DAWN OF A NEW APOCALYPSE: ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION IN 2012 AND PRIMITVIST DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

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Apocalypse is often viewed entirely as a politically conservative phenomenon, conjuring images of evangelical Christians anxiously awaiting the return of Christ. However, such a reading oversimplifies competing tensions within apocalyptic discourse. This study examines interpretations of ancient apocalypses, both Jewish and Christian, paying particular attention to the workings of what has been termed the apocalyptic imagination in order to establish a basic framework to consider contemporary instances. The apocalyptic imagination may be characterized as a “revolution of the imagination” and is largely concerned with the status of truth, and what ways of knowing may constitute truth. Additionally, apocalypse may be calibrated either towards a focus on destruction and purification or creation and redemption.

The condition of postmodernity and “postmodernists” have been characterized as apocalyptic in and of themselves. This study argues that contemporary engagements with the apocalyptic imagination are largely informed by a perceived failure of the Enlightenment project, both in terms of politics and ways of knowing.

Speculations about a nearing “end” of the Mayan calendar identify a coming apocalypse in the year 2012. Debates within this discourse, specifically between Daniel Pinchbeck and Whitley Strieber, illustrate the tension between purification and redemption. Furthermore, there is a concern with reexamining what constitutes knowledge, particularly that feelings about the world are worth knowing.
Primitivist discourse cites civilization itself as the source and agent of domination and exploitation. The apocalyptic implications of overthrowing civilization are examined paying particular attention to the epistemological claims made within primitivist discourse.

Apocalypse exhibits many conflicting tendencies within its discourse and cannot be characterized monolithically. Just as it is an oversimplification to view it in conservative or reactionary terms, casting it as necessarily concerned with liberation likewise misses important nuances. However a particular apocalypse is calibrated, it does challenge accepted conceptions of truth that may be arrived at through non-rational thought including emotion.
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INTRODUCTION

But you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don’t believe
We’re on the eve of destruction.
-Barry McGuire
Los Angeles
1965

The end of the world is nothing new. The Christian Book of Revelation has predicted a coming end for nearly 2000 years, and Jewish apocalyptic texts have done so for even longer. Contemporary society has created its own apocalyptic narratives, drawing on these religious traditions while being informed by concerns particular to this age. While apocalypticism is often characterized as a politically conservative worldview, doing so overly simplifies a complex field of conflicting impulses. Radical critiques of civilization (and calls for its end) and discourse about the end of the Mayan long count calendar occurring in 2012 are both illustrative of these complexities. In different ways these two cultural phenomena draw on both long standing traditions yet also predicts or calls for a radical rupture. What is new about these apocalypses is there specific content; their form primarily follows that of apocalyptic narratives that have developed in European or Western civilization. Apocalypse generally make claims that contest generally accepted metaphysics, ethics and politics, and epistemologies; what is new are the specific claims, not that these claims are being made. Examining the operation of contemporary apocalyptic worldviews provides insight into the condition of postmodernity, which itself has sometimes been characterized as apocalyptic. What often is overlooked when thinking about apocalypse is that it encourages thinking in ways entirely different from commonly accepted truths.

Ever since the Soviets acquired the atomic bomb in 1949, threat of nuclear apocalypse
has waxed, waned and rippled within America’s collective imagination. More recently, President George W. Bush warns of the possibility of World War Three unless Iran is prevented from pursuing nuclear weapons while John McCain reinterprets Beach Boys songs to call for war. The supposedly anti-war Democratic party’s presidential nominee, Barack Obama insists that all options of military force should be “on the table,” the implication being nuclear strikes, to deal with Iran’s nuclear ambitions. The release of a National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which indicated its nuclear weapon ambitions had been abandoned, seems to have temporarily silenced the atomic saber rattling, though conventional war still seems as likely as not. The nuclear threat is maintained in justifications for waterboarding and torture in general; the country must stay vigilant in a ticking time bomb scenario. But the apocalypse rides others horses of planetary doom, too.

Former Vice President Al Gore shares the Nobel Peace Prize for 2007 due to his work informing the public of impending environmental crisis. Armed only with a Power Point presentation, Gore travels the world, theater screens and television sets to warn of a looming disaster that awaits if people do not change the products that they consume. This apocalypse may be prevented not through prayer or preemptive strikes, but through corporate “green” campaigns and fully inflated tires.\(^1\) We may rest assured knowing that there is no need for structural change or a critique of capitalism.

While nuclear fueled Armageddon and global melt down seem to me to be the most widely circulating apocalyptic memes\(^2\), American culture is pregnant with more. Not only do these cultural forms exist just below the surface, they also exhibit a certain fecundity. Thousands

\(^1\) See An Inconvenient Truth’s website http://www.climatecrisis.net/takeaction/whatyoucando/index5.html for this and many other ways one may “take action” without significantly impacting a consumption based lifestyle.

\(^2\) A meme is defined by Richard Dawkins as “a unit of cultural inheritance… naturally selected by virtue of its ‘phenotypic’ consequences on its own survival and replication” (Cited in Auinger, 2001: 5).
(millions?) anxiously await the Rapture as some Christians have since John of Patmos first put pen to paper. Today the Elect need not rely on missives from those in exile; instead they may track the approach of End Times on the Rapture Index, a website that helps the devout prepare for the coming of the anti-Christ (raptureready.com).

The secularly minded too have options beyond nuclear destruction, which after causing sleepless nights for over half a century is becoming somewhat tired, or catastrophic climate change which may be too far in the future. For these people “peak oil,” the high point of oil production followed by a decline that spells bad news for industrial economies, looms in the near future, or may have already in fact occurred. Water shortages spell another potential disaster, one immediate enough that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has raised the importance of the issue to the World Economic Forum. Whether the Davos contingent is concerned with the suffering of human beings or bottom lines is a matter of contention. However, oil and water do in fact mix in looming catastrophic disasters.

Those of an optimistic disposition may turn to futurists with predictions beyond those of Donna Harraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto.” Within this worldview, a “singularity” is approaching in which computational power and human integration with computers will increase to such an extent that humanity as we now know it will cease to be, and in its place will walk godlike beings. Whether these gods will rule over mortals without the economic means to buy into divinity remains to be hashed out.

Journalists are seeing Hollywood and mass media as attempting to make sense of this resurgence of apocalyptic thinking. An article by Lev Grossman on Time Magazine’s website According to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll from October, 2006, 63% of 594 Christians believed “that before the world comes to an end, the religiously faithful will be saved and taken up to heaven.” A Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll conducted January 2006 found that 11% of Americans believed the world would end in their lifetime, while 43% did not know.
dated January 17th, 2008 examines the appeal of Cloverfield and I Am Legend, recent box office successes. Cloverfield documents the destruction of New York City by a Godzilla-like monster, while I Am Legend follows the last man in New York City after it has been devastated by a viral cure for cancer run amok. Grossman sees these films as working out people’s fears of exiting in “a Post-9-11 world.” Though conventional wisdom maintains that “9-11 changed everything,” contemporary apocalyptic thinking seems to predate 2001 in many appreciable ways.

The condition of postmodernity (with all potential caveats and equivocations of using the term acknowledged) has been identified as being somewhat apocalyptic itself. In Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Frederic Jameson finds that “the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative” (1991: xvii), in that only particulars are over or finished and all morphs into part of a general flux. Additionally for Jameson, the supremacy of the image, what Baudrillard terms the hyperreal, “abolishes any practical sense of the future... thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm” (46). Considering the apocalyptic within this cultural-political framework reveals a function that is more fundamental than lingering anxiety stemming from 9-11 and fears of future attack. Some other fundamental systemic problems with American society encourage imagining the destruction of the world and its subsequent rebirth; the apocalyptic impulse is not merely a reliving of a singular traumatic event.

Anthony Giddens’s conception of “radicalized modernity” that is fundamentally concerned with the management of risk is similarly useful to compliment Jameson. For example, Giddens explains that the threat of global catastrophe by nuclear annihilation might ostensibly be managed by “experts” but is in fact beyond any individual’s control, and that it is not just experts who recognize the lack of agency to mitigate such risk in any meaningful way. It may be
productive to consider how people’s “sense of foreboding” (Giddens, 1990: 131) leads them to adopt a range of apocalyptic worldviews.

Giddens identifies four strategies for attempting to come to terms with uncontrollable risk. Using “pragmatic acceptance” individuals focus on problems they can themselves address in their daily lives. The strategy of “sustained optimism” rests on the belief that reason will ensure the containment of risk, that “experts” having not yet destroyed everything will not do so anytime soon. These ways of adapting to looming doom primarily operate outside of the apocalyptic. The two others help to explain contemporary American apocalypticism. “Cynical pessimism” acknowledges the futility of risk aversion in a humorous or jaded manner, and the embrace of apocalypse, particularly with a dose of irony fits well with this reaction. “Radical engagement” acknowledges the existence of problematic or unjust conditions, not just in immediate, personal life but in global and social realities, does not accept that they should remain, and puts forth a concerted effort to change that condition. At first blush this may seem incompatible with apocalypse; that is unless one considers any revolutionary program as apocalyptic, meaning that the overthrow of existing order and establishing of a new is precisely what John of Patmos envisioned. Instead of Christ the King, it may be a proletarian vanguard; the characters are different but the narrative structure is similar. The apocalyptic contains elements of cynical pessimism and radical engagement, and may be best considered to exist as a hybrid strategy.

Conceptualizing the apocalypse as potentially revolutionary runs counter to how it is generally conceived in the popular imagination and much scholarly interpretation. For example, Jacques M. Chevalier in *A Postmodern Revelation: Signs of Astrology and the Apocalypse* contends “apocalyptic language now appeals primarily to conservative segments of the
population concerned about crises of the West” (1997: 4). Some might imagine that only biblical literalists devouring Scripture and the Left Behind series of novels and films seriously considers the apocalypse. Or do others as well? Chevalier’s examination of the apocalypse is confined to the Book of Revelation as a discursive strategy to unseat astrology as divine, and the process by which it has now become mere divination. Yet the apocalyptic exists as a powerful discursive strategy in the contest of ideas more generally. Chevalier draws on Jacques Derrida, who “considers the apocalypse to be at the heart of all literary experience” (28), and further employing Derrida to examine other literary experiences that deal specifically with the apocalypse may reveal aspects of a way of thinking about our present condition.

Derrida’s essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” “isolate(s) prediction and eschatological preaching” (1984: 20) as characteristic traits of apocalyptic writing; this form tells of ends and beginnings. He characterizes contemporary philosophy as being written in this tone, and argues that examples of “the end of history, the end of class struggle, ... the end of Oedipus,” (20-21) are all definitive of what has been termed postmodernity. This characterization of postmodern philosophy as apocalyptic seems to have most interested scholars such as Martin Jay. However its wider implications, beyond a specific philosophical moment are quite useful. Apocalyptic narratives are concerned with revealing truth and in enacting change, so much so that “Nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre” (29). One must be sure to not cast such wide a net that it at once catches everything and nothing. Characterizing the apocalypse too broadly as simply revelation may include too much; there must be another factor at work. For this factor we turn to a fuller examination of the apocalyptic imagination.

John J. Collins explores the generic form of apocalypse in The Apocalyptic Imagination:
An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity. Collins finds “The genre… does not entail a consistent doctrine. Rather it provides an imaginative view of the world, usually expressed in traditional symbols, within which there is room for a variety of theological doctrines, even in apocalypses which address a common problem” (1984: 180). Contemporary apocalyptic imaginations contain such variations, and it is useful to also examine political and epistemological claims that are beyond what can be termed theological.

Some contemporary manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination can be explained by, and as a part of critical social theory of the latter half of the 20th Century. Herbert Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man, Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, Jean Baudrillard’s Symbolic Exchange and Death, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus describe a totalitarian society that exerts its dominance through the deployment of symbols to control an individual’s “inner life.” Its totalizing aspect makes the powerful rhetoric of apocalypse an avenue of escape. At the same time these theorists participate in the apocalyptic imagination themselves. Martin Jay in “The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn” argues that the postmodernists, specifically Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, join the religious and scientific apocalyptics as a third form of contemporary apocalypticism (1994). Jay is somewhat suspect of this strategy, preferring a political program in line with what Jurgen Habermas calls for. However the “naturalness” of capitalism seems to call for a super-natural to overcome it. In some respects talk of “when the revolution comes” has been replaced with “When the apocalypse is here.”

For Jay, what those engaged with the apocalyptic imagination are unable to mourn is Kristevan mother figure. He contends “It is thus tempting to interpret the apocalyptic moment in the critique of technological and scientific hubris as a convoluted expression of distress at the matricidal underpinnings of the modernist project, indeed of the entire human attempt to uproot
itself from its origins in something we might call mother nature” (1994: 42). The inability to mourn is not just that of the mother or a matricidal impulse of modernity; instead it is the inability to mourn the failure of the promises of the Enlightenment. We cannot mourn the passing of Enlightenment ideals because its institutions, having largely failed to deliver its promises, continue to move around like an animated corpse. To parallel Jay’s mourning of the loss of the mother, the Enlightenment on its legs of liberal democracy and scientific knowing, prattles forth like a parent suffering from severe dementia, offering abuse and little else. While some of the family knows that it is now in fact its “time,” most are unwilling to let go of pleasant memories from the past.

The following examples of this apocalyptic way of looking at the world warrant consideration but have gone unexamined. The first may be broadly termed anti-civilizational, specifically anarcho-primitivism. The essentially apocalyptic core of this worldview is that civilization itself is intrinsically destructive, and that substantial reductions of human population levels are necessary for liberation and the survival of life on the planet. The theoretical basis rests primarily with John Zerzan expanding upon the work of Fredy Perlman, though the broader movement has incorporated many elements of deep ecology. Deep ecology, first articulated by Arne Naess, is a way in thinking of humanity as a component of the natural world, rather than its master or its adversary. Further elaboration and discussion of anarcho-primitivism is a key component of such radical anti-authoritarian journals such as Anarchy: A Journal for Desire Armed (AJDA) and The Fifth Estate. The pseudonymous writer Wolfi Landstreicher has also greatly contributed to this discourse, in AJDA and elsewhere. Additionally, the journal Green Anarchy is specifically dedicated to anarcho-primitivism and its practice.

This theory has been implemented by multiple radical social movements that have
mobilized around this doctrine. Earth First! is perhaps the most well known example, with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) taking significant action. These and other like minded groups have not escaped government scrutiny. “Eco-terrorism” has been identified as the greatest domestic terrorist threat to the United States by the federal government. Some scholarship has been conducted on these movements, with the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* devoting Volume 2 Issue 1 (2008) to the examination of radical ecological movements.

While anarcho-primitivists see civilization collapsing under its own crushing weight, others have found more cosmic explanations for the End. The end of the Mayan long count calendar has also taken hold of a segment of the people whose vision of the world is colored by apocalyptic imagination. Though exact dates vary among its proponents, December 21, 2012 has been identified as marking a global shift or transformation of consciousness. The date provides the unifying element to a variety of approaches to this particular view of the apocalypse. The late night talk radio show *Coast to Coast*, hosted currently by George Noory, formerly hosted by Art Bell, is the widest expression of this phenomenon within the mass media. The show, also concerned with paranormal investigations, alien abductions, angels, ghosts and conspiracy, exists as a forum for multiple articulations of 2012 prophecy. 2012 as apocalypse has been fictionalized by Whitley Strieber as *2012: The War for Souls* (2007), though the majority of books written on the subject are non-fiction. Daniel Pinchbeck’s *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (2006) holds 2012 as marking a shift in global consciousness, and approaches his analysis of contemporary culture through a lens of Mayan cosmology and psychedelic drugs.

The 2012 apocalypse has received some attention beyond its adherents. *What is  

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4 This is according to testimony by John Lewis, the FBI’s deputy assistant director for counterterrorism to the US Congress in May, 2005 (Maag, 2006).
Enlightenment? a “a spiritual, cultural, philosophical, and otherwise category-busting magazine committed to bringing a new perspective to politics, business, science, the arts, and the environment” (www.wie.org) has given page space to explorations of 2012. The radical implications of an approaching apocalypse have been explored in Fifth Estate (Halloween 2007), with Pinchbeck receiving explicit treatment. Scholarly treatment of the 2012 phenomenon has been relatively sparse. Robert K. Sitler examines the appropriation of Mayan culture by New Age adherents, focusing primarily upon how it has been misinterpreted, misappropriated, and misconstrued, essentially being inauthentic. Questions about the reasons why an abandoned Mesoamerican calendar has cultural resonance are entirely absent from scholarly consideration.

The anti-civilizational theory of the anarcho-primitivists, and varied apocalyptic tropes of adherents to 2012 contain considerable overlaps. In addition to their apocalyptic worldviews and cross pollination (let us not forget that bees are disappearing) in the pages of Fifth Estate, each is grounded upon an identical foundation. This groundwork from which each is built is a rejection of dominant modes of knowing, specifically the Baconian scientific worldview. While most systems of knowledge have to a large extent been qualified as language games, the hard sciences have come to occupy a position as the only valid path to Truth. Scientists and philosophers of science may themselves acknowledge the fallibility of their knowledge; the public at large does not. These apocalypses are not located in the battlefields of Megiddo, but within the field of epistemology.

This project’s method is one of intellectual history informed by cultural studies, similar to which Jay outlines in Force Fields (1993). Jay acknowledges that this discipline containing elements of philosophy and histories of intellectuals and culture is open to critique for not doing any of these well. However Jay’s point that “it may be a hidden strength of intellectual history
that it functions at the shifting intersection of different, often conflicting discourses” (2) is particularly relevant to the examinations of apocalyptic imaginations, especially so in the cases of anti-civilizational discourse, and the unusual hybrid of science and mysticism at play in 2012. It will attempt to examine and interpret the overlap, exchange and interplay of contending ideas within contemporary apocalyptic thinking through an approach of disintegral contextualism. Jay finds that such a method does not “isolate the text from the world or explain the text by the world, it has dissolved the boundary between the two and redescribed what was previously construed as extratextual as itself somehow textual” (160). Also drawing from Jay is that this work will not engage in “name-dropping;” meaning that the identity of an author and his or her similar ideas will not be employed to legitimate ideas set forth, but instead to help “unveil” my own position within these discourses.

The sources to be drawn upon are those that exist in conversation with one another. Some explicitly reference these texts, while others address similar questions. In determining what are the important questions to those engaged with the apocalyptic imagination, one can become aware of what exactly are the stakes involved within the discourse. The interplay of these questions, counter-questions and answers may be somewhat explained by the condition of postmodernity, while also explaining aspects of postmodernity itself.

This project consists of a total of six sections, including this introduction. Chapter 1, “The Ends of the World: Engagements with the Apocalyptic Imagination” examines the generic conventions of apocalypse and the operations of the apocalyptic imagination. Particularly of interest is the way in which the apocalyptic imagination questions established philosophical discourse, particularly those so accepted they have attained a status of near a priori truth. Having created a framework of the apocalyptic imagination, Chapter 2, “The World Ended and Nobody
Cares: Apocalypse in the Postmodern and as the Postmodern” examines the condition of postmodernity (which has been characterized as apocalyptic in and of itself) in terms of the apocalypse and the disillusionment with the Enlightenment project. Chapter 3, “Sucking on Toads or Battling Reptilians: Redemption and Purification in 2012 Discourse” examines the writings of Daniel Pinchbeck and Whitley Strieber in terms of an argument the two engaged in about the nature of a “global shift” occurring in 2012. The confluence of science and mysticism, and appropriation of indigenous ways of knowing backgrounds interesting epistemological claims within discourse about 2012. Chapter 4, “Civilization’s Dying: The Apocalyptic Imagination in the Primitivist Critique of Civilization” examines radical critiques of civilization by anarcho-primitivists. Primitivist challenges to basic assumptions about how human society does and should operate expresses the revolution of the imagination that is central to the apocalyptic imagination. Additionally the discourse specifically addresses how it uses apocalypse. The project as a whole is an attempt to make sense of why the apocalypse is an enduring component of western thought and is particularly present in contemporary society. The specific contemporary apocalypses examined herein will be given a charitable reading and are examined primarily in terms of how the apocalyptic imagination works within these discourses, paying particular attention to pulls from conflicting tendencies within the apocalyptic imagination.
CHAPTER I:

THE ENDS OF THE WORLD:

ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION

Dawn of a new apocalypse
This is the end.
-Integrity
Cleveland
1991

“The end is nigh,” “Hell in a hand basket,” “everything is fucked.” These sentiments are fairly often taken to be definitive of the “apocalyptic.” The apocalypse is not simply a cataclysm or universal destruction; there are also redemptive elements, either through some divine force intervening on behalf of its followers in good standing, or the revelation of “knowledge” that is radically different from accepted truths of its day. The redemption is often conflated solely with the Second Coming of Christ or some other messiah. This conception, overly influenced by Christianity’s historical dominance in “The West” ignores the revelatory aspect, of which promises of salvation are a particular component. Stepping back from theological concerns, either the protection of divine truth by theists, or its discreditation by atheists, allows the examination of how the apocalyptic imagination functions and has influenced American society.

The influence of the apocalyptic imagination has been significant historically, and continues to be in (still/perhaps) secularizing American society. While fundamentalist Christianity receives the most media attention as a group engaged with apocalypticism, apocalyptic currents run through much of contemporary discourse across the political spectrum. The Reaganite rhetoric of nuclear deterrence has been replaced by a Clash of Civilizations, drawing on the Christian Book of Revelation’s battle between the forces of good (global empire) against evil (everyone else) to rally reactionary militarism, but the apocalyptic imagination is not
merely the purview of the right. Marxism and feminism have also been critiqued as apocalyptic, and much of environmentalist discourse at least engages in “end-of-the-world-ism.” The condition of post-modernity itself has been examined as inherently apocalyptic. These interrogations sometimes overlook the positive aspects of the apocalyptic imagination, often due to the conflation of Christian Apocalypse with apocalypse more broadly. This is not to say that engagements with the apocalyptic imagination are entirely free of pitfalls, but does require a careful examination of how this mode of thinking and communicating operates.

The first task must be a clarification of terms. The broad umbrella of “an apocalyptic” to envelop these intersecting and competing uses is somewhat seductive for its simplicity. However, the use of “apocalyptic” as a noun has fallen into disuse within scholarly examination; instead three distinct concepts are identified within this broader tradition: the literary genre of apocalypse, the social ideology of apocalypticism, and apocalyptic eschatology, characteristics of apocalypse that can be found in either literary works or social movements (Collins, 1984). These distinctions are useful, particularly in studying the historical development of either literature or societies. However, when attention is turned to contemporary uses of apocalypse, apocalypticism and apocalyptic eschatology, the significant overlaps complicate neatly carved divisions. John J. Collins’s examination of Jewish apocalypses in *The Apocalyptic Imagination* provides a useful term that can be used to examine these intersections without retreating to the overly vague umbrella of simply “the apocalyptic” (1984). Catherine Keller uses a similar term, the “apocalyptic imaginary”, in *Apocalypse Now and Then*, a feminist examination of Christian apocalypse and its impact (Keller, 1996). This term is perhaps more accurate in that it describes particular contents within imagination that draw upon the structure of apocalypse, rather than totalizing the entirety of imagination. However, apocalyptic imagination rather than the more
precise apocalyptic imaginary will be used to avoid potential confusion because it has found wider adoption within scholarly work.

A recurring staring point to defining what apocalypse, and the concepts so derived, is to look at its etymology. Jacques Derrida’s essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” (which serves as a starting point for much of the discussions of the apocalyptic character of post-modernity), begins with the assertion by André Chouraqui that the Greek apokalupsis is a translation of the Hebrew gala. He expands upon the similarities thusly:

Apokaluptō no doubt was a good word [bon mot] for gala. Apokaluptō, I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing that can be a part of the body, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the sex or whatever might be hidden, a secret thing, the thing to be dissembled, a thing that is neither shown nor said, signified perhaps but that cannot be or must not first be delivered up to self-evidence (1984: 4).

Keller finds the origins of the word apocalypse as gendered in that the unveiling of Apo-Kalypso “connotes the marital stripping of the veiled virgin… The moment of truth blinks with cosmic excitement” (1996: 1). Taken together, these two explanations of the origin of apocalypse reveal important aspects that are frequently overlooked in favor of spectacular destruction: the revelatory aspect, that apocalypse is concerned with epistemological concerns to as great an extent as metaphysical or ethical claims; and that construction, maintenance or subversion of gender roles are often, if not always at stake within the apocalyptic imagination.

Before turning to a fuller examination of the sexual politics of apocalypse, an examination of what is purportedly revealed is necessary. D.H. Lawrence in his final work, *Apocalypse* asserts “Apocalypse means simply Revelation though there is nothing simple about this one, since men have puzzled their brains for nearly two thousand years to find out what,
exactly, is revealed in all its orgy of mystification” (1982: 1). Perhaps Lawrence is correct; the veiled virgin is stripped in preparation for this orgy of mystification that results in only greater obfuscation and politics of ressentiment. If this is in fact the case, exploration of the apocalyptic imagination would rightly cease here. It is more likely that Lawrence’s characterization is incomplete or part of modernity’s attempt to solidify its own epistemological certainties. *Semeia*, a journal of biblical criticism, defines apocalypse as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (*Semeia* 14, 1979, cited in Collins, 1984: 4). Collins expands this definition to include two strands within Jewish apocalypses, visions which are concerned with a development of history, and otherworldly journeys which engage in cosmological speculation (1984).

The component of a supernatural world leaves much of the modern and postmodern engagements with the apocalyptic imagination outside its purview, or does it?

The hidden world of angels and demons is central to Jewish apocalypses, and is also present in Christian Revelation (Collins, 1984). Beyond these works that exist within a very specific cosmology bounded by angels and demons, it would seem that few other works would meet these criteria. This is not necessarily the case; instead one may find the existence of a hidden world in other contemporary works, its population being angels and demons or some other type of being. The specific demographics of an unseen realm are of less significance than the purported existence of such a realm which indicates that widely held ways of knowing are somehow inadequate. The hidden demon or angel can be conceived as ideas close to the foreground of thought, but just beyond. The existence of something hidden takes on additional
meaning in contemporary American society that purports to value institutional transparency. The
demonic hidden world may be of hidden risk in securities trading, secret camps and black sites
much more obscured than Guantanamo Bay, while the angelic is that protected psychological
space where hope is not yet lost, Raoul Vaneigem’s “core of creativity,” safe from lies and
constraints (1994).

Though the integration of a world beyond and knowledge beyond is not an element
explored in existing scholarship, it might be useful to integrate these ideas because they both
seem to be central to the genre apocalypse, and the apocalyptic imagination more generally.
Collins finds that essential to apocalypses is their presentation of wisdom, knowledge that is the
“precondition of right action” (1984: 17). The connection between knowing right and acting right
is not unique to apocalypses, or even religious writing broadly. Instead this is a part of a tradition
that includes classical Greek philosophy; what is significant is the way in which this knowledge
is attained. Rather than consequences arrived from a rational examination and interpretation of
given premises, apocalypses, and the apocalyptic imagination are interested in “revealed”
knowledge. The status as revealed from a divine personage is not its essential characteristic,
instead it is the introduction of new a priori truths. Collins explains, “The apocalyptic revolution
is a revolution in the imagination. It entails a challenge to view the world in a way that is
radically different from the common perception” (1984: 215). These truths may be attempts to
shore up existing power relations, or may be an attempt to undermine existing or create new
power structures. Keller characterizes this tension as part of apocalypses’ “operative ambiguity,
capable of both revolution and reaction, and often of combustions of the two” (1996: 10).
Whatever the tendency within specific instances of the apocalyptic imagination, Keller finds the
“apocalypse pattern” to be a polarized morality of good victimized by “diabolically
overpowering” evil that results in a cataclysmic showdown with the triumph of good and the creation of a new world. This “habit as a habit [is] destructive, and perhaps first of all self-destructive” (1996: 11). Such a polarization is perhaps the most problematic aspect of the apocalyptic imagination, and has been addressed and engaged with by those interested in employing apocalypse within liberatory projects. For feminists engaged with the apocalyptic imagination, this polarization, this dichotomizing is the operation of patriarchy (Keller, 1996). More broadly, either/or logic, good/evil, self/other is the precondition to exerting dominance over another being.

The temporal aspect of apocalypse also functions within epistemological fields. While an “end time” is predicted, or perhaps promised, by apocalypse, this works as more than a date by which to set clocks and calendars. Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, distinguishes between the imminence of apocalypse as opposed to its immanence (2000). This distinction is important to understanding how the apocalyptic imagination functions. While some people will maintain that the apocalypse, in whatever its form, is imminent, that the end is in fact nigh; it also exists as that which is of primary importance, that humanity must change its way of thinking about itself and its place in the world. The repeated passings of given “end dates” without an apocalypse as envisioned actually occurring illustrates this function. Kermode explains that the passing of predicted apocalypse disconfirms without discrediting (2000). The mystical element of the apocalyptic imagination lends itself to the changing of dates; the variables entered into the equation may have been incorrect, but the function itself is not disproved.

Kermode also addresses apocalypse as making sense of the passage of time: “*Tick* is a humble genesis, *tock* is a feeble apocalypse” (Kermode, 2000: 45). An expansion and adaptation of Kermode’s analogy better helps to make sense of the apocalyptic imagination. One must not
forget the redemptive aspect of apocalypse; it is not an end but a renewal. Rather than tock being a feeble apocalypse, the interval between tock and the next tick is where the apocalypse is located. Kermode explains that the interval between tock and the next tick is difficult for people to grasp; though he does not acknowledge, the apocalypse may be understood as an attempt to make sense of the non-sensible. This understanding of the apocalyptic imagination is bolstered by Collins assertion that the apocalypse is a revolution of the imagination.

The apocalyptic imagination ought not be divorced from the societal and political conditions which inform it. The specific entities which populate its manifestations are reflections of the political and social stakes in play when an apocalyptic text is created. Collins makes this clear, that “It is generally agreed that apocalypse is not simply ‘a conceptual genre of the mind’ but is generated by social and historical circumstances” (1984: 18). Though Collins limits his scope to texts written as part of “Late Judaism,” there is no reason to maintain that this would no longer hold true in a contemporary context.

Apocalypse as politics is particularly clear in feminist readings of the tradition. The likely gender politics that informed the “toxic misogyny” (Keller, 1996: 29) of the Christian Apocalypse’s imagery has been similarly well argued by multiple scholars. Keller wonders “Who, moreover has played the ‘earthen pots’ to John’s ‘iron rod’? Could one find more gendered pictographs” (1996: 44). Like Keller, Mary Wilson Carpenter in her essay “Representing Apocalypse: Sexual Politics and the Violence of Revelation” (1995) finds the passages immediately preceding the part of Revelation about pots and rods as revealing John of Patmos’s agenda. In this passage John threatens the followers of Jezebel, a leader of a sect in Thyatira, that was sinning by eating forbidden foods and generalized immorality. Carpenter finds the reason for censure to be deeper than the sinfulness explicitly articulated by John: “The
church of Thyatira is thus threatened for its tolerance of a woman preacher, and in return for giving up this egalitarianism is specifically promised the reward of a phallic power over the nations – a power to rule with a ‘rod of iron’” (1995: 115). The threats themselves, like the promised reward of a powerful rod, were sexualized. John warns, “Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead” (Rev. 2:22-23, quoted in Keller, 1996: 45). Keller contends these threats rose to such a level of virulence because it represented a wider tendency of “uppity women not only disregarding the legalisms of a food code but cultivating a scandalously self-authorizing spirituality” (1996: 45).

Can a genre, named for a text whose only reference to a human woman, Jezebel (Keller, 1996), is part of an evocation of rape and “masculine enhancement” be employed to any effect other than domination and subjugation? The threats leveled by John were a response to the threat of sexual and spiritual egalitarianism, and divinely inspired wisdom is not required to envision how this reflects and blossoms into a complete authoritarian imagination. The apocalypse is frequently characterized as a heterosexual male construct (Boyarin, 1995; Hewitt, 1995), a group that historically has reveled in projects of authoritarian domination. However, the apocalyptic imagination has been found useful by women and other oppressed groups. Keller explains the tension as, “The apocalypse, as text or effect, is a quintessentially male product. Women often laid claim to its potencies, because it provided the main Western currency for revelation or revolution” (1996: 28). Though the apocalypse promises power and domination, it is also concerned with justice. The problematic aspects of John’s Revelation are not definitive of the apocalyptic imagination, rather it is a single, though influential manifestation that named the genre.
Keller is particularly useful, as she explores the conflicting pulls of apocalypse, how to reconcile the inherently patriarchal and misogynistic apocalypse of Revelation with its appropriations by those looking toward liberation; “This tangle anticipates the larger question of this book, How are we to assess the dependence of modern feminism upon the essentially sexist script of apocalypse” (Keller, 1996: 116). Though her focus is limited to the Book of Revelation, her explorations do pull back the curtain surrounding the apocalyptic imagination more generally. To make sense of these competing currents, Keller identifies several forms of apocalypses: cryptoapocalypse, retroapocalypse, neoapocalypse, anti-apocalypse and counter-apocalypse. Cryptoapocalypse is the apocalyptic feeling present in contemporary society that exists subliminally in a Kristevan abject space. This concept is particularly useful in explaining postmodernity as apocalyptic, a task to be fully engaged with shortly. Retroapocalypse is apocalypse as used by biblical literalists, anticipating an imminent Rapture, with the belief that John wrote specifically about current times. Neoapocalypse is the attempt to rescue apocalypse from its authoritarianism and is best exemplified by liberation theology. Anti-apocalypse is an attempt to bring the apocalypse to apocalypse, to end apocalypse. Keller identifies post-structuralism generally, and some feminist engagements with apocalypse as anti-apocalypses. Counter-apocalypse is the term Keller applies to her own project, approaching apocalypse with an acknowledgment of its potential power and problems, while actively seeking to redeem it from its patriarchal, authoritarian tendencies (1996). If the apocalyptic imagination is taken to be a contested site, where power may be concentrated or diffused, liberated or oppressed, these concepts are useful in enabling engaged analysis of these conflicting tendencies. The apocalyptic imagination generally is much like the Book of Revelation as illustrated by Keller’s question, “Is this the book of cosmic-historical revolution? The book of paranoid patriarchy? Or does it cut
like its own double-edged speech, both ways” (1996: 41).

The apocalypse is often viewed in entirely conservative terms, and fascism as its ultimate enactment. “For indeed, fascism seems to have become the privileged modality of the apocalypse, functioning both spatially as a totalitarian model of society’s destructive self-completion, and temporally through a rhetoric of ‘final’ solutions, of ends and of thousand-year regimes without end” (Hewitt, 1995: 18). Andrew Hewitt rejects this characterization, instead fascism is anti-apocalyptic (though not in Keller’s sense), because “Fascism is not to be made sense of—even as the embodiment of the irrational” (ibid.). Because fascism project is one of artificial oneness, its totalizing trajectory is a final negation of reciprocity, and therefore of discourse. Apocalypse is communicative, and for this reason fascism does not exist within its framework. This may too readily purge fascism from the apocalyptic imagination. Fascism does share with some manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination a glorification and deification of violence.

Carpenter finds the apocalypse’s connection with violence to be its component that is most in need of examination. And like fascism, this violence is frequently sexualized and is used to control sexuality, “The text of Revelation offers more than faith and hope – it offers access to power based on the manipulation of a cultural system of gender and sexuality. The words of Revelation transfer to the female body the horror of sexuality, consuming that body both by eating and by fire” (Carpenter, 1995: 110). Keller echoes this position, “Far from any gospel of love, this text promises power-raw, global, political power. Those who ‘conquer’ will ‘rule’ with the ruthless sovereignty of ‘the Father’” (1996: 44). This understanding of Revelation may also be applied to fascism of the Twentieth Century, it too manipulated gender and sexuality to create powerful nations of warriors and mothers. Though the bodies consumed by fascism were not
entirely or primarily women; the victims of fascist violence, particularly of Nazism, were first feminized. Homosexual, communist, Jew; all were first made not to be proper men before being made into not human.

Is the apocalyptic imagination, like fascism intrinsically violent? Carpenter wonders, “If Revelation puts sex into discourse as gynephobia and homophobia, then sexual and gendered violence may be integral to ‘apocalypse’ as we know it: the sexual politics of ‘apocalypse’ may be unable to dispense with violence because that violence – a *gendered* violence – may be what is at stake in the vision of apocalyptic power” (1995: 111). Carpenter suggests that a “gay apocalyptic” is a potential way to somewhat work around this violence, an approach to the apocalyptic imagination first developed in the 1960s. The revolution of the imagination seems to be a strong component, Carpenter explains:

But the events of the revolutionary sixties also gave rise to an oppositional apocalyptic: readings of Revelation that valorize a line of prophets linked in a common opposition to “culture,” and that celebrate apocalyptic vision as a rapturous opening of the seals of prophesy or the doors of perception, a longed for “coming out.” In this “gay apocalyptic,” representations of Revelation take on the structure of a visionary “coming-out” narrative, a prophecy of something to be revealed at the end of History but not *in* history (1995: 120).

This “gay apocalyptic” bears similarity to Keller’s counter-apocalypse, and also reflects Collins’s characterization of the apocalyptic imagination being a revolution of the imagination. Opening the “doors of perception” is one approach to changing the ways in which truths often taken as givens are challenged. Rather than ignoring the gendered violence of Revelation, it must be acknowledged and be part of that which is to be done away with. Rather than the Whore of
Babylon being defeated, the apocalyptic imagination could be employed to defeat such
dichotomies of whore and mother. Richard Dellamora finds William S. Burroughs to be a figure
representative of such an engagement with the apocalyptic imagination, though he uses the term
“queer apocalypse.” (1995). This term may be somewhat more apt because it does not connote
the diametric way of thinking that is to be subverted; rather than gay as opposed to straight,
queer has been used to describe the state of flux in which sexuality exists.

Kermode, does not find much to be found of use in the apocalyptic imagination, including
Burroughs. What is particularly problematic for Kermode is “The most terrible element in
apocalyptic thinking is its certainty that there must be universal bloodshed” (2000: 107). This is
certainly true of many manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination, particularly Christian
Revelation as deployed by those who seek to create or protect their authority. However it is
overstatement to characterize it as a necessary element of the apocalyptic imagination. While
bloodshed and destruction are often present, it is not so in some of the Jewish apocalypses
examined by Collins, and seems to be mitigated or at least downplayed in some contemporary
manifestations. The conflation between judgment and punishment is what makes bloodshed seem
necessary. The revolution of imagination within queer or counter-apocalypse can call out
domination and oppression without demanding that an archangel line those responsible up
against the wall.

Keller sees the apocalypse, particularly the Book of Revelation as “the master script of
the hidden transcript” (1996: 10), James Scott’s conception of the discourse of the oppressed that
takes place privately as resistance to oppression. Derrida also finds that “Nothing is less
conservative than the apocalyptic genre. And as it is an apocalyptic, apocryphal, masked, coded
genre, it can use the detour in order to mislead another vigilance, that of censorship” (1984: 29).
The language of apocalypse, in either referring back to biblical texts or creating new apocalypses, disguises its potential radicalism; biblical citations exist as respectable truth while new apocalypses may be overlooked as being too fantastic to be of any concern.

What may seem to be the obscurantist tendencies of the apocalyptic imagination serves another function as well. Collins identifies the language of apocalypse as expressive, rather than descriptive. “Feeling about the world” (1984: 214) is what is expressed, rather than how the world actually is. This may be understood as attempts to address subjective truth rather than objective truth, how it “feels” to exist in the world rather than simple descriptions of what makes up the world. The language also serves a pragmatic function as well, that it encourages a person to act. Texts utilizing the apocalyptic imagination are “far more congenial to the pragmatic tendency of liberation theology, which is not engaged in the pursuit of objective truth but in the dynamics of motivation and the exercise of political power” (ibid). The communication of emotion can be much more effective in persuading people to act rather than a simple reporting of “facts.”

However, just as characterizing the apocalyptic imagination as irredeemably fascistic is deficient, the case that nothing is less conservative than the apocalypse should not be overstated. E.P. Sanders characterizes Jewish apocalypse as literature of the oppressed, that “the authors intended to promise restoration by God from present oppression” (1989: 459). Collins argues that this characterization is incomplete because it would only includes historical apocalypse and leave out otherworldly journeys (1984). However there are other reasons to view apocalypse as not always existing as literature of the oppressed. Carpenter challenges the idea that Revelation was written to comfort early Christians suffering under the yoke of Rome. Instead of a promise of forthcoming liberation, the text may have served to create feelings of persecution to further
political interests of early Christian leadership. She contends, “The strongest motive for constituting the reader’s subjectivity as paranoid might simply be that some members’ fear of ‘persecution’ could be mobilized in the interests of other members of the group” (Carpenter, 1995: 114). The potential for creating debilitating paranoia and a sense of powerlessness is not limited to early Christianity, it is a potential component in contemporary manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination as well. The converse of inaction due to fear is inaction due to hope; rather than paralysis due to paranoia, “knowing” that positive changes are coming soon can encourage a person to simply wait for change to come. Social action can be ignored because of assurance that victory is ultimately assured. Collins recognizes “Detachment from this world in the hope of the glory that is above or is to come is a common characteristic of the Jewish apocalypse” (1984: 214). If change is imminent, rather than immanent, the rhetorical impact of the apocalyptic imagination’s expressive language may be mitigated and promote complacency.

The conflicting tendencies of the apocalyptic imagination, between challenging or conserving authority, seems to relate to how interpretation of apocalypse is calibrated. The “dichotomizing habit” which creates a seemingly unstoppable evil often accompanies a glorification of the impending destructive. This interpretation of apocalypse, I would argue, conflates judgment with punishment, and relishes a coming purification of the world. Such an interpretation is calibrated toward destruction and purification. Conversely, engagements with the apocalyptic imagination that do not totalize and polarize are less fascinated by the destructive spectacle of apocalypse. Instead, the calibration of interpretation is tilted towards ideas of creation and redemption. There does exist an “evil” perpetuating injustice, but its destruction is secondary to the creation of a new world, and a redemption of the old. Such a conception of the apocalyptic imagination is useful to understanding how it is used by people who engage with it.
The destructive, purificative apocalypse often finds comfort in authority and results in the aforementioned debilitating paranoia. The creative, redemptive apocalypse is more likely to challenge existing authority, though can fall to the inaction promoted by a sense of hope and assuredness.
The world’s about to be destroyed
There’s no point getting all annoyed
“So Long & Thanks For all The Fish”
*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*
2005

Whether the apocalyptic imagination functions toward reinforcing or undermining the status quo, contemporary society has been engaging with the apocalyptic imagination. Martin Jay attempts to make sense of its current operation in “The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn” (1994). He identifies three manifestations; the resurgent Christian fundamentalist millenarianists, “scientific doom-sayers” concerned with the impending destruction of the world ecosystem, and postmodernists. The Christian fundamentalists may generally be considered to be concerned with retroapocalypse, to use Keller’s terminology. The scientific doom-sayers seem to be a bit more multivocal. Jay explains that there has “always been an undercurrent of anxiety about the unintended consequences of dominating nature and brutally revealing her secrets⁵. In the 1960s and 1970s, these gained a new hearing with the rise of environmental concerns, renewed Malthusian alarm about overpopulation, feminist critiques of the gendered underpinnings of science, and the heightened awareness of the implications of nuclear war” (1994: 32). Identifying a particular apocalypse within Keller’s terminology is difficult because there are multiple currents within this group, but its relevance to anti-civilization thought will

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receive full examination in the next chapter. Jay finds a strong moral tone in both the religious and scientific forms of contemporary apocalyptic imaginations, but notes a difference in the scientific’s “preference for statistical extrapolations over symbolic signs of God’s wrath” (ibid.) The religiously oriented have since found an affinity for apocalyptic statistical analysis and one may track the likelihood of apocalypse on the Rapture Index, available online at www.raptureready.org. Jay’s primary concern is with postmodernism’s apocalyptic imagination, and deserves careful examination here. Jay focuses on how the condition of postmodernity is talked about in apocalyptic terms, rather than on how the apocalyptic imagination informs the condition itself. The focus on discourse is evident in that Jay pays particular attention to Derrida’s essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” (1984) as exemplary of the postmodernist apocalypse.

Jay finds this apocalypse to be different from others because of the permanence of destruction, that it claims to be on “the verge of an end that never comes” and that it is “not simply apocalypse now, but apocalypse forever” (Jay, 1994: 33). This permanence of crisis is crucial to understanding Derrida’s use of apocalypse. Jay finds John P. Leavy Jr.’s interpretation of Derrida’s essay instructive, that “Derrida’s strategy is to introduce just enough of the apocalyptic to act as a kind of immunization against its full realization” (1994: 35). The apocalypse is not simply a Derridean pharmakon of poison and cure, but may be better understood as part of Derrida’s project of deconstruction.

Derrida uses apocalypse in a way that is not primarily concerned with its destructive aspects. In an essay about nuclear criticism, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” Derrida structures the essay as seven missives, a reference to the repetition of sevens, such as the seven seals, in John of Patmos’s Revelation. The apocalypse
in this essay is not “the inescapable catastrophe, the undeviating precipitation toward a remainderless cataclysm” (Derrida, Seven Missives, 1984: 21), the apocalypse is the essay itself. Derrida is attempting to reveal knowledge that is essential to creating effective nuclear criticism. Because of the totality of nuclear destruction, in which nothing remains, it is impossible to describe its aftermath in certain terms, only speculation which is ultimately a belief. “In this critical place (the nuclear age), there is no more room for a distinction between belief and science, thus no more space for a ‘nuclear criticism’ strictly speaking. Nor even for a truth in that sense. No truth, no apocalypse. (As you know. Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, Unveiling)” (ibid: 24). There is no reference to nuclear apocalypse, a nuclear war is cataclysm. For Derrida the pharmakon is discourse describing nuclear destruction, an outgrowth of the strategy of deterrence. His purpose, and that of nuclear criticism is to make the threat of nuclear annihilation known and clarify government disinformation or fantasies about the potential for nuclear victory: “Nu-clear criticism has to make clear what is unclear in the (Reagan) Administration’s views” (ibid: 26). The apocalypse is truth, and though it may not be realizable in an ultimate form, it does not need to be warded against.

When Derrida asks “wouldn’t the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience even, of every mark or every trace” (Derrida, Apocalyptic Tone, 1984: 27), and claims that the genre of written apocalypse is an “exemplary revelation” of such a structure, Derrida is suggesting that all works that are concerned with truth claims are in fact apocalyptic, in that their purpose is to reveal certain truths. To illustrate this central point, he repeatedly distinguishes between end and closure. The apocalyptic imagination is concerned with ends rather than closures, and one must be clear as to what is meant by end. Eschatology is the detailing of the enactment of a teleology. The end concerning Derrida is the end meaning
purpose, not the end of purposes. Apocalypse forever ought not be conceived as destructive, but rather, deconstructive, or calling for deconstruction to come. Derrida conceives deconstruction as problematizing, destabilizing, complicating and bringing out the inherent paradoxes of that which it turns its attention to. Though it may sometimes be characterized as apolitical or merely anesthetizing politics, Derrida at least sees the project of deconstruction as much more consequential, and critical legal studies to be an exemplary enactment: “in order to be consistent with itself, not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical, academic discourses but rather (with all due respect to Stanley Fish) to aspire to something more consequential, to change things” (1992: 8). The dig at Fish is particularly telling, in that while Fish acknowledges the constructed nature of law, he distances himself from critical judgments against existing political-juridical systems because they at least work. This distancing from criticism of meaningful things in favor of mere criticism of meaning is not a full enactment of deconstruction for Derrida. Deconstruction attempts to end established interpretive ends, reveal those meanings that have been obscured, and enact change.

Though the language he uses is different, Derrida seems to concur with the apocalypse as being a revolution of the imagination: “Conversely, we could even say that every discord or every tonal disorder, everything that detones and becomes inadmissible in general collocution, everything that is no longer identifiable starting from established codes, from both sides of a front, will necessarily pass for mystagogic, obscurantistic, and apocalyptic” (Apocalyptic Tone, 1984: 30). For this reason, that which does not conform to the already established boundaries of accepted discourse is therefore apocalyptic, there is nothing less conservative than the apocalyptic genre. This does not entitle these works to an uncritical pass, but must be demystified, meaning “to demystify the seductive or agogic manoeuvre is fine and necessary, but
must we not first ask ourselves with a view to what, to what end does it seduce, use trickery, mislead, manoeuvre” (ibid.). Such a project seems to be in line with Keller’s project of the counter-apocalypse in that it is foolish or impossible to jettison the apocalyptic imagination, but it must be properly interrogated.

This demystification is not predicated upon the apocalyptic use of hidden worlds of angels and demons, the demystification is required by the existence of hidden worlds or hidden words. Derrida’s use of mystical is best understood as something that is obscured yet accepted, and his essay “Force of Law: ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority’” is useful to understanding this concept. Derrida first explores how laws are obeyed “not because they are just but because they have authority” (1992: 12). This foundation is in itself mystical, because of the inherent paradox of its foundation; “the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law (droit), making law, would consist of a coup de force, of a performative and therefore interpretive violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust at all” (1992: 13). Though law justifies its authority on the assumption that it is just, appealing to already established legitimacy, for example the concept within jurisprudence of precedent, its ultimate foundation can not be just or unjust. At the root of all juridico-political orders is an act without already given authority, a lack of precedent. This fundamental aporia, a dead end in tracing back the roots of authority, is the mystical foundation of law. Mystical in this sense is that which cannot be explained through established existing codes.

Derrida’s formulation of law is also useful in understanding the awaiting of an end that never comes, apocalypse forever, or a permanent crisis. Within any judgment, juridical or otherwise, there is a “period of épochè,” a suspension of belief, that is filled with anxiety, which is necessary, because “who will claim to be just by economizing on anxiety” (Derrida, 1992:}
This anxiety that seems to be an expression of apocalypticism that manifests all so frequently in the contemporary age is only a component of a search for justice and its possibility. To be anxious is to recognize one’s responsibility for his or her decisions, and that things can go wrong. It may also be asked, who will claim to be just by maximizing self assuredness? The expression of the apocalyptic imagination as part of this search is clear when Derrida describes deliberative thought:

> In short, for a decision to be just and responsible, it must, in its proper moment if there is one, be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle (1992: 23).

Just as the apocalypse is concerned with apocalypse, to a certain extent justice is concerned with apocalypse. To bring justice, law or whatever guiding principle, must be sundered before being made anew. Jay, in discussing Leavy’s interpretation of Derrida finds, “From the point of view of deconstruction, such an outcome is a source of apparent comfort, because it forestalls final totalization. But in the larger context of postmodern apocalyptic fantasizing, the emotional effect it produces is closer to saturnine resignation” (Jay, 1994: 35).

Jay finds this sullen disposition to be at the heart of “the apocalyptic imaginary as a whole, and not merely its postmodern variant” (1994: 36). While Jay also finds the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Jean Francois Lyotard to be indicative of this mode of thinking, the anglophone Anthony Giddens has written about this disposition in a way that proves useful. Giddens finds the “sense of foreboding which so many have noted as characteristic of the current age” (1990: 131) to be based upon the way in which risk has become globalized in the modern
world. He finds seven points that characterize the “specific risk profile of modernity” (ibid: 124):
1) risk’s intensity, that there is a risk of nuclear war that could potentially end all human life on
the planet; 2) contingent events that can effect extremely large numbers of people; 3) the impact
of human knowledge on the natural world, particularly technology’s impact on environmental
conditions; 4) institutionalization of risk in global market exchanges, of which the current global
food crisis is representative; 5) the awareness of risk being risky, that is uncertain; 6) this
awareness is held by many people; 7) and that no expert can be completely proficient in
managing risk. Similar to this overwhelming position of risk, Keller identifies a feeling of
pending apocalypse existing within society as a cryptoapocalypse, a sort of Kristevan abjection
within the “subliminal margins” of human psyche. It makes people “inclined to expect the
burning of the rainforests” by naturalizing feelings of foreboding and inevitability, “enabling
their own numbed complicity in the economic system that is causing the end of the world for so
many Amazonian species” (1996: 8). Taken together these factors help to explain the sense of
pending cataclysm that is identified with adopting the apocalyptic imagination, but it is only one
component.

Jay, drawing on Sigmund Freud, contends that the apocalyptic imagination rests on
vacillations between melancholia and mania stemming from an inability to mourn a lost object.
He explains:

For there can be little doubt that the symptoms of melancholy, as Freud describes
them, approximate very closely those of apocalyptic thinking: deep and painful
dejecction, withdrawal of interest in the everyday world, diminished capacity to
love, paralysis of the will, and most important of all, radical lowering of self-
esteeem accompanied by fantasies of punishment for assumed moral transgressions
Jay’s characterization of the apocalyptic imagination only describes some of its manifestations, completely ignoring its possible constructive uses. While a resignation to waiting for retribution, whether divine or natural is a possible course of action, so too is taking predictions of a worst case scenario as a motivation to action. Jay also seems to be overly dismissive of the “anti-redemptive postmodernist voices in the apocalyptic chorus,” characterizing “Derrida’s valorization of infinite, unconstrained linguistic play” (ibid: 38) as an example of the accompanying manic impulse that also leads to inaction. This argument seems to be based on a misreading of Derrida, or an overlooking of his work, such as “Force of Law” in which he calls specifically for a socially engaged project of deconstruction.6

For Jay, what those engaged with the apocalyptic imagination are unable to mourn is a Kristevan mother figure. He contends, “It is thus tempting to interpret the apocalyptic moment in the critique of technological and scientific hubris as a convoluted expression of distress at the matricidal underpinnings of the modernist project, indeed of the entire human attempt to uproot itself from its origins in something we might call mother nature” (1994: 42). This position provides fertile ground to cultivate a fuller understanding of the current apocalyptic imagination, but is also somewhat deficient. It correctly identifies the gender politics that are at stake within apocalypses, but does not fully explain in enough detail the current moment, and overlooks important points to fully describe the apocalyptic imagination throughout history as the misogyny of Revelation is somewhat understated in this conception. Carpenter’s identification of two competing currents is a useful reminder of competing apocalypses:

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6 Jay also contends that Jean Baudrillard’s work is a “celebration of the hyperreal world of simulacral overload” (1994: 38), a position that ignores the critical aspects of Baudrillard. Rather than a celebration, Baudrillard may be more constructively read as a documentation of “the desert of the real” and the general vapidity of contemporary society. Such a counter-reading is unfortunately beyond the scope of this work.
The literary apocalyptics of the 1960s to 1980s suggest the production of both kinds of apocalyptic narratives: the “master narrative” of individual male prophetic authority and the erection of that authority on the necessary subordination of women and the assumption of inevitable conflicts between men; and the visionary narrative of “pairs of prophets” whose apocalyptic goal is to “open the doors of both institutional and imaginative oppression (1995: 128).

Jay seems to take a somewhat disparaging look at the “pairs of prophets” while ignoring the constructions of a “master narrative.”

The inability to mourn is not just that of the mother or a matricidal impulse of modernity; instead it is the inability to mourn the failure of the promises of the Enlightenment. We cannot mourn the passing of Enlightenment ideals because its institutions, having largely failed to deliver its promises, continue to move about like an animated corpse. To parallel Jay’s mourning of the loss of the mother, the Enlightenment project on its legs of liberal democracy and scientific progress, prattles forth like a parent suffering from severe dementia, offering abuse and little else. While some of the family knows that it is now in fact its “time,” most are unwilling to let go of pleasant memories from the past.

This alienation from the Enlightenment or modernist project is present in many of the contemporary works on apocalypse. Kermode, one of the first to define postmodernity in terms of apocalypse, disparaged what he termed the new modern, what is now the postmodern, for its shift in how it engages the apocalyptic imagination through different attitudes towards the past. “To the older (modernism) it is a source of order; to the newer it is that which is to be ignored” (2000: 115). These attitudes do however work within the operations of the apocalyptic imagination; the creation of new ways of thinking does not look to an order predicated on the
past. Kermode argues, “Marx once said that ‘the consciousness of the past weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,’ and it is from that nightmare that the modern apocalyptists want to awake. But the nightmare is part of our condition, part of their material” (Kermode, 2000: 121). This waking nightmare, the demented parent we cannot mourn, I would argue, is the source of contemporary apocalyptic imaginations. The naturalness of the present order, at the “end of history” requires, in a sense, a super-natural to overcome it, to pass judgment that it is failing in its reign. Keller finds evidence that seems to support such a thesis: “With multiple fundamentalisms blossoming globally in response to modernity’s betrayal of its promises, the late-modern confidence in the upward March of Progress seems almost as old-fashioned in its arrogance as the theisms it sought to supersede” (1996: 6). Boyarin finds a similar uneasiness with our existing structures of the truth that are outgrowths of the Enlightenment. He explains, “At the same time we question our own authority now, when the confidence of modernity is exhausted, and seek to interrogate once again the legendary ancestors” (1995: 43). A full accounting of the accuracy of the perception that the project of the Enlightenment has resulted in failure is beyond the scope of this project, however that such a perception exists, and informs the adoption of the apocalyptic imagination is what is important to the task at hand. Collins explains this connection as, “The sense of alienation from the present order is fundamental to many apocalypses, especially the historical type” (1984: 19).

Those who share this outlook are at the very least not entirely deluded. The failure of liberal democracy has been theorized by numerous thinkers since the rise of American power in the post war period. Herbert Marcuse, writing in 1964 offers a fairly complete summation:

The main trends are familiar: concentration of the national economy on the needs of big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even
controlling force; hitching of this economy to a world-wide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes; … fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose. (19)

What were familiar trends nearly a half century ago are now fully accepted truths. The concentration of the economy on the needs of corporations has resulted in a concentration of wealth unparalleled in the industrialized world except Switzerland. In the United States, wealth is highly concentrated in a relatively few hands. “As of 2001, the top 1% of households… owned 33.4% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% … had 51%, which means that just 20% of the people owned a remarkable 84%” (Domhoff, 2006). This concentration may be an economic or moral success according to Friedmanesque economists, but points to a failure of politics. If politics is, as Harold Lasswell defines in Politics: Who Gets What, When, How, about distribution of resources, and the majority of citizens are left without those resources, that may lead some to believe that liberal representational democracy is not fulfilling its promises (1950).

While change is routinely promised by those seeking political office in the United States, Marcuse’s observation that “the programs of the big parties become ever more indistinguishable, even in the degree of hypocrisy and in the odor of clichés” (1964: 19) holds as true under the “threat” of global terrorism as the under threat of international communism circulated during the time described by Marcuse.

The military alliances, monetary systems and development schemes identified by Marcuse are likewise as relevant in the twenty-first century as in the last. The economic system of global empire, what may also be taken as a betrayal of Enlightenment promises of self-determination, is likely at work in the cultivation of the apocalyptic imagination. Kermode finds that “the mythology of Empire and of Apocalypse are closely related” (2000: 10), and identifies
the function of imperial regimes in fulfilling the requirements for Christian Apocalypse based on the Book of Revelation. He equates the unlikely imperial fantasies as operating as another justification that can be disconfirmed without being discredited. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* by Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush” reveals the connection between empire, Enlightenment and apocalypse:

The aide said that guys like me (meaning Suskind) were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Suskind, 2004)

When the emperor has new clothes, those that oppose the empire may be inclined to try to find a similar outfit. The revolution of imagination described by Collins and others, is concerned with how reality is perceived, and this example is one of the ways the apocalyptic imagination may once again, like by John of Patmos, be appropriated for reactionary ends.

The “noble” triumph of the capitalist world system has become a truth in its own right, grumblings from discontents aside. An early expression of such a sentiment written shortly after the collapse of Soviet empire is Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” His thesis, that
liberal democracy (in fairness to Fukuyama, government more in line with European democracy than American), is the “final form of human government” (1989), is anti-apocalyptic in that the end is here and apocalypse is no longer needed in the glorious reign of global capital. However, the attempt to end apocalypse is just as likely to have stirred up the apocalyptic imagination as put it to rest. According to Collins part of the revolutionary potential of the apocalyptic imagination is that it reminds people that “The world as now constituted is not the end” (1984: 215), both in terms of end as purpose and of closure. Such assurances that the end has in fact already arrived may be countered with apocalypse. People currently engaged with the apocalyptic imagination likely hold that the whole of humanity is not fulfilling a telos in consumerism, and that other possibilities have not been closed off, bleak as the possibility for change may sometimes seem.

The certainty of the necessity of a given political order is not the only realm in which the west holds claim, a similar project of dominance extends to epistemology. Anshuman Prasad, a postcolonial theorist, identifies the way in which Europe has laid claim to the only correct way of knowing, the way being Baconian science. He characterizes this connection between knowing and dominating in the following way:

Science and Europe stand in a symbiotic relationship which is mutually productive and reinforcing. European “achievements” (among the most notable being its global overlordship during the colonial era) validate European science; European science and technology validate Europe’s claim to universalism and, therefore, its presumed right to rule the world. It will be premature to believe that the hold of Baconian science on Europe’s imagination has weakened to any significant extent during the present century. (1997: 103)
However, one must be wary of overstating any particular commonalities between postcolonial and apocalyptic projects. Keller explains the apocalypse is a particularly Western structure, rather than universal, in that it locates a single center of power in conflict with demonic hordes, and also creates a dualistic time scheme. It is thus different than cyclical time schemes that privilege death and rebirth. The difference is that one would hardly characterize the death of autumn that leads to a spring rebirth as a matter of justice. Additionally, “Though dissident subcultures have repeatedly resonated to its original context, the textual effects cannot be purged of imperial Christian traces; we whose class benefits from Western hegemony can hardly read ‘conquest’ and ‘power of nations’ as innocent metaphors” (Keller, 1996: 44).

It is this other leg of the Enlightenment, the assuredness of Baconian science as truth, that contemporary manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination are also reacting against. Though philosophers of science and epistemology may argue that such a reading is not actually present in scientific knowing, the way in which Baconian science operates within American culture as avenue to universal truth is what informs the apocalyptic impulse. Additionally, it is not just those interested in decolonization that are reacting in such a way, this is also likely at work in evangelical Christian millennialism.

A way of describing nature has, to an extent, become synonymous with nature, and a way of distributing resources and determining that distribution has attained a similar level of naturalness. The way in which a given politics and given epistemology have been naturalized to such an extent to become second nature then calls for a super-natural to challenge it. This more than natural need not be mystical in the sense of miracles, but mystical in the Derridean sense. The manner in which the Enlightenment project has been wholly appropriated towards the end of social control is a betrayal of its initial promise of liberation. The perceived failure of the
promises of the Enlightenment is what cannot quite be mourned, because its artifacts weigh heavy on one’s consciousness. This is not to say the positive impulses need be abandoned, instead Derrida suggests, “We cannot and we must not – this is a law and a destiny – forgo the _Aufklärung_, what imposes itself as the enigmatic desire for vigilance, for elucidation, for critique and truth” (Apocalyptic Tone 1984: 22). The _Aufklärung’s_, the Enlightenment’s, foundational principles need not be jettisoned, and the apocalyptic imagination may work towards reinvigorating that which has become stagnant: politics and the status of what constitutes knowledge which have given up the vigilance Derrida encourages. The apocalyptic imagination may be well suited for this task if Keller’s contention that “apocalypse transforms the object of fear into the site of hope” holds true (1996: 6). In a sense “when the revolution comes” has become “when the apocalypse gets here.”

Societal stagnancy may be contributing to the widespread melancholia identified by Jay; much like individual depression is sometimes attributed to being in a rut, societal stagnancy may encourage societal depression. There may also be a certain inevitability as well; Jay contends “Melancholia is thus less an illness to be overcome than a permanent dimension of the human condition, and so too are the apocalyptic fantasies that can be marshaled so easily by a myriad of different stimuli” (1994: 42). If the apocalyptic imagination is a permanent dimension, it requires vigilance to ward off its reactionary, authoritarian and misogynistic tendencies. It must also not fall prey to a tendency Keller finds; she explains, “We wish for messianic solutions and end up doing nothing, for we get locked into a particularly apocalyptic either/or logic – if we can’t save the world, then to hell with it. Either salvation or damnation” (1996: 14).
CHAPTER III:
SUCKING ON TOADS OR BATTLING REPTILIANS:
REDEMPTION AND PURIFICATION IN 2012 DISCOURSE

You know the way everybody’s into weirdness right now. Books in all the supermarkets about Bermuda triangles, UFOs, how the Mayans invented television. That kind of thing.
-Miller, 
Repo Man
1984

Imminent ecological catastrophe, immanent epistemological uncertainty, rallying prophecies from Patmos in the service of liberation or control, feelings of general unease that are manifestations of some cryptoapocalypse; there are many forms the contemporary apocalyptic imagination takes. However, these examples are either interpretations of ancient prophecies or while broadly apocalyptic, not explicitly prophetic in a conventional sense. An examination of contemporary apocalyptic prophecy is helpful to understanding why and how perceived failures of the enlightenment project encourage and inform the apocalyptic imagination.

One such apocalyptic prophecy with a somewhat substantial following, or at least collection of interested people is that of 2012. Though specific predictions vary widely between adherents, drawing on source material ranging from anthropology and astrophysics to popular tropes of conspiracy theory, including aliens and global elite networks operating in secrecy. The unifying element is the importance of the date December 21, 2012, what is often characterized as the “end of the Mayan calendar.” Latin American studies scholar Robert Sitler has written academically about the phenomenon in the journal Nova Religio, examining the divergences between the 2012 movement and actual Mayan culture. After acknowledging the presence within the movement of magnetic pole shifts, a galactic beam and alien contact occurring on the winter
solstice of 2012, he explains the significance of the date to Maya as:

Hyperbolic conjecture aside, the December 21, 2012, date is simply the last day of
the current pik (pronounced “peek”) cycle, a period of 144,000 days in the ancient
Maya Long Count calendar roughly equivalent to 394 years. More significantly, it
marks the end of the thirteenth pik, the final period of a far larger calendar cycle
measuring 1,872,000 days that began on August 11, 3114 BCE and that will come
to fruition more than 5,125 years later on the 2012 Northern Hemisphere winter
solstice. It is important to point out that even this so-called Great Cycle in the
Long Count merely represents a minor component in far larger Maya
chronological periods that theoretically extend backward and forward in time in a
system of exponentially increasing temporal cycles without beginning or end
point. The date is hardly, as some mistakenly claim, the “end” of the Maya
calendar. (2007: 90)

Though the calendar may not end in a sense of closure in a rigorously historical or
anthropological sense, for adherents of 2012 it signifies the end, as in purpose of the Maya
calendar. The place the calendar holds in contemporary imagination, specifically contemporary
apocalyptic imagination, is defined by December 21, 2012 as a date of significance. The interest
with the Maya calendar of adherents to 2012 is informed largely by the existence of this
perceived end (closure and/or purpose) date, that marks some sort of global shift. Determining
what are the ends sought through giving significance to this date is the interest within this
project.

An attempt to sift through the entirety, or even significant portion of the material on 2012
available would be an undertaking in itself. However, it is possible to get a sense of how 2012
prophecies figure into contemporary apocalyptic thought by examining the work of two authors
whose work illustrate the competing calibrations of the apocalyptic imagination, in that they
focus on either the creative and redemptive aspects of apocalypse, or the destructive and
purificative dimensions.

Fortuitously, an argument between Whitley Strieber and Daniel Pinchbeck, on the
September 15, 2007 podcast *Dreamlands*, characterized as “War in Dreamland” by Strieber
provides a framework for such an investigation. Strieber, host of the podcast, is an author of both
fiction and nonfiction, known for his “first hand account” of alien abduction, *Communion*
(1987). Though Strieber is not entirely engaged within 2012 discourse, he has written a novel,
*2012: The War for Souls*. Pinchbeck, a guest on the show, is an author and journalist who was on
multiple 2012 perspectives. Their point of disagreement is primarily based on conflicting visions
of the future, on whether focusing on negativity creates further negative outcomes, or whether
not focusing on negative possibilities is pollyannish self delusion. An examination of
Pinchbeck’s work will establish an initial groundwork from which to build upon before parsing
out the stakes and finer points of the conflict.

the Head : A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism*, has broken into
contemporary culture with some success. In 2007, 40,000 copies were in print (MacDonald,
2007), and on Amazon.com, ranks #4 in Books > Health, Mind & Body > Psychology &
Counseling > By Topic > Consciousness, and #6 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age
> Divination > Prophecy as of July, 2008.. Pinchbeck has also made appearances on the
syndicated AM radio show *Coast to Coast AM*, a nightly national broadcast dedicated to
paranormal and conspiracy topics, and on Comedy Central’s *Colbert Report.*

The book is a memoir of Pinchbeck’s investigation into prophecy through a lens of psychedelic experimentation, with 2012 serving as a focal point. His subjects include crop circles; otherworldly entities, be they aliens, Terrence McKenna’s “machine elves,” shamanic guides, or “Ahrimanic” entities contacted through the hallucinogen Dipropyltryptamine (DPT); Jose Arguëlles, author of *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology* (1987), which is one of the first New Age engagements with the Maya calendar; and his personal relationships and embrace of polyamory. Pinchbeck’s writing is informed by the work of analytical psychologist Carl Jung, Austrian mystic and founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner, Terrence McKenna, an experimenter and advocate of psychedelics, who formulated a 2012 prophecy independent of Maya calendars, and various shamanic traditions. The central premise of *Return of Quetzalcoatl* as formulated by Pinchbeck is that:

> Human consciousness is rapidly transitioning to a new state, a new intensity of awareness that will manifest itself as a different understanding, a transformed realization, of time and space and self. By this thesis, the transition is already underway—though largely subliminally—and will become increasingly evident as we approach the year 2012. (2007: 1-2)

The centrality of a transformation of consciousness, or phrased differently, recalling Collins, a revolution of the imagination is essential to the apocalypse outlined by Pinchbeck. He is aware of his engagement with the apocalyptic imagination and explains “Apocalypse” is “a word that literally means ‘uncovering’ or ‘revealing’” (ibid: 100).

It is not explicitly clear whether Pinchbeck intentionally structured his memoir about prophetic journey around an apocalyptic framework. His work does, however, lend itself to
exploring how the framework of ancient apocalypses, as articulated by Collins, may be applied to contemporary engagements with the apocalyptic imagination. Pinchbeck is interested in unveiling a transcendent reality that is both temporal and spatial and as Collins would put it, “radically different from the common perception” (1984: 215). Additionally there are frequent references in Return of Quetzalcoatl to otherworldly entities that shape Pinchbeck’s prophetic journey, for example with the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl inhabiting Pinchbeck during an experience with the hallucinogen ayahuasca. Finally, his language is often expressive, rather than descriptive, detailing a “Feeling about the world” (ibid: 214), calling for an engagement with other ways of knowing outside of strict rationality. It also seems to function as a counter apocalypse, as outlined by Keller, as there is an awareness of avoiding the violence that may be present in apocalypse. These elements of the apocalyptic imagination are particularly evident in the following passage, in which Pinchbeck is at his most prophetic:

At that near-point in our future (2012), science will reintegrate with aboriginal wisdom, rights will meet lefts, the carapace of modern technology will crumble as new support systems self-organize, causing a momentous polar shift in human thought and human values—from alienation to integration, from deformed and spatialized time to synchronic harmony, from either patriarchal or matriarchal dominance to true partnership, from ego-based delusions to global telepathy.

(2007: 242)

Though this prophecy may seem overly hopeful or unlikely, it certainly suggests that the world “as now constituted is not the end,” in the sense of a closure or the sense of a purpose (Collins, 1984: 215).

The predicted downfall of patriarchy and matriarchy is not the only time in which
Pinchbeck addresses gender politics, which like avoiding celebrations of violence, is a crucial component of Keller’s counter apocalypse. He finds, “Sexuality is still shrouded in aggression and mistrust (the words ‘fuck’ and ‘screw’ are hurled as curse words), with young women’s hypersexualized bodies endlessly used as props to sell products” (2007: 329). While he identifies the problems of sexism and patriarchy, his solution is somewhat glossed over. One may assume that human telepathy and an accompanying increase in empathy would largely work as a solution. He also suggests that polyamory would undermine patriarchy, explaining, “If monogamy were to give way to more flexible relationship patterns, based on deeper trust, this would have wide-ranging consequences in our intuitions and even in the design of our cities and houses—our current systems and structures are oriented toward the nuclear family unit, rather than the extended family and communal life-patterns of tribal cultures” (ibid: 328). However, this proposal does not receive the attention given to some of his other claims, resting largely upon a reference to Laura Kipnis’s book *Against Love* (2004).

Pinchbeck does find the denigration of the feminine expressed by contemporary culture’s abuse of “mother nature.” He identifies Baconian science as largely to blame for this mindset, and I would argue is expressing disillusionment with the enlightenment project that is central to postmodern apocalypse. Though Pinchbeck does not acknowledge the trialogue between Rupert Sheldrake, Terrence McKenna and Ralph Abraham in which Sheldrake makes a similar point, his affinity for McKenna suggests this may be an unacknowledged source when Pinchbeck recounts, “As Francis Bacon put it at the beginning of the modern era of scientific progress: ‘We must torture Nature until she reveals her secrets.’ Modern science has never lost its sadistic tinge” (ibid: 326). It is not just the domination of nature that Pinchbeck finds problematic with a Baconian scientific worldview; it is also deficient in an epistemological sense. Likely drawing on
Friedrich Nietzsche, who he approvingly cites elsewhere, Pinchbeck wonders, “And to what extent are the postulates underlying our current science-based or materialist worldview actually mythical, or metaphysical, ones” (ibid: 9)? This is a clear expression of incredulity toward the universality of western science, that its seemingly non-contingent truths may in fact be contingent. He further queries, “Is it far-fetched to suggest that the deities of our secular age include the superstrings, selfish genes, Black Holes, and Big Bangs described by our scientists, that define the limits of the materialist worldview?” (ibid: 9-10). The suggestion that these fundamental scientific “truths” may in fact be deities does not imply that for Pinchbeck such ideas have no value. Pinchbeck bases many of his own metaphysical claims upon quantum physics. One may argue that his interpretation of “science” is a misrepresentation, however that does not negate the fact that Pinchbeck’s objections have to do with the manner in which science is deployed, rather than science itself.

He advocates at once a renewal of skepticism and a renewal of credulity, and approvingly cites the “sacred science” of astronomy as practiced by “the Maya and Egyptians and the architects of Stonehenge and Chaco Canyon” (ibid: 10). His intent in recognizing these ancient sciences is to remove the utilitarian aspect from science. Such utility is too often directed into understanding new techniques to kill the most number of “enemies” at the most efficient cost or extract the greatest number of resources while minimizing the outward appearance of ecological damage at the most efficient cost. He explains:

While followers of New Age trends often idealize indigenous tribal cultures for their connection to natural forces, modern skeptics dismiss them—our superiority seems proven by our technical acumen, our efficiency in manipulating resources, exploring the tiniest quanta of matter, or shooting rockets into deep space. An
alternative perspective withholds judgment. (ibid: 11)

Perhaps Pinchbeck’s affinity towards physics more than any of the modern sciences is that as yet it is the discipline that still exists most within the realm of pure science rather than as implementation of technology.

Though Pinchbeck never brings Derrida into his pantheon of reference, his deconstruction of perceived scientific fact is indicative of an underlying current of deconstruction. Much as Derrida is fundamentally concerned with the way in which experience is interpreted, bringing techniques from the study of literature into all realms of philosophy, Pinchbeck finds, “The ‘curious literary quality’ of existence that Terrence McKenna noticed seems ever more tangible, as this story moves through us” (ibid: 397). Pinchbeck’s and McKenna’s interpretation of existence as resembling a text does not therefore trivialize experience, any more so than Derridean deconstruction trivializes politics. Also like Derrida and the other “postmodernists” identified by Jay, Pinchbeck admits he has “always been prone to occasional plunges into desolation” (25). Melancholia and apocalypse once again seem linked.

Pinchbeck’s critique of materialism extends to his politics as well. For Pinchbeck, the fundamental aspect of ways of knowing provides the basis for any other claim made about the broader world, including politics. He explains this connection thusly:

Through the late twentieth century, the movements of the Left limited themselves to a materialist understanding of reality—exemplified by Marxism—demanding social justice and economic equity but not the restoration of intuition and the recognition of the hidden, qualitative dimensions of being suppressed by the mental-rational consciousness, narrowly focused on the quantifiable. The Left fought for “rights” of man, while ignoring the “lefts” of man and woman. (213)
This should not be interpreted as some reactionary call to a mystical ruling class, as some critics Pinchbeck responds to in his afterword claim, but instead echoes aspects of the anarchist tradition, as well as elements of the New Left of the 1960s. This interpretation is also evidenced in his use of Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial society within *Return of Quetzalcoatl*, as well as his referencing of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s 2004 book *Multitude*, their follow up to the 2000 *Empire*, and Pinchbeck’s 2007 interview in the Fifth Estate, a journal of anti-authoritarian politics. His program for social change advocates localized sustainable economics, such as implementation of complementary currencies, sustainable production through techniques such as permaculture, and building of communication networks that are modeled on exchange and reciprocity. The advocacy for multiplicity, rather than homogeneity is evident in his concern that, “A parallel process to mass species extinction has sharply reduced the diversity of human cultures. Of six thousand known cultures on Earth, more than half are currently threatened with extinction” (ibid: 8).

Though Pinchbeck does offer a program for enlightenment and more empathic human relations, his “Eastern” inspired search to tame the ego is not always entirely successful and at times seems trapped in the worldview he seeks to challenge. While explaining his distinct cultural location, it sometimes seems to be a jaded valorization his privileged Manhattan upbringing by bohemian parents, with his father an abstract painter and his mother a writer who had connections to the Beats, including a relationship with Jack Kerouac. His rather lofty self-image is best evidenced when he asserts:

"Often I have felt less like a person than a convenient intersection for ideas to meet and mesh, a magnet or strange attractor, compelled or fated—perhaps tragically misguided—to draw together Jungian psychology, quantum paradox, Frankfurt
School critique, anthroposophy, and Mayan mythology with explorations of such seemingly outre subjects as crop circles, alien abductions, Amazonian shamanism, and the end of time. (ibid: 15)

Pinchbeck’s identification of himself as super-human, not a person, but vessel for melding divergent ideas into a collected whole to save humanity can be a bit much. Additionally, several references to Marcuse is hardly a grasp on the entire Frankfurt school. Pinchbeck’s elevated sense of self is also present when he recounts an experience with a recently deceased spirit that found him because “our culture lacked shamans, my Bwiti initiation and shamanic study, perhaps, made me the closest available substitute” (ibid: 39). In the same way that the ego is not entirely suppressed, the world of endless images without substance has not been fully excised from Pinchbeck’s work. While recounting a visit to what may be characterized as a New Age Disneyland, the Vale do Amanhecer in Brazil, Pinchbeck resorts to “hip” descriptors to describe the place. He explains that overall it looked like “an outtake from a Fellini flick,” populated with people whose “style was Flash Gordon meets Mata Hari” and that his companion had a “starry-eyed devotion to her magical mystery tour” (ibid: 349). However, this overload of “cool” cultural referents is more reflective of the desert of hyper-reality than the engagement with a shamanic real that is Pinchbeck’s central project.

Still, a measured approach, rather than uncritical embrace is sometimes absent, as when he claims, “Unlike modern industrial manufacturing, nature does not create waste. The timing of natural processes—from the chemical signals transmitted during fetal development to the seasonal blossoming of a flower—is usually flawless” (ibid: 12). Though nature does not create the levels of toxicity and waste of industrial manufacturing, those with cats and litter boxes in their house may be somewhat more familiar with creations of natural waste. Similarly, the
flowers may bloom just as they should in the jungles of the Amazon, and are likely absent in the concrete canyons of Manhattan, but in North East Ohio, such things do not always occur with such perfection. The desire to encounter otherworldly beings also overcomes Pinchbeck’s skepticism, and is particularly evident in his recounting of a trip to England to investigate crop circles. Pinchbeck tells the following story:

We returned to the car and Lee Ann opened the passenger door. The black T-shirt I had bought and lost several days ago, seventy miles away, was lying there, draped across the backseat, witnessed by Lee Ann and Angelica. The T-shirt had disappeared before they arrived in Glastonbury. There seemed no conceivable way I could have been responsible for the shirt ending up in the car, unless I had forgotten a whole series of actions. I recalled my night-long “fairy world” visions after my first ascent of the Tor. Living in a realm adjacent to our own, hopscotching through our world like quantum tricksters, fairies in fairy tales are often mischievous beings playing with humans by stealing objects or moving things around, sometimes returning what they borrowed. Were they teasing me? (ibid: 168)

Rather than being teased by fairies, perhaps the marked tendency for those engaged in psychedelic experimentation and shamanic communion with plants to “just space stuff” is at play; rather than an otherworldly encounter on the giant rock of the Tor, he was in fact simply stoned to the bone?

In a certain sense such foibles and occasional annoyances enhance the work as apocalypse, in that it allows for the redemption of the prophet. Pinchbeck cites McKenna’s observation about the “‘intrinsic comedy of privileged knowledge’” (ibid: 99), and does attempt
to work out elements of his own arrogance throughout the memoir. The seriousness and pretension is mitigated by the following story:

*Shlupp, shlupp, shlupp*—the sound of my K-Mart slippers sinking into jungle muck. We were passing through a botanical wonderland—the greatest profusion of species of flora to be found on the planet—and it was all I could do to keep my focus on my footing, reaching down every few steps to pull one or the other of my slippers back on, preventing the mud from claiming it. (ibid: 359)

In admitting his own goofy—there is no more accurate word—behavior, Pinchbeck knowingly deflates the self importance he creates in other parts of his work. That the vessel of Quetzalcoatl is a scraggly dude fumbling with flip-flops in the jungle (and who wears flip-flops to the jungle?) is an acknowledgment and counter to the high-minded seriousness that is sometimes present.

Pinchbeck is likewise aware of some of the potential problems of engagements with the apocalyptic imagination. Such an awareness bolsters the case for taking *Return of Quetzalcoatl* as an instance of Keller’s counter apocalypse, because Pinchbeck seeks to utilize the transformative and creative strength of apocalypse while avoiding destructive violence. Additionally, Pinchbeck acknowledges the underlying dread that can paralyze action, stating, “these Days, an approaching or imminent ‘End of the World’ has taken on the Styrofoam ambiance of a cultural cliché” (ibid: 3), a restatement of Keller’s cryptoapocalypse, the ever-present sense of impending doom. That the End, in this sense, closure has “Styrofoam ambiance” is significant in that such an ambiance is entirely utilitarian, has poor aesthetic value, and will be around for a long time after its initial creation and use. He is also aware of the possibility for complacency that apocalypse can encourage. While he is hopeful that humanity will shift to a more positive mode of consciousness, which encourages empathic human relationships, he does
not overstate its necessity, its has-to-and-will-assuredly-happenness; he writes, “this quantum jump into a new context has been carefully prepared by our history, when it is viewed from a certain perspective. At the same time, our active engagement is required to make it happen” (ibid: 2).

Pinchbeck’s psychonautic forays into psychedelic realms may have different receptions by different readers – entertaining, illuminating, or simply indulgent. However interpreted, they but should not be viewed as incidental to the apocalyptic imagination. In fact, psychedelic experience seems to bear marked similarities to the apocalyptic imagination. Dellamora’s exploration of the queer apocalypse of William S. Burroughs found that

Burroughs writes in a genre of Gnostic apocalypse that projects a shadowing world of malign significance. The obverse of the genre is the quest for illumination. In Queer, this apocalyptic quest is figured by the fictionalized account of a South American journey in search of yage. (1995: 149)

While in the novel Queer the character Bill Lee fails in his quest for the psychedelic compound yage, also called Ayahuasca, Burroughs was successful in his own South American journeys, and documented his experiences in letters to Allen Ginsberg. His descriptions of his visions share characteristics essential to apocalypses:

Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants sprout out of your cock and vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of the body), ...Gaming tables where the games are played for incredible stakes. From time to time a player leaps up with a despairing inhuman cry having lost his youth to an old man or become Latah to his opponent. But there are higher stakes than youth or Latah (a condition
in which a person is open to suggestion and cannot control their own behavior).

Games where only two players in the world know what the stakes are. (2006: 50-51)

Here Burroughs describes a journey to another realm in which cosmological truths are revealed. The games being played may be viewed as the cosmic conflict of apocalypse; what stakes are higher than one's vitality or agency? Perhaps the fate of the world.

Ginsberg's recorded experience is even more explicitly apocalyptic. Writing to Burroughs detailing his own explorations into yage, Ginsberg worries, “I hardly have the nerve to go back, afraid of some real madness, a Changed Universe permanently changed” (ibid: 64). A changed universe is precisely the stakes of the apocalyptic imagination. Also, like many apocalyptic visions, the visions induced by yage can be terrifying.

The apocalyptic aspect is not particular to yage, for other psychedelic compounds have had similar effects recorded. Aldous Huxley describes his experience with mescaline as apocalyptic. He writes, “Confronted by a chair which looked like the Last Judgment—or, to be more accurate, by a Last Judgment which, after a long time and considerable difficulty, I recognized as a chair—I found myself all at once on the brink of panic” (1954: 55). Huxley also explains psychedelic experience as an enlightening unveiling, yet in more measured terms that compliments the sometimes overly enthusiastic Pinchbeck. Huxley writes:

I am not so foolish as to equate what happens under the influence of mescaline or of any other drug, prepared or in the future preparable, with the realization of the end and ultimate purpose of human life: Enlightenment, the Beatific Vision. All I am suggesting is that the mescaline experience is what Catholic theologians call ‘a gratuitous grace,’ not necessary to salvation but potentially helpful and to be
accepted thankfully, if made available. To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or to a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large--this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially of the intellectual. (ibid :73).

Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who first synthesized LSD and the first to experience its effects takes an even more measured approach to the use of psychedelics than Huxley, but his experience is likewise apocalyptic. The process of unveiling and redemption present in apocalypse is clear in Hofmann’s experience recounted by John Horgan:

Hofmann’s worst trip occurred under the influence of psilocybin, when he hallucinated that he was in a ghost town deep inside the earth. “Nobody was there. I had the feeling of absolute loneliness, absolute loneliness. A terrible feeling!” When he emerged from this nightmare and found himself with his companions again, he felt ecstatic. “I had feeling of being reborn! To see now again! And see what wonderful life we have here!” (Horgan, 2008)

Hoffman’s observations suggest that psychedelic experience is a personalized engagement with the apocalyptic imagination, or that the apocalyptic imagination may be viewed as a projection of psychedelic experience outward to the world at large. What is pertinent to discussions of contemporary visions of the apocalypse is that psychedelic apocalypse seems more concerned with creation and redemption, rather than destruction and purification.

The tension between creative and destructive engagements with the apocalyptic imagination is quite clear in the “War in Dreamland” podcast with Pinchbeck’s apocalypse
calibrated toward the hope for redemption, with Strieber focusing on pending catastrophe. The argument begins with Pinchbeck questioning Strieber about why he focuses on negative outcomes, and it intensifies with Pinchbeck’s suggestion that Strieber is unduly influenced by the entities he encounters anddocuments in *Communion* and that, moreover, these entities do not serve the best interests of humanity. Strieber becomes enraged, arguing, “You tell me that the entities are supposedly negative, when you don’t know jack shit about those entities because you’ve never had any contact with them” (*War in Dreamland*). Whether these entities are in actuality helpful or hurtful, real or fictitious is not as important to understanding the apocalyptic imagination as the conflict in outlooks presented by Strieber and Pinchbeck.

Throughout the interview, the tension between a creative and destructive apocalypse repeatedly plays out. Strieber sets up a question saying, “By 2012 we’re all gonna know we’re in some kind of endgame,” to which Pinchbeck replies, “I don’t think it’s endgame at all, I have a different perspective.” He later explains, “2012 can be seen in a positive way” because it will force humanity to manifest psychic ability. The back and forth is almost comedic: Strieber asserts, “The earth is no longer able to sustain us,” to which Pinchbeck replies, “I think the earth will be able to sustain us.” This point of sustainability is a particular site of conflict, with Strieber stating he knows that there will be a die-back of the human species in the next one-hundred or one-hundred-fifty years. Pinchbeck takes him to task on this point, that the future is not known by either of them, and that Strieber is only succeeding in putting out “negative vibes.” Pinchbeck suggests that in addition to being in league with negative entities, Strieber focuses on the negative because it sells well. His point is bolstered in that throughout the argument, Strieber continues to push Pinchbeck’s book, calling it “phenomenal” and “terrific.” Even in the midst of a heated, bordering on vitriolic argument, Strieber still finds opportunity to be a salesman.
While Pinchbeck finds Strieber to be obsessive about negative outcomes, Strieber finds Pinchbeck to be entirely too pollyannish. Strieber views himself as someone who is providing a valuable service, because “it is essential to be aware of these dangers.” Strieber sees himself giving warning and calling people to action and finds that Pinchbeck is someone who breeds complacency, because he is “Putting out another vibe, we need do nothing but sit and meditate and everything will be fine.” Strieber’s critique of Pinchbeck is somewhat incoherent, however; for, as according to Strieber, the happy hippie meditating upon visions of the future is also indicative of a “miserable fascism on the human spirit, a future that is enormously dreary.” Strieber does not explain what he means by this statement, but it may be inferred that Pinchbeck’s vision of a world without capitalism and unending commerce and consumption is somehow dreary and fascistic. What type of world would it be if books did not need to hawked on internet podcasts?

Unlike Pinchbeck’s apocalypse focused primarily on creation and redemption, Strieber’s focus on the destructive and purificative aspects of apocalypse are especially clear in his novel, 2012: the War for Souls. First published in 2007 and now available in grocery and discount stores as a mass market paperback, it is rumored to be in development by Warner Bros. Pictures, directed by Michael Bey and released in 2010 (2012: The War for Souls (2010)-Movie Details, 2008). The novel ought not to be viewed simply as a throwaway science fiction thriller that is not indicative of Strieber’s position on apocalypse because in an interview Strieber has claimed:

The novels are not truth disguised as fiction. They are an attempt to explore various possibilities and speculations through fiction, and hopefully unearth some truth in the process. For this reason, they are far more important than the nonfiction I have written speculating about the meaning of my own life and the
close encounter experiences of myself and so many others. There are some elements in the novels that I believe to be true but cannot prove, and others that are speculation based on my own memories, dreams and reflections. (Casteel, 2008)

While Pinchbeck uses the form of memoir to express his apocalyptic vision, Strieber uses the form of the science fiction novel.

The story takes place on three parallel worlds: 1) Earth, 2) a two-mooned Earth, 3) and Abaddon, home of reptilian aliens called seraph, who are intent on conquering both Earths. The protagonist on the two moon Earth is Martins Winters, an archaeologist who is present at the Great Pyramid of Giza when a giant lens appears that is a reptilian soul-capturing technology that allows the reptilians to enter other worlds. The regular Earth’s protagonist is Wiley (and sometimes Wylie, both spellings are sometimes used) Dale, a science fiction author that has access to the two mooned earth, and acts as its savior, partially through writing about his visions.

Wiley is clearly a proxy for Strieber, in addition to the similarity of name and occupation, both authored books about contact with aliens that had negative consequences on their personal lives. In War for Souls, Wiley’s wife Brooke asks Wiley not to write another book in which their family members are characters in it. She explains, “It hurt this family so much honey. I just can’t go through it again.” Then further explaining the difficulties such a project presents to their son, she states, “The kids eat him alive! His dad got a rectal probe. You try living that down at the age of twelve” (2007: 41). Strieber has said in an interview, “I rue the day I published ‘Communion.’ It destroyed my career and ruined my life” (Casteel, 2008). Similarly, Strieber has expressed doubts as to the significance of the 2012 date (War in Dreamland), and Wiley “figured it was
another Y2K, when the coming of the year 2000 had been expected to cause an outbreak of chaos, but which had actually been a lot of over hyped nonsense” (Strieber, 2007: 48). 2012 does end up having significance in Strieber’s work because it allows the reptilians access to other worlds for invasion.

The invasions, not surprisingly, are foiled and are emblematic of a destructive, purificative apocalypse. Evil is constructed as a fundamental force than is beyond redemption. After the scientifically minded Martin is made aware of the existence of souls, the narrator wonders, “Maybe the reason that crime was always with us was that the souls of criminals returned just like everybody else, and were criminals again. Maybe, if the the war was won, we could learn to pick and choose who would survive in eternity and who would not” (ibid: 146). Crime is not caused by social factors, or even a deficiency of will, but instead the fundamental nature of criminals, which is evil. After the war is won, the survivors do not need to learn how to “pick and choose” evil souls for destruction—the reptilian invasion takes care of that task. The destruction brought to the world is ultimately a purification, of which the survivors are aware: “They knew, then, that this terrible attack had also been a cleansing, because they could feel by its absence that the weight of wicked souls had been lifted” (ibid: 315). These wicked souls are not the reptilian aliens, but humans. Given this outlook, Strieber’s position that he is merely sounding a warning call about a coming human dieback seems to be partially informed by a fantasy that those who do die off had it coming. Similarly the deaths of evil beings are revealed, much as in the Book of Revelation. The reptilian invaders meet quite a grisly fate: “Far below, the seraph began to see arms and legs of their own kind, torsos, heads, shoes, falling around them, striking one and then another of them and causing their yellow brains to splash out. Heads
bounded along like great hailstones, or rocks catapulted down by a siege army” (ibid: 305). Not only do evil beings meet annihilation and slaughter, it is at best foolish to question this outcome, because feelings of caring are at best misguided, and leads to negative consequences. People who went out in search of their soul-sucked loved ones meet a similar fate because, “Their compassion and their love had been used to trap them” (ibid: 98). Just to clarify the message, the narrator flatly states, “Nice guys sure as hell finish last” (103).

Like many of the manifestations of the apocalyptic imagination that calibrates towards destruction and purification, *War for Souls* also exhibits a marked deference to authority. When huge swaths of the population are being soul-sucked into mindless servitors, the narrator finds, “In fact the most terrifying thing about the whole business was the silence from Washington and Topeka” (ibid:54). So long as paternal figures in state and national capitals can offer reassurance in the face of obvious destruction, one may remain somewhat calm, but should that voice be quiet, then the fear settles in. Similarly, there is idolization of the masculine power that accompanies authority as evidenced by “He (the president) left the room, and Martin thought he would follow that man anywhere. He had completely revised his opinion of the president. He was smart, decisive, and a master of the art of managing powerful men like the ones in this room” (ibid: 35). The top dog is admirable most for his capacity to dominate, rather than any other quality, such as defending against an alien invasion.

The tension between creative, redemptive apocalypse and destructive, purificative apocalypse are clearly present within discourses about 2012. As this end (as in purpose) date approaches and blockbuster films are released, these competing calibrations will likely continue to play out. Psychonaut and astronaut will argue about how much doom is healthy and how
authority should be conserved or undermined. Disillusionment with existent conditions inform
both of these interpretations of 2012, particularly looming climate change. Alien contact or shifts
in consciousness are both long shots, however upheaval as a result of environmental degradation
seems to be a safer bet.
CHAPTER IV:
CIVILIZATION’S DYING:

THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION IN THE PRIMITIVIST CRITIQUE OF CIVILIZATION

Civilization’s dying
And no one’s realizing
The position of hate stuck inside the gun
Civilization’s crying
And I won’t try to deny it
We got a problem son,
Something’s gotta be done
-Zero Boys
Indianapolis
1981

While 2012 displays some political orientation and expresses some political consequences, its political implications are secondary to its primary project. What may be broadly referred to as primitivism shares some of the epistemological concerns of Pinchbeck’s 2012, but it does so in an explicitly political manner, while also expressing important elements of the apocalyptic imagination. Primitivism focuses more acutely on structures of domination and oppression within the social world, while 2012, when it does address such issues, limits its focus primarily to individuals. However there is a shared sense that the dominance of science as avenue to truth may ignore other important forms of knowledge. In addition to social revolution, primitivism calls for a revolution of the imagination.

Primitivism, also referred to as anarcho-primitivism, or anti-civilizationalism, may best be understood as a tendency which identifies civilization itself, rather than patriarchy, capital, or the state as the essential source of oppression and domination. This is not to say that primitivism is not concerned with these, or other forms of oppression; primitivists claim to be opposed to domination in all of its stripes. Conceiving this move within radical discourse from critiquing the
state to civilization itself as a tendency is useful in that standard words to describe political orientations are somewhat contrary to assumptions that underly primitivism. Firstly, aside from the shared characteristic of identifying civilization as what is ultimately oppressive, multiple formulations exist as to the specifics of this line of thought. It also explicitly eschews many of the basic assumptions of modern politics, drawing from and overlapping with “post-left anarchy,” a move away from what its proponents term “Stalinist” tendencies within anarchist organizing, and post-anarchism, an attempt to incorporate post-structuralist thought with anarchism. Additionally, some critics of civilization, such as Jason McQuinn and Wolfi Landstreicher, reject the label of primitivist, however it is a useful shorthand for the purpose of this project. These people are still involved with primitivist discourse no matter their preferred self identification. The apocalypse of primitivism, the overthrow of civilization and establishment of a new way for human existence is expressed in apocalyptic terms, and also grapples with the implications of apocalypse within its discourse.

Though challenging civilization itself may seem to relegate primitivism to a necessarily marginal position, there are significant reasons for its examination. In addition to its radical critique of society that is worthy of consideration for purely intellectual reasons, there are also social reasons for doing so. Within the “anti-globalization movement” there is a significant anarchist component, which in turn has a significant element informed by primitivism (Day, 2005; Sheppard, 2003; McQuinn, 2003). The radical ecology movement is likewise influenced by and an influence of, primitivism. Earth First!, a movement dedicated to employing direct action to protect the natural world is one such example (McQuinn, 2003; Sheppard, 2003). A more radical outgrowth, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), has received media attention for arsons against SUV dealerships and construction sites of housing developments in exurbia is
likewise engaged within primitivism.

Such groups have gained the attention of the United States government, prompting, “John Lewis, the FBI’s deputy assistant director for counterterrorism, told Congress last May [of 2005] that ... animal rights groups represent America’s No. 1 domestic terror threat” (Maag, 2006: 20). The United States Congress, always ready to protect the homeland from terror and enterprise from damage to profit, passed the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, which in November, 2006 was signed into law. The act prohibits actions that:

- intentionally damages or causes the loss of any real or personal property
- (including animals or records) used by an animal enterprise, or any real or personal property of a person or entity having a connection to, relationship with, or transactions with an animal enterprise;
- intentionally places a person in reasonable fear of the death of, or serious bodily injury to that person, a member of the immediate family ... of that person, or a spouse or intimate partner of that person by a course of conduct involving threats, acts of vandalism, property damage, criminal trespass, harassment, or intimidation; or
- conspires or attempts to do so. (18 US Code. Sec. 43)

The National Lawyers Guild has expressed concerns that “the law may severely penalize successful email campaigns, media campaigns, whistle blowing, and demonstrations in protest of animal and natural resource industries—all because they result in profit loss. Isn’t that one way that cause-related campaigns measure the success of their message?” (Boghosian 2006: 8). The criminalization of such groups is somewhat similar to the criminalization of the Industrial Workers of the World through criminal syndicalist legislation of the early 20th century. Whether the attention from the federal government is reflective of these groups being a threat that must be
dealt with using the utmost severity, or that they are doing something right, is outside the scope of this particular project. However, it is indicative that the thinking behind these groups is worthy of examination.

Within American primitivism there is a multiplicity of outlooks and outlets but it is possible to identify primary avenues of dispersal. The print magazines *Green Anarchy*, in Eugene, Oregon, *Fifth Estate*, near Detroit, in Ferndale, Michigan, an *Anarchy: A Journal for Desire Armed* in Berkeley, California are the locations for much of the discourse, with websites such as primitivism.com and insurgentdesire.org.uk serving as additional outlets (McQuinn, 2003; Sheppard, 2003). Pamphlets exchanged at anarchist bookstores, infoshops, convergences and punk rock / hardcore shows are also vital within the exchange of these ideas. While it would be an oversimplification to identify any single individual as the primary theorist of primitivism, John Zerzan serves quite well as a proxy. In series of essays originally published in the 1980s by *Fifth Estate*, and later collected in the book *Elements of Refusal* (1988), Zerzan established many of the critiques that continues to inform primitivist discourse. The elements of civilization to be refused may be broadly defined as time, language and other forms of symbolic thought, that Zerzan finds to be the source of alienation, along with agriculture and the domesticity and accumulation of surplus resources it creates. Primitivists generally cite the move from nomadic life to established settlements as the first step in establishing a division of labor based upon both gender and social station.

The negation of civilization initially seems to exhibit the tendency toward destructive, purificative apocalypse. A more thorough reading of primitivist literature reveals that such a judgment would be premature. In a pamphlet entitled Primal War, Rob “los Ricos” Thaxton explains in an essay “For the Barbarians” his reasons for rejecting civilization, and the need to
examine one’s basic assumptions of what it means to be civilized:

The concentration camps of Nazi Germany – the use of biological warfare (smallpox) against Native American peoples – the deliberate starvation of millions of peasants by Stalin and Mao – the commercial trading of African peoples – the dungeons and pyres of the Inquisition – the Crusades – the bombings of Guernica, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Iraq, Yugoslavia – the creation of famine and pestilence by the World Bank and IMF – all acts of cruelest barbarity, right? No!

All of these horrific crimes against humanity were carried out by civilized people IN THE NAME OF CIVILIZATION!” (No date: No page.)

Thaxton is calling for more than the overthrow of an exiting order, he is encouraging a revolution of the imagination. Rather than horrors of history existing as barbarity that is an exception to the process of civilization, Thaxton argues that violence and domination are intrinsic to the project of civilization itself. It is not clear, however whether the call to end civilization is simply a fall into misanthropy and hopeless nihilism, or if there is some creative project also working.

The view that primitivism is necessarily misanthropic is particularly common amongst its critics. Radicals and anarchists of other stripes are also often critical of primitivist thought for this very reason. In a pamphlet titled “Anarchism vs. Primitivism,” Brian Oliver Sheppard argues from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective that primitivism is entirely unlike classical anarchism because primitivism’s aim is to reduce everyone to poverty, rather than improve lives (2003). He similarly identifies the elements of deep ecology within primitivism as essentially misanthropic. A full discussion of deep ecology is beyond the current scope, but a brief explanation is instructive. Deep ecology is a a philosophical position first developed by Norwegian Arne Naess, with significant contribution from Bill Devall and George Sessions in its dissemination in the
United States. To vastly oversimplify its positions, deep ecology holds that humanity should not view itself as in opposition to or outside of nature, that human interests are not intrinsically more valuable than the existence of any other being, and that a more holistic world view is required to ensure the survival of the biosphere. It presents its position in contrast to shallow ecology, that which seeks to mitigate environmental damage without addressing its underlying causes (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Drengson & Inoue, 1995). Rather than essentially misanthropic, deep ecology may be understood more honestly as rejecting human lordship. This may also be useful for attempting to understand primitivism.

While there may be inclinations to view primitivism as an expression of the desire to “live alone in the woods,” rejecting human contact and relishing misanthropy, the writings of primitivists also often contradict an explicitly misanthropic reading. In the 1994 essay “Time and It’s Discontents,” Zerzan explains the limits of such an outlook:

Above Lake Silvaplana, Nietzsche found the inspiration for Thus Spake Zarathustra. “Six Thousand feet above men and time...,” he wrote in his journal.

But time cannot be transcended by means of a lofty contempt for humanity, because overcoming the alienation that it generates is not a solitary project. In this sense I prefer Rexroth’s (1968) formulation: “the only Absolute is the Community of Love with which Time ends.” (1994)

Contact with other beings is not that which is to be abandoned, rather mediating forms of contact. Peter Bauer, who has adopted the moniker “Urban Scout” is a proponent of primitivism that is more explicit about the emotional component of his project. In an interview in Green Anarchy he explains the process of “rewilding,” an attempt to break the shackles of civilization on the individual level:
It’s a holistic sensory and emotional experience. You empathize with the world. You feel for it. Some anthropologists call this anthropomorphizing, but that word, I feel, originates from people who are unwilling to empathize. I’m not “projecting my feelings onto the world, I’m opening up and letting the feelings in. To me, empathy is another way of sensing, a way of “seeing the world with your heart. For example, when you hear a dog whine you know that it’s feeling something, a sadness. I’m not projecting my human emotions onto the dog. The dog is noticeably in pain, and that pain can carry over to me if I let it in. That’s called empathy. (Wells, 2008: 24)

Urban Scout expands the need to connect with others beyond humanity, but is also challenging assumptions about how one may come to “know.” This seems to be another expression of what Collins termed the revolution of imagination.

Much of primitivism bears a similarity to the apocalypse of Pinchbeck in that it calls for radically different ways of looking at the world. Fredy Perlman in the influential primitivist text “Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!” explains how assumptions about humans’ supposed intrinsic need to work unduly influences work of anthropologists. Observed ways of living must be made sense of in terms of work, rather than any other activity; Perlman explains, “Modern anthropologists who carry Gulag in their brains reduce such human communities to the motions that look most like work, and give the name Gatherers to people who pick and sometimes store their favorite foods. A bank clerk would call such communities Savings Banks” (2005: 28). The Gulag Perlman refers to is a prison within one’s mind that makes alienated work the pinnacle of human endeavor. One cannot succeed in any revolution without first revolting against naturalized structures within the mind, a revolution of the imagination. John Landau in “Civilization and the
Primitive” from the *Primal War* pamphlet expresses a similar idea in more purificative terms, “Civilization is being chained to the mind of Ideals, *any ideals*” (1995: No page). Landau finds the imposing of ideals, measuring all things against an imagined perfection, to be the primary problem of ideals. While pop psychology seems to pay lip service to such an idea with warnings against idealizing relationships, at the same time encourages unending “self-improvement” and tips for finding Mr or Ms Right. Primitivism attempts to be more consistent in its critique of holding ideals of perfection, and expands such critique to all manner of human thought.

Most problematic for primitivism seems to be Baconian science and its societal position. Zerzan explains, “Classical Newtonian physics in fact remains, despite changes in science, the dominant, everyday conception of time” (1994). Zerzan’s concern is similar to Pinchbeck’s in that what is most problematic with science is its social implementation, which often is less than scientific. Unlike Pinchbeck, Zerzan does not hold quantum physics to offer any especially liberating conclusions. Instead, he views all of science as socially contingent:

In physics, time seems to be an undefined basic dimension, as much a taken-for-granted given as it is outside the realm of science. This is one way to remind ourselves that, as with every other kind of thinking, scientific ideas are meaningless outside their cultural context. They are symptoms of and symbol for the ways of living that give rise to them. According to Nietzsche, all writing is inherently metaphorical, even though science is rarely looked at this way. (ibid)

Wolfi Landstreicher has expanded upon how science is not merely socially constituted, but how in his view, it reinforces existing social orders. In an essay “A Balanced Account of the World: A critical Look at the Scientific Worldview” published in *Anarchy: A Journal for Desire Armed*, Landstreicher argues, “Francis Bacon made it clear that science was not an attempt to understand
nature as it is, but to dominate it in order to twist the ends of humanity—in this case meaning the current rulers of the social order. In this light, science must necessarily be subjected to social analysis by anyone claiming to call the present social reality into question” (2007: 33).

Landstreicher is not critical of empirical observation and experimentation, so much as the way in which it is implemented. He approvingly cites Polynesian knowledge of navigation, learning about interacting with one’s environment as practiced by lay people, children and animals, and the techniques of early modern heretics such as Giordano Bruno. The primitivist apocalypse is attempting to unveil the assumptions of modern science and the ways it may be deployed for social control and domination.

Zerzan does not limit his critique to the certainty created by science, but includes all of language. Much as science determines the truth it aims to search for, so does language: “The arbitrary, self-contained nature of language’s symbolic creates growing areas of false certainty, where wonder, multiplicity and non-equivalence should prevail” (1999: 34). Language does not only determine truth, but what consciousness itself exits as. Zerzan contends that consciousness has been characterized as “That which can be verbalized, or [those who stake this position] even argue that wordless thought is impossible (despite the counter-examples of chess-playing or composing music)” (ibid: 32). For Zerzan, these totalizing aspects of language are the bases of alienation and ideology, leading to an overly determined conception of the world. He explains the correspondence between ideology and language as based upon reification; “Reification, the tendency to take the conceptual as the perceived and to treat concepts as tangible, is as basic to language as it is to ideology. Language represents the mind’s reification of its experience, that is, an analysis into parts which, as concepts, can be manipulated as if they were objects” (ibid: 34). Zerzan goes so far as to view the world without language to have been a type of lost paradise;
“The communication with all of existence must have been an exquisite play of all the senses, reflecting the numberless, nameless varieties of pleasure and emotion once accessible within us” (ibid: 31). The separation from “reality,” like science, serves the interest of those already dominating society. He explains, “Language, myth, religion and art thus advanced as deeply ‘political’ conditions of social life, by which the artificial media of symbolic forms replaced the directly-lived quality of life before division of labor. From this point on, humanity could no longer see reality face to face; the logic of domination drew a veil over play, freedom, affluence” (ibid:40). Here Zerzan engages in apocalyptic language, not of destruction and creation, but in revelation. Paradise continues to exist, the veil obscuring its existence need only be pulled back, though this is admittedly quite an undertaking.

Zerzan does engage sometimes engage in the either/or logic he claims language creates. Citing linguist E.H. Sturtevant, Zerzan argues, “Since all intentions and emotions are involuntarily expressed by gesture, look, or sound, voluntary communication such as language, must have been invented for the purpose of lying or deceiving” (ibid: 36). Zerzan casts language itself as a Prince of Lies to be done away with through an unveiling apocalypse. He offers an instance in which this unveiling routinely occurs: “There is a profound truth to the notion that ‘lovers need no words.’ The point is that we must have a world of lovers, a world of face-to-face, in which even names can be forgotten, a world which knows that enchantment is the opposite of ignorance. Only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning” (ibid: 43). Much as a text message or email lacking vocal inflection loses some of the communicability of a phone call, and the phone call loses the exchange of body language and facial expression, language may lose the immediacy of nonverbal communication, as that between idealized lovers. It is worth considering however that
intimacy is often expressed. To a certain extent there is a cultural expectation to verbalize one's thoughts about another, or to hear “how much you want me;” rather than trust a given moment. Perhaps deception has become so reified, its perpetuation through language is a sole source of comfort.

Primitivism does not only seek to pull back the veil of language, but also seeks the apocalypse as the end of time. It is the symbolic structure of time, and its accompanying alienation and domination the primitivists find problematic. Zerzan finds time to be central to understanding the problems with contemporary life. He maintains, “Time is increasingly a key manifestation of the estrangement and humiliation that characterize modern existence” (1994). The symbolic structuring of past, present and future, and the quantifying of existence lends itself well to instituting social control. Ultimately, for Zerzan time, like language, is a deception. This does not mitigate its power however; Zerzan explains, “Why does this ‘illusion’ have such a hold over us? We might just as well ask why alienation has such a hold over us” (ibid). The most insidious aspect of time is when it manifests itself as linear, particularly as the basis for progress. Tara Specter’s essay “Hope Against Hope” in *Green Anarchy* explains “We should not expect progress. Progress belongs to the time of false ecology, to the history of a world whose time has been made straight by the illusions of economy. The Earth has never known a line like that. Time is found in tendrils, in loops, in the movement of circles, ellipses, and continua” (2008: 12). Again, the primitivist apocalypse, much like Pinchbeck’s, rejects Enlightenment assumptions such as a progressive move of history.

While Zerzan and Landstreicher avoid advocating the exploration of fairy realms through shamanic practice, other primitivists echo Pinchbeck. In *Green Anarchy*, Scavenger writes about “Reclaiming the Myth-Time: Finding Our Place Through Story and Song,” embracing the
possibility of interacting with fantastic creatures while maintaining a more skeptical outlook than Pinchbeck. Scavenger recounts an experience he had in which he entertains having seen some sort of fairy, nymph, or sylph, but concludes:

Ultimately it does not matter what I saw. Being very critical of most things and yet receptive to the mystery of the world I came to see the impact of that brief connection was all that mattered. I changed.... The fact that I am willing to share that story and the way I share it speaks more on who I am than on the allegedly objective reality of what I saw on that day. Believe, disbelieve, or ponder – how you receive the story is how we relate as beings. How we communicate is how we connect, or fail to connect. (2008: 44)

Exhibiting characteristics of the apocalyptic imagination, Scavenger’s encounter with an unseen realm of otherworldly creatures serves as instruction for interacting with beings in the real world. Rather than carrying an internalized fear of expressing one’s experience and inner world, Scavenger argues for an honesty in the face of potential ridicule and a reciprocal credulity and acceptance for relating to other people.

Primitivism also shares with Pinchbeck a romanticizing of the natural world and indigenous cultures. The creation of throwbacks to the paleolithic as monolithic is critiqued by Sheppard as “One of the central flaws in primitivist logic is the conflation of millenia of various cultures and societies into one entity—‘primitive man’” (2003: 13). The appropriation of cultures into a potluck to revive potlatch sometimes borders on parody. Urban Scout explains his attempt to rewild in terms of drawing on indigenous cultures thusly:

To me, urban hunting and gathering and the rewilding stuff isn’t so much about primitivism -that’s inevitable- for me it’s about returning to an indigenous
mindset, less about wearing buckskin or living in a Tipi, and more about seeing things through the eyes of a native, and having the relationship that they had with their human families, and the larger family that included everything under and beyond the sun. (Wells, 2008:24)

While Urban Scout maintains his project is less about living in a Tipi than holding a particular mindset, it is still a component of his project, as demonstrated by his choice of shelter in Portland, Oregon. A similar example of primitivism becoming its own caricature is that Primal War has three pages of illustrated instructions on the creation of bolas, axes and spears with the caption “THE TIME HAS COME / TO PICK UP THE SPEAR / TO DESTROY THE STATE / WE WERE RAISED TO FEAR.” Images of revolutionaries dwelling in tipis in a friend’s backyard fashioning weapons out of sticks and stones is as goofy as a New York shaman trouncing through a jungle in flip-flops, but lacks the knowing self-deprecation. Perhaps this may be an expression of a willingness to express one’s desire in the face of ridicule?

The critique of language and experiments with other ways of living are paths for overcoming the domesticity that is created by civilization. “What Is Primal War” in the pamphlet Primal War explains the reason for rejecting civilization as a combination of the alienating effects of symbolic thought and property. The anonymous author contends, “We are tired of working away our lives to pay for foods which grows (sic) free, to pay for entertainment that only topically fills the voids, we are tired of living in constant fear of being killed by the machines we have worked so hard to maintain and own, we are tired of always looking into the future instead of living in the present” (No date: No page). The way people are conditioned to accept that of which some primitivists have grown tired is a function of social control over ones mind. Zerzan explains, “The subjection of outer nature, as Adorno and others have understood, is
successful only in the measure of the conquest of inner nature” (1994), with “What is Primal War contending “The same forces that colonize to civilize the pockets of remaining wilderness have been colonizing our minds with the aim of domesticating us to feed this death machine. The overall level of pacification of the captive masses can show the effectiveness of this taming” (No date: No page). So effective is the colonization of the mind, primitivism calls for apocalypse to tear this veil away.

The apocalyptic imagination operating within primitivist discourse has not gone unnoticed by its participants. Particular attention is paid to the cryptoapocalypse identified by Keller as the underlying feeling of paralyzing dread present in contemporary society. “What is Primal War?” describes the cryptoapocalypse in societal terms, “The end product of a dangerously high level of alienation and meaninglessness to a world of throwaway products is a passive nihilism that pacifies us. We feel that the problems of the world are too great for us to deal with, and so we sink back into a dazed, depressed state and watch the world coming to an end” (No date: No page). Rebelaze writes in *Green Anarchy* about the effects of cryptoapocalypse in personal terms:

I have no idea why I’m alive right now, in a time with so much misery and violation, brutality and destruction everywhere. And like ordinary folks I too feel paralyzed, too helpless to do anything. I find comfort in saying that I’m helpless because it allows me to continue with my cowardice, my laziness, my ignorance which all define me in my puny state of needing shelter in right-angled buildings and a hunk of engineered metal strapped around me to transporting (sic) me from place to place. This mantra of feeling paralyzed allows me to trick myself into thinking that someone else will clean up the whole stinking mess and turn things
around toward meaning once again. But really I know “someone” won’t. I know that I can only change myself, and that is the only way I know how to change the world. I just don’t want to do the work because it’s so difficult. (2008: 6)

For Rebelaze, the cryptoapocalypse is not so cryptic, the widespread misery of the world is all too apparent but just as disabling. The idea of a coming civilizational collapse that is ever drawing nearer, driven by industrial society’s ever increasing concentration of wealth, ecological devastation, and increasing reliance on fiat currency prompted up by a vast network of interdependent financial systems, underlies much of primitivist thought. Much as the seeming invulnerability of civilization is disempowering for Rebelaze, assuredness of its impending collapse can also produce only inaction.

In an essay “Waiting for the Apocalypse: The Ideology of Collapse and the Avoidance of Revolutionary Responsibility,” Landstreicher explores the consequences of the apocalyptic imagination within a revolutionary movement. The assumption of collapse mitigates the need to take any action; Landstreicher explains, “Assuming the inevitability of collapse is an easy way out. It permits one not to face the present reality, not to place oneself in conflict with the existence we are living here and now” (2003). This echoes general characteristics of apocalypse identified by Collins, that, “Detachment from this world in the hope of the glory that is above or is to come” (1984: 214). Or glory to be found in the woods:

Instead (of engaging in revolutionary activity) one can simply go off into the wilds and give oneself over to developing “primitive” skills in order to prepare oneself for the coming collapse and let the rest take care of itself. Of course, I support people learning any sort of skill that can enhance their capacities for self-determination and self-enjoyment. The problem with this perspective is not in
choosing to learn the skills, but in giving up a practice aimed toward the revolutionary destruction of the present social order based on a faith in its inevitable collapse. (Landstreicher, 2003)

Though Landstreicher entirely rejects any sort of “apocalyptic faith,” he does advocate for an engagement with the revolution of imagination the apocalyptic imagination can help inspire. He contends, “Our practice of revolt starts from our own dream of the world we desire and our own understanding of how the present world stands in our way, an understanding that we sharpen through analysis and critique in order to better attack this world” (ibid). This position may be taken to represent a sort of counter-apocalypse, one that acknowledges the potentially paralyzing aspects of apocalypse, yet calls for the creation of an entirely new world.

Within the primitivist apocalypse there are calibrations towards both destruction and purification as well as creation and redemption. The collapse of civilization suggests a die-off of human population, much like that of which Strieber is sure. This point does not escape its critics, such as Sheppard. Sheppard cites an interview with Zerzan conducted by Lawrence Jarach which examines the likelihood of a die-off:

Jarach says the criticism that constructing a primitivist society “would result in an immediate mass die-off of thousands—if not millions—of humans” is a mere “dismissal” from those who do not want to spend time trying to understand the many forms of primitivism he has laid out for us. Jarach then asks Zerzan if, in fact, “millions will die immediately” if primitivists had their way. “Perhaps the key word in your question is ‘immediately,’” Zerzan carefully responds. “In other words, if the whole prevailing apparatus vanished instantly somehow, millions probably would die.” The solution is apparently to slowly dismantle technology—
something that would not bring about mass death *immediately*, it is true, but gradually. (Sheppard, 2003: 37)

Zerzan seems to be suggesting a reduction in global human population, which is not exactly the same as a die-off in which millions of people die. For Zerzan, human population is determined by agricultural surplus, and a reduction in surplus would likely result in an adjustment of family size. Sheppard does not differentiate the two possibilities, and approves of, “Understandably, few people want to support something that is hostile to the life-saving medical care, information technology, and electronic entertainment that they enjoy” (ibid: 9). The centralization of medical care among privileged classes goes unexamined by what one may assume would be a class-conscious anarcho-syndicalist. The primitivist critique of such things as electronic entertainment as only resulting in alienation is not examined by Sheppard.

A more nuanced critical examination of collapse is conducted by Landstreicher. In addition to the shirking of revolutionary responsibility that comes from embracing an ideology of collapse, Landstreicher finds the destructive and purificative impulse to be troubling and naive. He explains:

A few even seem to take delight in the suffering and death that would inevitably accompany such a collapse, apparently forgetting that this suffering and death would not likely recognize distinctions between rulers and ruled, between domesticated and wild, between civilized and “primitive”. Furthermore, they seem to ignore the fact that those who have controlled power and resources up to now would certainly continue to try to do so as the world collapsed around them, most likely resorting to the same sort of techniques as warlords in Somalia or Afghanistan have used, but on a much larger scale with much more destructive
In this view, a civilizational collapse is not an event to relish or hope for, because in addition to human suffering, there would likely be an increase in authoritarian violence and domination.

The destructive and purificative aspects of apocalypse is much more evident within primitivist discourse that focuses on negation. Zerzan sometimes crosses into this territory in his project to trace the ultimate source of alienation. A simplistic reading of his work could lead to a belief that if language, number, time, art and symbolic thought could be done away with, the earth and humanity would again be purified. The focus on negation is more explicit in “Civilization and the Primitive.” Landau defines civilization as “Civilization is not fooling around, not blowing your top, not having a temper tantrum, not touching, not following your drift, not ease, not acting like those who are ‘lower’ than you, not farting, not belching, not napping, not breathing, not crying, not resting... It is the litany of ‘nots’ (/knots)” (1995 :No page). Though Landau is discussing the negations inherent in civilization, his focus is still on negation; farting, belching and napping, while enjoyable, does not constitute an affirmative plan for liberation. The tendency towards destruction is most clearly expressed by Thaxton in “For the Barbarians”:

Do you want to know what kind of unfeeling, sadistic person could carry out acts of geno- and ecocide? Take a look around at any shopping mall, go to any religious service in America. Could it be any plainer to you if your cars needed human blood in order to run? If Americans had to strangle an infant Native American in order to gain financing for their homes, would there be forcible childbirth centers on reservations? And would there be any decline in the number of home sales?” (No date: No page).
While his characterization of the American public may be a bit inaccurate, it is much more likely that it would be preferable to hire a proxy to conduct the strangulation than to do it oneself, it is a creation of a near demonic opponent, incapable of redemption. Thaxton does not go so far as Strieber in positing that immortal souls are the ultimate cause for American callousness and gluttony, but his rhetoric does the trick.

While there are some instances of destructive apocalypse within primitivism, with collapse and die-off being no small sack of potatoes, more often than not the focus is on redemption and creation. Specter explains her views on the continuation of life in the face of perceived global death:

The land is dying but it looks like spring... And yet, while frightened, I also recognize a certain power of the Earth, which is itself always more than death. Life, once begun, once discovered and unleashed, cannot be lost. Death can come for living things, but life itself is endless. For every misshapen circumstance we bring and every rhythm we destroy, life will find a new way. It will heal its wounds and continue on, wrapping its patterns, its lifeways, and its newly innovated rhythms around time itself, pulling eternity into an exuberance that shuts out all particulars of despair. (2008: 12)

Specter utilizes the expressive language of apocalypse to convey feeling about the world, namely that while humanity often positions itself as lord over all, its ability to fully enact a death sentence may be incomplete. Additionally, Specter is calling for a change in perspective regarding death, that it is secondary to life. While Kermode may argue that apocalypse is an expression of unease about mortality, this apocalypse wants to suggest that the unease may be exaggerated.
Landstreicher engages with the apocalyptic imagination even in instances in which he is not specifically writing about apocalypse. In his “Balance Account of the World” essay Landstreicher concludes, “I am not interested in models, but in the opening of possibilities, the opening to relations with the world around us that are without measure—and the past is never an opening; at best, it is evidence that what exists is not inevitable” (2007: 39). This is a re-articulation of Collins’s suggestion that apocalypse can serve as a reminder that the world as now constituted is not the only form in which it must exist. Landstreicher’s counter apocalypse in “Waiting for the Apocalypse” clearly emphasizes the creative and redemptive aspects of apocalypse, and the need to not allow it to breed complacency. Landstreicher argues:

Because only by learning to actively create our lives for ourselves, developing ways of living that are absolutely different from those that we have experienced up to now – something that can only be learned in revolt – will we be able to guarantee that the end of this civilization will not lead to even worse horrors. Because this is the meaning of taking responsibility for one’s own life here and now, this is the meaning of revolutionary responsibility. (2003)

For Landstreicher revolt is an ongoing process in which critical examinations of social conditions as well as one’s own assumptions are always examined. The revolution of imagination exists as a precondition for insurrection.

The primitivist apocalypse is most instructive when viewed primarily as a revolution of the imagination that calls into question otherwise unquestioned “truths” about society and social domination and stratification. The spectacular destruction and fall of Babylon likely does hold some appeal for adherents, though relishing destruction is not generally present in its literature. McQuinn characterizes the strength of primitivism as:
The primitivist milieu has developed and popularized critiques of civilization, progress and technology and that is its most important strength. I don’t consider myself a primitivist because of what I see as the inherently ideological thrust of any theory which idealizes a particular form of life (whether or not it has ever actually existed). But this does not mean that I am any less critical of civilization, progress or technology. Rather, I see these critiques as essential to the renewal and further radicalization of any genuine attempts at general contemporary social critique. (2003)

In a certain sense, primitivism, or anti-civilizationalism, is the necessary outgrowth of anarchism, a program that seeks to undo all authoritarian structures. The destruction of authority and creation of mutually supportive social relationships is very similar to Carpenter’s counter-apocalypse. The specifics are somewhat divergent, but the general thrust is in the same direction.
CONCLUSION

Tell me girls, tell me boys
Do you wanna save the world
Or do you wanna blow it up?
-Bobby Joe Ebola and the Children MacNuggits
*Carmelita Sings: Visions of a Rock Apocalypse*
Oakland
1999

Return of a Christ, revealing of aliens, global shifts in consciousness, civilizational collapse, or ecological destruction are all apocalyptic scenarios of varying degrees of likelihood. The willingness to entertain fantastic scenarios is what is central to the operation of the apocalyptic imagination. More important than whether any anticipated event ever in fact occurs is how one thinks about any given apocalypse, whether focus is given to destruction and purification or creation and redemption. Rather than conceiving of the apocalyptic imagination as essentially reactionary, authoritarian, patriarchal and fascistic, or conversely, as literature of the oppressed that is necessarily revolutionary and liberatory, a nuanced reading of apocalypse as a field with conflicting impulses or varying calibrations is much more useful.

Though the apocalyptic imagination is not monolithic in its political orientation, it would be a mistake to characterize it as apolitical. Particularly important is the connection with epistemology and ways of knowing to social organization. Such a point is an underlying theme of both Pinchbeck and primitivists, but has also been explored by much of the critical theory of the late twentieth century. Perhaps the connection between power and knowledge explored by French post-structuralists is an underlying, unsaid reason reason Jay and others have characterized postmodernism, which the post-structuralists are often subsumed by, as apocalyptic in and of itself. It seems unreasonable on its face to think that changes in social orders and structures could occur without accompanying changes to the ways in which actual people think.
Whether Antonio Gramsci or Franz Fanon engage with the apocalyptic imagination is a matter worthy of further exploration.

It seems the cryptoapocalypse has become more entrenched in the decade since Keller initially described it. In some senses, it has become less cryptic and more explicit, though the accompanying sense of dread seems to have intensified. New Orleans washed away, the human cost largely ignored so that capitalist investors can establish a Kingdom of Heaven and Tourism; the revelation that “constitutionally protected” liberties are as much a reality as Christ leading his battalions of saints over the fields of Megiddo, the reestablished Garden of Eden filled with Lexuses and olive branches contains foreclosed homes and food riots. The list can go on, but should be approached as a reason one’s own imagination may need revolutionary overhaul, rather than taking pleasure in a jaded pretentious knowing that one is somehow special for indeed living in the worst of all times. As Kermode explains, this is not a unique position, and is rather quite ordinary. Vermilion Sands, writing in *Fifth Estate* suggests in an essay “After the Fall” that the grisly realities of the world which include war, genocide and starvation should not be taken as signs of a coming apocalypse. Instead Sands suggests:

> I think we should all just agree that we live in a post-apocalyptic era and none of us were saved. None of us rapturously ascended into the heavens to be welcomed the loving arms of some jealous, patriarchal Mesopotamian deity. No one was whisked away by some interstellar ark to a better life in some off-world gated community. (2007: 23)

While such a suggestion does somewhat mitigate the paralyzing fear or sedating hope of apocalypse, it also somewhat undoes the creative aspects of the apocalyptic imagination. However, Sands’s anti-apocalypse is written with expressive language to communicate a feeling
about the world, and presents an interesting counter point to the apocalypses previously examined.

Whether one is sure that a global shift in consciousness is on its way, or that civilizational collapse is imminent, or some combination with elements of whatever fantastic or esoteric tradition, the apocalyptic imagination can at times become just another quick fix, deferring responsibility to a later date. Graham Purchase, an ecologically conscious anarcho-syndicalist, sees such a desire in many contemporary radicalisms. He characterizes the impulses as:

Looking back toward the Stone Age or forward toward some post-industrial techno-utopia is equally pointless. Primitivists long for a quick fix from a (largely imagined) glorious past, while technophiles long for the quick fix in an idealized future – when the way out of the present mess probably entails an imaginative mixture of Neolithic community and selected technologies. (1995)

Though Purchase is not discussing apocalypse, his commentary is just as applicable. The apocalyptic imagination may be able to create images of an idealized future and rhetorical devices to motivate the creation of such a utopia, it largely ignores the necessary leg work to get from here to there. However, the imagination that is necessary to get out of the present mess can be bolstered by the apocalyptic imagination.

In some ways Purchase is a useful corollary to not just the primitivists, but also to Pinchbeck. While Pinchbeck has a political program if human telepathy does not emerge in the next few years, Purchase has devoted more writing to developing a program. He largely focuses on international unionism, and forms of anarchist organization, but also investigates “eco-technologies” which are more thorough in minimizing ecological slaughter than the current “green revolution” of “clean coal” and gradual increases in fuel economy. He also differs from
some other anarcho-syndicalist critics of primitivism, such as Sheppard. Sheppard dismissed permaculture, the growing of foodstuffs without having to bring in outside resources, just as readily as the most disturbing elements of primitivism, falling into the techno-industriophila previously identified by Purchase. Purchase is even cautious in putting too much stock in any given solution, and cautions, “It is even possible that many of the new eco-technologies that seem to offer hope may turn out to have unforeseen side effects, and that humanity will be compelled to give up modern technology altogether. But, if this happens, it must be an organic process” (ibid). Such a program complements Pinchbeck, and is in many ways closer to his outlook than an entirely primitivist politics.

The apocalyptic imagination informs radical thought generally in that the desire for a new world necessarily entails leaving the old. In the contemporary apocalypses examined the focus on what may constitute truth is essential to those projects, and is arguably their most interesting component. Reexamining what is truth allows an exploration into what are the “goods” to be pursued either by society or an individual. Particularly important to such an engagement with truth is what modes of thought may constitute truth. Instead of “objective universals” there is an effort to engage with what Raymond Williams terms structures of feeling, “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (1977: 132). Knowledge, rather than something existing outside of experience, as some sort of Platonic form, it may be considered simply as that which is worth knowing. Such a conception of knowledge may include emotion and feeling, or as Williams describes:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind,
in a living and interrelating continuity. (ibid)

An interrogation of ends is crucial in a time of crisis, whether the crisis is that expressed by those engaged with the apocalyptic imagination, the crisis that underlies the cryptoapocalypse, “the repeating pattern of a crisis every few months, usually focusing on trouble at a single institution” that John Authers identifies in the *Financial Times* (2008) or the ongoing crises that Derrida places within all decision making processes. Rather than change that we can believe in, the apocalyptic imagination attempts to change what we believe.
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