
APOCALYPTIC DESIRE AND OUR URBAN IMAGINATION

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INTRODUCTION

The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be.
Paul Valery

For approximately the last three millennia, some portion of the world's population has subscribed to the notion that the world as we know it is going to be destroyed by the wrath of nature, the will of God, or by human development itself. While many apocalyptic references relate back to conservative religious traditions, a great number in circulation today are being promoted by progressive secular entities. Eco-theorist scholar Greg Garrard writes that not only has the notion of the apocalypse been present since the beginning of Judeo-Christian time, but the apocalyptic trope has more recently "provided the green movement with some of its most striking successes," in publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.¹

As demonstrated by Pixar's Hollywood feature *Wall-e* or Hayao Miyazaki's popular anime film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, there are no shortages of references to a future civilization emerging after the fall of industrial-capitalism in today's popular media. While some post-apocalyptic representations such as Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* or the History Channel's *Life After People* might remain fairly nihilistic in their future projections of urban life, the majority of these post-apocalyptic narratives provide some glimmer of hope that, with a few critical changes to certain Western traditions, a new type of sustainable balance is possible.

This paper builds on my past research regarding the above topic, tying it here to sociologist Ulrich Beck's theory of reflexive modernism, connecting his theories on social agency to the theme of this conference regarding change and imagining the future. While many of the threats that fuel today's apocalyptic imagination are real, I argue in the end that the real crisis of the future is first and foremost that of time — or more precisely our current out-of-date *concept* of historical time.

THE APOCALYPTIC TROPE

The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.
Abraham Lincoln

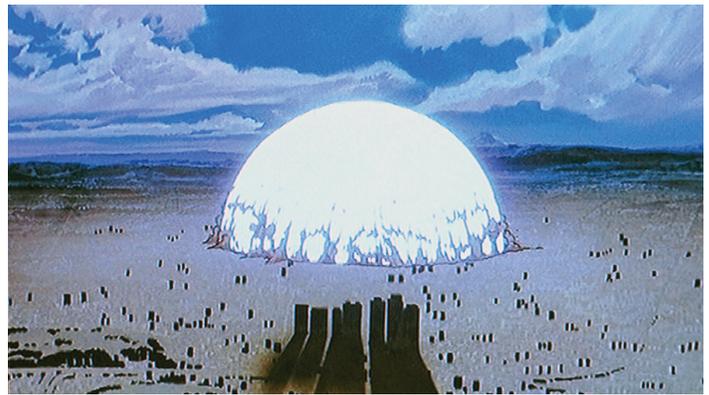


Figure 1. Opening shot of Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988).

The apocalyptic trope has proven to be one of the most complicated, resilient, and powerful metaphors used throughout our history to manipulate human behavior. On one side, it continues to be a central rhetorical element connecting a multitude of conservative agendas (religious, military, and industrial) to justify an assumed moral supremacy of one group over other humans as well as nature. On the other side, in contrast, it has emerged as one of the most relied-upon and productive rhetorical devices in the current environmental movement.

Lawrence Buell writes in his seminal work, *The Environmental Imagination*, "The apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal."² It is hard to find any contemporary environmental argument today that does not cite this metaphor. While both sides might embrace the idea of a future reckoning, there is little agreement on what to do next, particularly because the apocalyptic desire is built around the desire of a final show-down between opposing worldviews.

As Mathew Gross and Mel Gilles have stated in their recently published book *The Last Myth: What the Rise in Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America*

"(t)he purpose of the anticipated apocalyptic moment is to vindicate one's beliefs. The apocalyptic moment resolves with finality the tensions between good and evil, between believer and non-believer, between environmentalist and capitalist—and the holder of the apocalyptic vision invariably comes out on top."³

So, while the scientific Enlightenment temporarily quelled traditional religious apocalyptic fervor during part of the last millennium, the two rivers of religion and science-- each with their strong narrative push forward-- have, with the advent of the nuclear age and the current environmental crisis, become in effect one fast moving river.

Historically, the disciplines of architecture, landscape and urban planning of course have emerged from both those two traditions. As such, it is imperative that we all critically assess to what extent our own imaginations are limited or pre-determined by this often-latent trope.

In truth, several significant apocalyptic-like events *have* already occurred within the last century, for the same reasons any larger one might eventually pursue—those reasons being our mistaken belief in our ability to both control nature and to manage risks by the same means we might manage smaller local industrial hazards during the last century. Cities such Hiroshima, Chernobyl, New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, Sendai have within the last half century experienced devastating acts of man and/or nature. Even those catastrophes that might be ‘blamed on nature’ were by and large exacerbated by human decisions either underestimating the extent of nature’s power or overestimating the technology used to control it. Without a doubt, our traditions and desires and our hubris are knitted deeply into our built environment.

Architecture by and large has responded to each crisis by using the same technology guided by the same attitudes that helped bring upon the initial calamity to begin with. As Pulitzer Prize winning cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker has noted: across the span of history, societies when threatened are more likely to more solidly cling to their cultural beliefs than to change them, even if it those beliefs might lead to the culture’s own extinction.⁴ As such, without a significant rethinking of our culture’s relationship to nature and without gaining independence from all forms of current apocalyptic discourse, we will continue to have as many failures as successes in our continued attempts to control nature—whether in rebuilding these cities or designing new ones. With deep resignation, Buell suggests, since our desire to control nature will continue

“to run strong in late twentieth-century American culture, we may expect the oscillation between utopian and dystopian scenarios that began in the last century to continue unabated....there is no question of it disappearing anytime soon as plot formula.”⁵

TOWARDS A REFLEXIVE FUTURE: ULRICH BECK’S ANALYSIS

Risk society is catastrophic society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm. Ulrich Beck

The motivating forces behind the deployment of this trope within the environmental movement are quite different on many levels than those in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In short, while the initial apocalyptic tendencies of the past were a metaphysical response to

the *under*-availability of protection against either nature or aggressive military forces of others, the apocalyptic urge today is due to the *over*-presences of manmade byproducts of the industrial age.⁶

As written in his seminal work, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*,

“The risks and hazards of today thus differ in an essential way from the superficially similar ones in the Middle Ages through the global nature of their threat (people, animals, and plants) and through their *modern* causes. They are risks of *modernization*.”⁷

Risks have always been here throughout history, but that in the past, these were risks to individuals. “In the earlier period, the word ‘risk’ had a note of bravery and adventure” In contrast, because today’s risks (such as global warming) endanger entire populations, the

“normative bases of their calculation the concept of accident and insurance, medical precautions and so on—do not fit the basic dimensions of these modern threats...This means that the calculation of risk as it has been established so far by science and legal institutions collapses.”⁸



Figure 2. In Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä* (1984), the Princess discovers the secret world of nature hiding beneath toxic forest above.

I am interested in Beck’s work because, rather than proposing a regressive turn to deal with this complexity, he instead proposes that what is needed is a *reflexive* impulse brought to the next stage in modernity’s own trajectory—through social engagement of a larger number of participants in the assessment and management of today’s level of acceptable risk at large than in the past.

Modernization involves not just structural change, but a changing relationship between social structures and social agents. When Modernization reaches a certain level, agents tend to become more individualized, that is decreasingly constrained by structures...And for modernization successfully to advance, these agents must release themselves from these structures and actively shape the modernization process.⁹

Originally, modern society promoted increased individualism, freedom liberal democracy relative to pre-modern society. Yet, recent postmodern critique reveals how the “quasi-religious modern icon

of science ” has in fact imposed controlling identities on “social actors, in the construction of risk, defining sanity, proper sexual behavior, countless other rational frames of social control.”¹⁰ In the case of architecture and urbanism, I would say these controls to our society might related to certain modernist zoning practices, the technologies employed to control nature and people, such as the use of ubiquitous visual surveillance, etc. Beck urges instead, that social subjects today be more “reflective in the construction of their own biographies” particularly in regard to ensuring ongoing informed progress in relationship to the environmental crisis.¹¹

Structural separation between the private industrial sectors and the political sector can’t continue when such risks from industrialization and modern processes have such widespread consequences (global environmental damage, collapsing financial markets, legal proceedings, harm to public health). What then “emerges in risk society is the political potential of catastrophes. Averting and managing these can include the reorganization of power and authority.”¹² Architects and planners, as part of the industrial and scientific sector producing the environment itself, must too reconcile their practices with this new reality and question what ‘filters’ we use in determining or measuring a development’s value or success.

THE POST-APOCALYPTIC: A CASE STUDY

Civilizations die from suicide, not from murder. Arthur J. Toynbee

Looking at the apocalyptic rhetoric itself has certain limits. As Gross and Gilles write,

“The deeper we entangle the challenges of the twenty-first century with apocalyptic fantasy, the more likely we are to paralyze ourselves with inaction- or with the wrong course of action.”¹³

By reacting to the *idea* of the apocalypse —rather than the underlying problems, most people, Gross and Gilles suggest, either ‘party, pray or prepare’ rather than change their actions.¹⁴ In contrast, I have found *post*-apocalyptic media and literature to be far more compelling, with the central question of these dystopian narratives being: will we, when faced with the idea of extinction after an apocalyptic event, decide to continue on with our past traditions or will we decide to somehow change our relationship to nature and technology?

In my research, I have tended to focus less on American disaster fantasies and more on the genre of Asian post-apocalyptic anime. This is mainly due to the fact that in the American versions with films such as *Armageddon* or *Day after Tomorrow*, the narratives deal only with the protagonists’ choices during the duration of the event itself, trying as best they can through the narrative structure to reconfirm their place in relationship to world (particularly in terms of reinstating the middle class white male’s control over nature as well as his protective value to his family). In contrast, Asian anime productions such as *Nausicaä*, *Akira*, *Appleseed*, *Sky Blue*, *Origin of the Past*, start with the premise that the apocalypse has already occurred and instead ask what to do next.¹⁵

Emerging as a genre after World War II in the shadows of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, anime productions by and large acknowledge that we now live in a landscape that has been forever altered (akin to Bill McKibben’s pronouncement of the end of nature).¹⁶ Finding in the aftermath of devastation, the protagonists are thrust into some form of leadership due to the exposed limits of traditional authority. These heroes and heroines are typically young adults, in a liminal state between losing their innocence and gaining their own sense of power.

In his book *Ecocriticism*, Gary Garrard writes, the apocalyptic device in narrative is always ‘proleptic,’ predicting the meaning of our present actions as projected in the future.¹⁷ Much of what is represented in these anime works is eerily similar to what occurs after many real disasters, particularly in regard to the spontaneous agency of ordinary people when traditional authorities are not properly equipped to deal with the disaster’s magnitude. Many of the main characters in these anime are the offspring of the scientific, militarist or political authorities previously in power, and struggle in deviating from their past norms. In almost all cases, they were depicted young women, racial minorities or some type of cyborg—other, to exemplify their independence from the past hegemonic structures.

In many ways, the films exemplify the type of agent-hood encouraged by Beck’s theories outlined earlier. In the earlier industrial stage of modernity, Beck argues, that reflexivity was

“excluded from the social and political interactions between experts and social groups over modern risks, because of the systematic assumption of realism in science.”¹⁸

Yet today that is not an option as things are so complex and so many people are affected by these decisions. If reflective learning process was in place prior to any number of our recent disasters, we might have better recognized

“the conditions underpinning the scientific conclusions, drawn out the social situational questions which they implied, and examined these with the benefit of *inter alia* of the different forms of knowledge held by people other than scientists.”¹⁹

Beck argues any reflexive learning process would cause “negotiation between different epistemologies and sub-cultural forms” and “would have entailed the development of the social and moral identities of the actors involved.”²⁰ To do anything else, in light of today’s challenges, would only deepen “the crisis of legitimization of modern institutions, locked as they are in their modernistic delusions.”²¹

Traditionally, cornucopian free-market economists and demographers have often argued that

“the dynamism of capitalist economies will generate solutions to environmental problems as they arise and that increases in population eventually will produce the wealth needed to pay for environmental improvements.”²²

Yet, after a number of catastrophes, from the toxic dumping at Love Canal of the 1970's to present-day events such as Katrina in the US, our culture has been forced to slowly adopt a more consequential logic. As well-known economist Paul Krugman writes in a recent *NY Times Magazine* cover feature,

The logic of basic economics says that we should try to achieve social goals through “aftermarket” interventions. That is, we should let markets do their job, making efficient use of the nation’s resources, then utilize taxes and transfers to help those whom the market passes by. But what if a deal between consenting adults imposes cost on people who are not a part of the exchange?...When there are “negative externalities” costs that economic actors impose on others without paying a price for their actions—any presumption that the market economy, left to its own devices, will do the right thing goes out the window.²³

In the case of Katrina, for instance, many of these dynamics (between social agency, technology, and nature) played out in their full complexity.

In his article “Recovering New Orleans,” Thomas Campanella states that after any significant disaster there is often a certain degree of “regressive resilience,” where the citizenry immediately wants to resurrect exactly what was there before, including the city’s social order and political culture.²⁴ Eventually, though, the impulse to repeat is sometimes reconsidered once new information is literally unearthed from the destruction itself.

Citing the work of Diane Davis on the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, Campanella recalls, “[T]he tremors not only shook up the city’s buildings but the very legitimacy of the political system and its leadership,” exposing,

“a raft of official corruption and abuses.”²⁵ When collapsed, new government buildings were found to be of substandard construction quality, and the now-exposed cellars of ruined police stations “contained evidence of torture.”²⁶

According to Diane Davis, “These revelations galvanized the capital’s resilient citizens to demand political accountability and a reordering of reconstruction priorities.”²⁷

Progress, though, in changing a culture’s worldview to adapt to changing realities is always slower and more inconsistent than one might like, even when this culture has been threatened with wholesale destruction. As I have discussed elsewhere, it is precisely our deeper more tenacious *categorization* of nature, and that of people assigned to the same lower status, which is at the root of our inability to rethink things. In the most general sense, living close to nature has been typically seen as ‘a type of poverty,’ where we view ‘nature as the past,’ or as evidence of a certain ‘immaturity of culture.’ In a vast number of cultural representations, women, youth, and people of color are often rendered as being closer to nature and lower in the social hierarchy of things.²⁸

This type of classification is also deeply established through our colloquial language itself, through well-worn binaries between how

we categorize primitive vs advanced cultures, lower vs upper classes, and our female mother-earth vs male celestial father-god.

This attitude is not limited to the religious or capitalist conservatives, as there is equal evidence that leftist-communist constituents have an equally poor environmental track record.²⁹ Nature worldwide is now, though, caught between satisfying our economic desires and providing for our biological needs. While Karl Marx stated that every culture sees its land according to its own desires (not caring of the environmental consequences as long as human progress was achieved), we today are forced to see something more complicated. Like no other generation before, we must now reconcile our view nature as *not* only property but also as something that has an immeasurable value that is outside the market’s logic.

In rare cases such as Greensburg, Kansas, devastated in 2007 by an F-5 tornado, a community can begin to redefine prosperity around more sustainable notion of ecology after a natural disaster.³⁰ Yet, larger cities tend to have more inertia and to lack the political leadership needed to make such a 180-degree turn in the wake of a massive environmental ‘game-changer.’ As Wayne Curtis wrote in *The Atlantic* about the rebuilding New Orleans right after Katrina,

In the absence of strong central leadership, the rebuilding has atomized into a series of independent neighborhood projects...An assortment of foundations, church groups, academics, corporate titans, Hollywood celebrities, young people with big ideas, and architects on a mission have been working independently to rebuild the city’s neighborhoods, all wholly unconcerned about the missing master plan. It’s at once exhilarating and frightening to behold.³¹

Seven years later though, ambitious attempts have, for the most part, failed or been rejected, as exemplified by the city’s early negative reaction to the Urban Land Institute’s report soon after the storm. This report proposed the return “of its most devastated low-lying areas to wetlands and concentrating more housing on higher ground” in order to “among other things, reduce the burden on the levees and canals that protect the city from storms.”³² As reported in *The New York Times*,

“[T]he idea of adjusting the city’s footprint in any way became politically toxic, and Mayor C. Ray Nagin quickly made it clear that the city’s redevelopment would be left in the hands of private interest.”³³

To plan for anything more progressive and more responsive environmentally, “a range of government agencies would need to work together to come up with a more coordinated plan”—which is something that capitalist democracy is not always able to easily allow for due to our concept of nature as private property.³⁴

CONCLUSION: A CRISIS OF TIME

A landscape is a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature...it represents man taking upon himself the role of time. JB Jackson

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Within shows such as History Channel's *Life After People* and many of the above mentioned anime features, there is a somewhat radical message: it is not nature which is in peril, but mankind. As eco-critic Christopher Manes has suggested, scientists today, though reticent to announce it explicitly, do generally

“recognize that humans are not the ‘goal’ of evolution any more than tyrannosaurs were during their sojourn on Earth...The most that can be said is that during the last 350 million years natural selection has shown an inordinate fondness for beetles.”³⁵

In fact, if fungus (as the lowliest of forms on a humanistic scale of values) were to disappear, on the other hand, the results would be catastrophic.

In this light, most of the post apocalyptic anime mentioned here are not truly dystopian. They are quite hopeful in their desire for man's continued co-existence with nature. In all of these depictions, nature returns in one of two forms, either with a vengeance in a type of return-of-the-repressed scenario (in *Nausicaä* or *Logorama*); or as a human assisted seedling (in *Wall-e* or *Tekkonkinkreet*). The more catastrophic the apocalypse is, as in *Nausicaä* or *Logorama*, the more human kind must change its ways to conform to nature. The less catastrophic the scenario is (with civilization only near but not past the ultimate tipping point), the more humankind must merely become better stewards of the earth as in *Wall-e* or *Tekkonkinkreet*.³⁶

Increasingly, urban reclamation projects have promoted a similar “return of nature” attitude, in which nature is allowed to re-colonize now obsolete industrial landscapes. While Seattle's Gas Work Park (completed in 1975 to some controversy) now seems fairly suburban in its reinstatement of nature, one of the most recent, the Highline in NYC, has pushed the post-industrial, return-of-nature aesthetic much further. The Highline provides an apt allegory for our times, rendering nature with a relatively high degree of autonomy while still embracing an icon of the industrial past. Though Fredric Jameson stated, “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good,” these contemporary landscapes suggest that certain *post-postmodern* worlds, where nature is again more in control of itself, might not be so terrifying after all, and might actually be quite beautiful.³⁷

At best, though, these cinematic narratives and the architectural projects mentioned briefly here can only be seen as registers of a desire for less totalizing relationship with the natural world. At the moment, it is not clear that the current environmental crisis has become of critical enough concern to actually *change* the way people, and architects/planners in particular, think about their relationship with nature or that of the *time*.

The idea of the apocalypse first appeared when the notion of *history* itself emerged at the advent of Judeo-Christian culture.³⁸ Prior to that, for 100,000 years or so, cultures worldwide endorse a circular

view of time—where there is acknowledged a cycle of birth-fall-renewal here on earth, rather than promoting a linear model of time with the end being spiritual ascension or unending material progress. While these few landscape examples allow the return of nature upon the ruins of an industrial past, they do not yet comment on what the future might or should hold.

Thus I would argue, the largest crisis of the present is a metaphysical crisis of time, rather than hard science. Our religious institutions as well as our secular scientific ones have yet shown any interest in adopting any alternative to the resilient apocalyptic trope. As Gross and Gilles interestingly note,

“The last time apocalyptic anxiety spilled into the mainstream to the extent that it altered the course of history—during the Reformation—it relied on a revolutionary new communications technology: the printing press.”³⁹

One must ask if there is some relationship to its resurgence during our own current communications revolution.

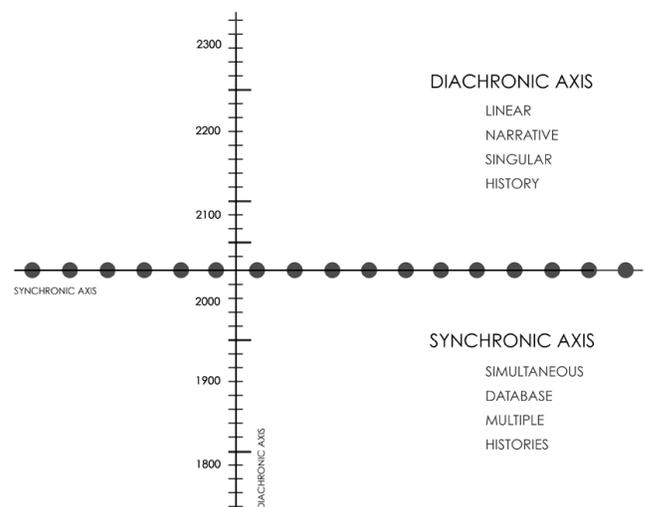


Figure 3. Diachronic versus the Synchronic; diagram/photo credit: author.

During such times of great change, systemic shifts in our own concepts of time and space often follow.⁴⁰ It is my hope that this might occur again, in order for us all to move beyond the apocalyptic end-game in which we are all currently entwined; and for architecture to move beyond any outdated modes of impotent technological utopianism. Positive things can in fact come from our numerous smaller mini- apocalyptic catastrophes. Not only did the Enlightenment follow the Plague, for instance, but hopefully by rehearsing the future in these proleptic narratives (both real and fictional), we will learn enough quickly enough to avoid any ultimate calamity altogether.⁴¹ As Lawrence Buell states,

“Can our imaginations of apocalypse actually forestall it...? Even the slimmest of possibilities is enough to justify the nightmare.”⁴²

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ENDNOTES

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- 3 Mathew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), p.14 (see also p. 177)
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- 6 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), p. 21.
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- 31 Wayne Curtis, "Houses of the Future," *The Atlantic*, November 2009.
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- 38 Gross and Gilles, *The Last Myth*, p. 178. See also: pp. 15, 77, 193.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
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