding night. For all its extravagant emotional displays, *Melancholia* seems in retrospect an exercise in cosmic physics as, throughout the film, masses—composed either of neurons or of rock—whose paths are set and unchangeable, collide and damage each other until at last a greater mass extinguishes them all.

"The voice of the bridegroom and the bride shall be heard no more," and that is the end of the world. In *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, I argued that apocalyptic narratives typically responded in partly symptomatic, partly therapeutic ways to historical traumas. I still consider this argument valid. But I would now add to it the thesis that these anxieties arising from historical-social traumas work together with, and often take the biological-cultural forms of, anxieties regarding procreation. More research and analysis will be needed to figure out exactly how.[8]

8. As a labyrinth of myth, ideology, and fantastical (but perhaps not so impossible) science, Angela Carter's *Passion of the New Eve* provides a template for the apocalypse of gender, sexuality, and procreation. A self-created goddess (formerly a biologist and surgeon) who names herself Mother changes a man into a woman and attempts to impregnate her with her/his own sperm in order to begin the creation of a new earth. The world devolves into chaos, Mother's plan aborts (figuratively speaking), and human agents of varied beliefs, genders, and origins, are left to try to remake things through the usual means of force and guile—without the aid either of Mother or her New Eve.

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ABSTRACT

Representations of the end of the world generally involve a totalizing critique of a social-symbolic order seen as corrupt beyond the possibility of reform. But in imagining the end of the world, we imagine also the end of the means of representing it, the end of language—and so, representations of apocalypse bring together numerous discourses of the incommensurable and unrepresentable: the sublime, the sacred, the abject and obscene, the traumatic, and "others" in all their variants. Finally, apocalyptic portrayals often engage in complex depictions of sexuality, especially in relation to procreation. If we, in imagination, eliminate the future, then what becomes of the child and of the biological processes that produce him or her? From the Whore of Revelation to Eliot's "Wasteland" to the pregnant immigrant of *Children of Men*, problematics of social critique and language find expression in dramas of sexuality and procreation.

BIOGRAPHY

James Berger is Senior Lecturer of American Studies and English at Yale University. He is author of *After the End* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and of a book of poems, *Prior* (BlazeVox, 2013); and he is editor of Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life: the Restored Edition* (Random House, 2003). His next book, *The Disarticulate: Language, Impairment, and the Narratives of Modernity* is forthcoming from New York University Press.