

QUEER APOCALYPSE

Survivalism and Queer Life at the End

Natalie Kouri-Towe

Queer

adjective

* Strange; odd; peculiar; eccentric. Also: of

questionable character; suspicious; dubious.

noun [informal]

* colloq. (free & derogatory). A homosexual; esp. a male homosexual.

* To put out of order; to spoil. Also: to spoil the reputation or character of (a person); to put (a person) out of favour (with another).

* To cause (a person) to feel queer; to disconcert; perturb; unsettle. Now rare. [1]

The apocalypse is coming and queers are going to spoil it. As narratives of impending apocalypse and postapocalyptic survival permeate our cultural and political landscapes, it becomes increasingly easy to imagine our end. Whether the end of a sustainable environment, the end of culture, or the end of global capitalist economies, the end of life as we know it is both a terrifying possibility and a promising fantasy of a radically different form of life beyond the present.

Mainstream depictions of postapocalyptic survival largely centre on the archetypal figure of the male saviour or hero, and advance a familiar patriarchal instrumentalization of women's bodies as vessels for the survival of the human species. But what alternate stories might we tell about the end, and how might a queer framework reshape our apocalyptic narratives?

[1] OED Online, Oxford University Press, 2 May 2013.

[2] Ibid.

The proposal to think queerly about the apocalypse is not an attempt to rescue apocalypse stories from the insidious reproduction of hegemonic relations; rather it is an opportunity to playfully consider what queer approaches to survival at the end might offer to our rethinking of the present. Apocalyptic narratives are appealing because we find it hard to imagine a radically different social and political world without the complete destruction of the institutions and economies that were built and sustained through colonial and imperial violence and exploitation. If we are already thinking and talking about the apocalypse, then queer thinking about the apocalypse serves as an opportunity for rethinking narratives of politics in both the future and the present.

As global structural, economic and political asymmetries accelerate, more people live in conditions lacking basic resources like food and water, and increasingly suffer from criminalisation and incarceration. It is clear that postapocalyptic survival is also not simply a fiction, but a daily reality for many people. From refugee camps to welfare reforms, survival is more than an exercise in imagining a different world. But, even for those who are not living through conditions of catastrophic loss, thinking about apocalypses is enticing. We take pleasure in imagining how we might prepare or attempt survival in a shifted environment because to imagine how we might live differently is to introduce new realms of possibility for living differently in our present. So how can we reconcile both the demand for attending to the crisis of survival in the present and the fantasy of postapocalypse? Here queerness might offer us some considerations for rethinking the apocalypse and narratives of survival.

Queer Survivalism

Survivalism

noun

* A policy of trying to ensure one's own survival or that of one's social or national group. [2]

* The practicing of outdoor survival skills. [2]

If survivalism is wrapped up in the preservation of the nation state, of race, of gender or of our social order in general, then the first contribution of queerness to the apocalypse is its disruption to the framing of who and what survives, and how. There can be no nation in queer postapocalyptic survival, because the nation presents a foundational problem to queer survival. The nation, which regulates gender and reproduction, requires normalized organizations of sexual and family life in order to reproduce or preserve the national population. If we are already at the end, then why not consider survival without the obligation of reproduction and the heteronormative family?

Masculinist narratives of postapocalyptic survival deploy the male protagonist as the extension of the nation. Here, the male hero stands in the place of the military, the police or the law by providing safety and security to his family and "weak" survivors like children and animals. Queer survivalism, on the other hand, disrupts the normative embodiments of survivalism by redirecting our desires to queer bodies, opening up survival to those outside of the prototypical bodies of fitness and health.

Because postapocalyptic narratives replicate racist and ableist eugenic tropes of "survival of the fittest," a queering of survivalism opens up space for thinking about, talking about, and planning for more varied and accessible frameworks for doing

survival. Conversely, a queering of survival might also open up the option of choosing not to survive, through the refusal of reproduction or the refusal of life itself.

The Queer Apocalypse

Apocalypse

noun

* More generally: a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment; esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm. [3]

If we are going to imagine the destruction of the world as we know it, then why not make these fictions meaningful to the present? Lee Edelman has argued that queerness is "the place of the social order's death drive." [4] If queerness is a kind of end to the norms and structures of our world, then it makes sense that queerness might say something meaningful about imagining the end. Narratives of postapocalyptic survival function primarily as stories of individual survival against a hostile world, and often a hostile other—in the form of dangerous strangers or zombies. These narratives privilege the individual as the basic unit of survival, replicating the neoliberal values of individualism. At best, these narratives expand beyond the individual survivor when he is joined by his immediate family or builds a new family.

Queer models of kinship offer alternate frameworks for imagining survival beyond the individual, through collectivity and alternative kinships. If we are going to imagine surviving either our present or our impending futures, we need collectives to survive. This is old news to people who have long survived through collective struggle and collective support. This is not to simply produce a romantic fantasy of a utopian community, but rather to acknowledge and recognize that strength comes from organizing together. If capitalistic, nationalist, patriarchal, heteronormative and neoliberal logics tell us that we're each responsible for our own lives, then what better queering can we offer than to reimagine stories of how we think about survival, or even to refuse to survive?

So what tools do we have for queer survival? First, we need alternative models for building survival strategies. For instance, learning how to repurpose everyday objects, everyday networks and everyday resources. [5] Second, we need to consider models of communalism, and to develop better ways of communicating and working through conflict. Third, we need to strategize collectively, share skills, build skills and foster collaboration. And lastly, we need to mobilize what queers do best—spoiling, twisting and perverting the normative narratives that dominate survivalism and stories of apocalypse.

Natalie Kouri-Towe is a Toronto-based academic and activist who works collaboratively in art-based social and political practices. Her work centres on queerness, social movements and transnational solidarity, with a focus on queer Palestinian movements. She is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto.

[3] Ibid.

[5] See Alton Cianfanti's survival kits, documented in this issue of FUSE.

APOCALYPSE ANYTIME

Kathryn Denning

Does apocalypse lie before us, or behind us?

Apocalypse is most often used to mean

"the end of the world." But if we go back to its

original meaning, apocalypse technically means

"revelation," and eschaton is the "end of days." [1]

So, for example, the Book of Revelation is an apocalypse—the vision which St. John saw from his none-too-cosy prison cell on Patmos, and relayed in a letter to his loyal followers, a vision which describes eschatological scenes with the

Horsemen (envoys of pestilence, war, famine

and death), fire in the sky, seas turning to blood,

a highly imaginative menu of plagues, a war in the

skies between monsters and angels, and generally

epic heavy-metal mayhem, ending with, of course,

the happily-ever-after survival of the righteous in

the eternal Kingdom of God, and the exceptionally

stylish obliteration of everyone else.

There are some intriguing elements in the classic

Judeo-Christian apocalypse, of which Revelation is the best known.

First, there is the revelation from another dimension (the Duinen).

Crucially, there is a statement of the future that places us in time and

tells us where we are in the path of History. Narratives can then

include features like a breach of impermeable boundaries (e.g., the

dead rising), the appearance of beings with strange powers, a war

(or a change in order) in which the righteous emerge triumphantly

despite having been persecuted.

[1] I expand on this in "Apocalyptic Performance: Archaeology and Folklore," in *Archaeology and Folklore*, eds. A. Gazzola-Schwartz and C. Hahlfeld (London: Routledge, 1999). For key sources on apocalypses, see Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

[4] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004).