

◆ Introduction

The Poetics and Politics of Apocalyptic and Dystopian Discourses

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“No podía ser sino Apocalipsis poético.”
(Hernando Domínguez Camacho, *Lucifer en romance*, 1652)¹

At the end of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, a massive asteroid that has been hovering over the desolate plot of the movie, which itself revolves around the mental instability and enervating passivity of its protagonist Justine, bears down inexorably and lethally on Earth. Justine’s brother-in-law and resident rationalist has been obsessively tracking the movement of the rogue planet—which seemed to have passed by the Earth only to circle back into its path—with a scientific method that is shown to be hopelessly inadequate in the face of physical realities, an impotence ultimately symbolized by the Cartesian father’s suicide brought about when his hopeful calculations prove false. Once it becomes evident that *Melancholia* is circling back to Earth, Justine’s sister Claire panics and attempts to take her son Leo and run away from the inevitable destruction brought by the rogue planet. But of course there is nowhere to run, and so Justine takes Claire and Leo by the hand and leads them to the lawn where they erect a makeshift teepee out of sticks (Góngora might have called them *leños*). Justine tells young Leo that this is a “magic cave” that will protect them from *Melancholia*; but the cave offers no real protection and is blown off the face of a crumbling and burning Earth together with the three small figures huddled inside it. The precarious arrangement of sticks is revealed in the end as a poetic conceit through which the trio attempts to accommodate themselves to their tragically finite existence. There is a sense of baroque *desengaño* to this pathetic gesture, which, in spite of its desperation,

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shows that none of the characters is really fooled into thinking that the cave, or its magic, will save them. Von Trier has explored this apocalyptic mentality in many of his well-known movies; however, where spectators watch tragic characters make disastrous choices in films such as *Breaking the Waves* or *Nymphomaniac*, the question of free will is all but absent from *Melancholia*, which makes for a good place to begin a volume on the apocalyptic imagination, especially at a time when drastic and increasingly evident catastrophic changes and choices are facing the human species.

As with any project such as this, ours started with a series of questions. Why is there currently such a proliferation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature, movies, television, music, and, yes, political agendas? Is the “End Times” a prescient outcome of accelerationist philosophical principles, wherein the most likely outcome of frenzied capitalism, hyper-consumerism, and technocratic social media usage is a terminally-ill post-human, devoid of any sense of communality, and constantly in search of an individual identity? Or is it the purgatory in which we must reflect on our hyperreal consumption of death, dystopia, and destruction—both literal and figurative? Literary and cinematic cycles such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, dozens of television series dedicated to zombies, vampires, time travelers, etc., and notably diverse extreme metal scenes (with genres such as Black and Death Metal) can be read as symptoms of an epistemological and ontological crisis, as well as a crisis-engendering, entertainment-driven aesthetics. Situating our volume within the vast array of Hispanic cultures, our discussions will move from the religious imagery of Medieval Europe, to early modern encounters with the New World, the epochal battle between scientific and religious determinisms in Modernity, and late modernity’s obsession with military, epidemiological, and climate-related catastrophes.

This is an apt moment for our project, especially given the current proliferation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic artifacts and rhetoric, from fictional and documentary film and television productions to fear-inducing political rhetoric and spectacles. In early modern Spain and its colonies, apocalyptic art and literature tended to be circumscribed by the aforementioned framework of *desengaño*, or ‘disenchantment,’ which was generally used by artists and authors to guide readers and spectators towards obedience to a status quo that was presented as a kind of magic cave, providing protection from socio-political transformations and personal damnation (Maravall; Nelson). Stephanie Schmidt’s essay in this volume takes up a case in point in the person of Lorenço, a Nahuatl scholar and scribe whose sly insertion of Mesoamerican ‘end times’ images and allegories into the framework of Christian redemption “invites Nahuatl to view Christian eschatology through the lens of the Mesoamerican suns and, thus, to move in familiar steps toward a Christian perspec-

tive on world time” (68). In other words, Lorenço provides a potentially safe aesthetic haven from which to turn away from the apocalyptic past toward a utopian vision of the future.

Jumping ahead half a millennium, Nelson Varas-Díaz notes that this simultaneous marking and erasure of difference has been symptomatic of the colonial dynamic from the very beginning of Western modernity. He cites Walter Mignolo’s work on decolonial thinking, which “goes hand and hand with modernity/coloniality in this way: the rhetoric of modernity is a rhetoric of salvation (by conversion yesterday, and by development today), but in order to implement what rhetoric preaches, it is necessary to marginalize or destroy whatever gets in the way of modernity” (228). Varas-Díaz’s work on extreme metal music in Latin America provides a powerful decolonialist amplifier for and disruptor of the rhetorical and cultural violence implicit in the aforementioned Lorenço’s apocalyptic allegory. His essay shows how extreme metal’s “incursion via its lyrics and imagery into the region’s colonial past has positioned the subject of coloniality front and center, making it almost unavoidable” (229). Specifically, he looks at Latin American metal music’s use of “death as a visual strategy . . . as it positions the relation between the colonized and the colonizer as a non-negotiable space. The latter must die violently in order for justice to prevail” (239).

In the current context, the landscape of apocalyptic poetics includes more conservative iterations, such as *Independence Day*, or redemptive fantasies such as *The Matrix* cycle, as well as new series such as *Westworld* or *The Walking Dead*, which foreground self-conscious actors and worlds whose individual decisions and emergent networks can be seen to challenge political gamesmanship and stagnation around issues such as terrorism and climate change, as well as the culture of spectacle. Still, in spite of the pervasive nature of apocalyptic paradigms and expressions, the question of what to do with this massive outpouring of epochal anxiety remains unanswered, especially in the face of political forces that attempt to exploit it for short term and often racist and misogynist programs of exclusion and power. As Bruno Latour (*An Inquiry in Modes of Existence*) has argued, the tendency of liberal cultural and political alliances to favor “truth politics” has been ably, if illegitimately, countered by a rhetoric of “fair and balanced reporting” of information whose institutional frameworks of production and veridiction have nothing to do with each other. This has undercut the ability and authority of the traditional bastions of knowledge production and mobilization, i.e., the university, the mainstream press, even government offices, to frame political dialogue. Nevertheless, Noam Chomsky states in a recent NY Times interview with George Yancy that “philosophy can play [. . .] an essential role, in changing the world, and philosophers [. . .] have undertaken that effort, in their philosophical work

as well as in their activist lives” (3). By bringing together diverse cultural and theoretical approaches to apocalyptic representations from different historical and cultural periods, our goal is to model new ways of engaging with and imagining historical, social, and political change and, simultaneously, answer Chomsky’s and Latour’s calls to action.

We begin our discussion with a dialogue between the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Georges Didi-Huberman. Notwithstanding the latter’s critique of Derrida’s dissolution of the power of the critical voice in a “truth ‘without vision, without truth, without revelation,’” both theorists have useful things to say about the apocalyptic mode or *tone*, as Derrida puts it. He begins his analysis of Kant’s critique of the increasing prevalence of “apocalyptic tone” in eighteenth-century philosophy with a classical etymological explication: “*Apokalupto*: I discover, I uncover, I reveal the thing that can be a body part, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the sex or any hidden thing, a secret, what must be hidden, a thing that cannot be shown or said, that perhaps signifies but cannot or should not be made directly evident” (12–13). He then links this meaning to his reading of the term *gala* in the Hebrew bible, which expresses “a word so hidden that it is like the sex of a person” (14). Essentially, the apocalyptic mode entails the notion of the revelation of hidden, prohibited and yet exciting, knowledge, which, if we add the theological framework of *revelation*, directs such knowledge to the consciousness of a chosen, *prophetic* recipient who would then communicate its salvific message to his people (Latourelle). When it is appropriated by supposedly modern philosophers (see Latour’s *We Were Never Modern*), Kant calls this “exalted tone ‘the death of all philosophy’” (19). Mysteries appear “when philosophy has lost its first meaning [which is] a rational *savoir-vivre*, literally a wisdom of life governed by knowledge or according to a science” (21–22). What is left is the will to power of the individual. Just so in George Orwell’s prescient *1984*, where the secret revealed to the protagonist (and the reader) after years of systematic torture and sensory deprivation is nothing more than the need for absolute surrender and debasement to the reality of the absolute power of Big Brother. If for McLuhan the medium is the message, in Orwell, torture is not the means to an end, but the very end itself.

Returning to Kant—as Derrida reads him—the loosening of the serious tone in philosophy allows its conversion into “a simple ornament, a theater set, a costume, or intellectual disguise,” allowing actors [pretenders?] “to attract, seduce, and lure readers and spectators towards the mystery and through mystery” and away from method, as they perform the function of a priest with his adepts and sects, “through a cryptic language” (24). The framing of philosophy in an apocalyptic tone thus voids the distinction between the voice of reason and the voice of the oracle, “giving voice to the oracle inside oneself in

the perversion of reason by mixing the voice of the other in ourselves and the voice of reason with that of the oracle . . . , [effecting a] leap from concepts to the unrepresentable and incomprehensible . . . [and eliciting] an obscure anticipation of the secret mystery coming from beyond” (26–30). Here, we are reminded of the way in which Chanfalla’s invocations and exhortations simultaneously divide and unite the individual spectators of *El Retablo de las maravillas* (The Stage of Wonders) as he reveals the secrets behind the magical curtain, bringing us full circle ‘back to the future’ of von Trier’s brilliant conceit. Finally, and crucially, the apocalyptic tone’s lure, especially in religious terms, holds out the promise of a settled and transcendental identity: “we will be one species, one sect, one gender, one sex, one race, when all are dead” (Derrida 56).

It becomes apparent in Derrida’s typically dense and difficult explication of Kant’s atypical harangue that the current mediatic strategy of what is deceptively called the *alt-right*, whether we are talking about Trump and his family, *Fox and Friends*, or Trump’s own “news,” is programmatically apocalyptic in tone and thrust. As they whip listeners and readers of their frightening and contradictory tweets or news-like presentations of alternative facts into a frenzy of fear-fueled vilification, the pretenders’ exhortations for continued and total allegiance holds out the promise—one that becomes more patently false every day—that their partisans will form part of a great nation, race, or people.

The apocalyptic mode is in fact one of the purest forms of double-speak, to quote Orwell again, in that it requires that one believe that the world will both end and not end at the same time. Derrida helps explain why it has become so difficult to determine if the current apocalyptic media assault on democracy is intentional or an accidental byproduct of its rhetorical weapons of engagement: “Apocalyptic rhetoric is designed to deceive the people as well as the powerful, it is non-conservative and can be used in times of censorship” (65). One might well ask what kind of censorship is in play when talking about Trump’s all out promotion of his and his family’s *brand* (Naomi Klein). The answer is the “censorship” coming from the traditional defenders of institutionally-legitimized knowledge, rhetorical restraint, and scientific method: in other words, Kant and his modern and postmodern descendants. Thus, what Kant terms the “neutrality or at least the imperturbable serenity that should accompany the relation to truth and the universal” is seen by the unabashed partisans of a violently whitewashed version of American exceptionalism as an illegitimate restraint on their drive towards the oracular confirmation of their ‘end of times’ vision. The further Derrida drills down into the apocalyptic tone, the more oppressive and inescapable it is shown to be: “The over- and in-determinations of the apocalyptic tone are inexhaustible” (65). Even ana-

lyzing the structure and meaning of apocalyptic tone cannot be accomplished without participating in the apocalyptic enterprise; so where does one turn for relief from or resistance against such an agile and seductive force?

Didi-Huberman's answer is that we become "contemporaneous," collapsing the distance between the secret promise of the past and its hidden fulfilment in the future: "The responsibility of the poet, philosopher, etc., is to show the fireflies of hope, etc., in the apocalyptic imagination. How to be contemporaneous means revealing the historical firefly in the overwhelming light of today's media" (53). In the context of Julio Baena's brilliant essay on *consumptive* versus *acquisitive* time, Didi-Huberman's *fireflies* would be analogous to Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's understanding of consumptive time, which is a "time not addressed towards any future; senseless time of goods and happiness. Time whose now slides on a *still* and ceases in a *no more*" (255). If modern acquisitive time moves towards the redemption and salvation of *modernity*, consumptive time postpones and questions such a specific 'end' of time, often ironically so, as Baena points out in his analysis of San Lorenzo's invitation to his torturers to turn him on the spit on which he is roasting and eat him (*versa et manduca*): "Saint Lawrence's irony rests on the projection of consumptive time into acquisitive time. The existence in the present (in a 'still' that goes on to a 'no more') discovers pleasure in postponing" (262). The point would seem to be that taking ironic pleasure in postponing the Other's and one's own redemption—ostensibly achieved by getting to the "end" of the story in both temporal and rhetorical terms—can be a powerful act of resistance.

Bringing together Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, Didi-Huberman assembles a genealogy of reading and viewing strategies that launches ironic darts of penetrating light into the overwhelming lightshow of the apocalypse. Pasolini, for example, shows how the camera has functioned as a primary medium for self-alienation: "Before the greatest marvels of the earth (for example, the Patio de los Leones in the Alhambra), an overwhelming majority of our contemporaries refuse the experience, preferring to leave this experience to the photographic camera" (58). It is probably not coincidental that Didi-Huberman cites Agamben's essay on the "Muslim" in a Nazi concentration camps to illustrate how Agamben identifies an effectively invisible historical subject, or "waste product" in Zygmunt Baumann's terminology. This fleeting figure of a discursive line running from the "unwitnessable" to the "impossibility of seeing . . . evoke[s], on the other extreme of his journey, a transcendental condition of the 'integral witness' and of the 'absolute image'" (60). In spite of the overwhelming presence of Moorish architectural forms and elements in La Alhambra, there is no Muslim presence to disturb the orientalizing and maurophilic nostalgia at the heart of

the touristic experience of Granada's mysterious (and apocalyptic) past, no contemporaneous fireflies to unite the destruction of the Moorish kingdom with current expressions of hate speech and political violence directed against Muslims. The critic's responsibility would be to fill this silence with the image of those more historically illuminating silences as a witness to past and present ethnic and cultural erasures. For Agamben, nothing is contemporary except what appears "'in the gap and the anachronism' with respect to what we perceive as our 'actuality'" (Derrida 53).

In answer to Derrida's exposition of the blinding luminosity of the apocalyptic mode, Didi-Huberman writes that the obligation of the poet-philosopher is to "give oneself the means [media] to *make the fireflies appear* in the overexposed space, ferocious, excessively luminous, of our historical present. It is a labor, Agamben adds, that demands in addition to courage—political virtue—and poetry, which is the art of fracturing language, and breaking the appearances, of dividing the unity of time" (53). Such a strategy can be found in baroque apocalyptic satires, most notoriously, in Quevedo's *Sueños*, which William Childers reads as "a coherent structure through which to contemplate the abyss" (133). He foregrounds Quevedo's self-referential fracturing of language in, among other *Sueños*, "The Dream of Death," which "undercuts the baroque major strategy implying that dogmatism generates metaphysical entities out of signifiers without referents" (135). Childers links Quevedo's apocalyptic satire with the minor strategy of the baroque which others have theorized in connection with Cervantes's and Velazquez's experiments with framing (Castillo and Egginton). Thus, he concludes that the "minor" version of *desengaño* deployed in Quevedo's *Sueños* "unmasks appearances, not to reveal a deeper truth, but to subvert the very pretense of any vantage point from which to launch a disinterested critique [. . .] The ground on which moral judgments rests has been irrevocably shaken" (138).

Indeed, Cervantes's own apocalyptic aesthetics produce the same kind of moral reverberations or tremors in *La Numancia*, albeit with distinctively tragic accents, as Moisés Castillo and Nelson, Venkatesh, and Wallin argue in their respective readings. Here, the poignant interactions between Numantine lovers and friends shine through their inexorable movement towards self-annihilation under the dehumanizing siege devised by General Scipio at the vanguard of Rome's imperial drive for absolute power. As M. Castillo notes, the play draws historical parallels between the military power of the Roman aggressors and the mighty Spanish Empire of later centuries, "the new Rome" of Cervantes's time. M. Castillo builds on the work of Michael Armstrong-Roche and other scholars in making the case that Cervantes's play might be about more recent historical tragedies and even "contemporary Numancias," as much as it is about the infamous Roman siege: "the allegorical

characters Guerra (War), Hambre (Famine), and Enfermedad (Sickness) in Act IV [. . .] evoke the siege that the Spanish Empire maintains with possible historical and more contemporary Numancias, in other words, the revolt of the *moriscos* (Hermenegildo, *La 'Numancia'*), that of Flanders (Willard King, Carroll Johnson), or that of the Araucanians (King, Barbara Simerka)" (82).

Cervantes's collapsing of the distance between Roman and Spanish imperialism projects not just fireflies but also shadows into the necrophilic climax of Numancia's tragic end. Hence, Numancia's condemned men—walking cadavers, dead men walking—are doing the same symbolic work as the cinematographic zombies deployed in Álvaro Buela's short film *Limbo*, analyzed here by Ana Forcinito. As Forcinito writes: "The image of the zombie becomes central in the short film [. . .] The images shown both in fragments of films and on the TV screen (*White Zombie* and *Wing of Zombies*) point metonymically to the detention centers in the Southern cone at times of dictatorship and the Operation Condor, [placing] the figure of the living-dead at the center of a metaphor in which time collapses in past and present in the space indicated by the title: limbo, a suspended time, an in-between" (165). It is tempting to imagine the extreme metal music analyzed by Varas-Díaz as the soundtrack for *Limbo*, since both aesthetic enterprises emerge from the same violent historical loam. This is the living time of history in the Benjaminian sense; the time of the ghostly encounter; the time of Casares in Del Toro's movie *El espinazo del diablo* (The Backbone of the Devil): "¿Qué es un fantasma? Un evento terrible condenado a repetirse una y otra vez. Un instante de dolor quizás. Algo muerto que parece por momentos vivo aún. Un sentimiento suspendido en el tiempo, como una fotografía borrosa, como un insecto atrapado en ámbar. Un fantasma, eso soy yo" (What is a ghost? A tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again. An instant of pain perhaps. Something dead which seems for a moment alive. An emotion suspended in time. Like a blurred photograph. Like an insect trapped in amber. A ghost, this is what I am) (our translation).

While today's readers of *Numancia* may be initially inclined to connect Cervantes's dramatization of the town's heroic resistance against the Roman military machine with foundational narratives and myths of national destiny, his tragic poetics do not align with the apocalyptic utopianism of the prophets of empire, aptly dissected here by Henry Berlin in the case of neighboring Portugal. As Berlin notes in his discussion of the poetic ferment behind the prophesy of a great Christian empire to be led by a future Rei Encoberto or Hidden King, when it comes to apocalypticism, prophesy, Messianism and millerarianism, "the virtue of defining one's terms runs up against the historical problem that these putatively discrete phenomena overwhelmingly occur together, in dizzying permutations" (33). In contrast with this familiar form

of prophetic apocalypticism, Cervantes (re)constructs the historical site of Numancia, not as a symbolic place-holder of healing promises of national redemption (*make Spain great again; blood and soil . . .*), but as an open wound suspended in time that forces us to confront the unreason of Empire: the invisible apocalypse of its past and present victims.

We can relate this notion to Nelson, Venkatesh and Walin's discussion of *necrophilic empathy*. Indeed, as they suggest in their contribution, necrophilic empathy reminds us "that the solidarity of communities is easily taken for granted and can be destroyed by encouraging pluralistic solipsism, that is to say, the differences in perspectives of community members can be easily manipulated to shake the foundation of the goals of the collective" (118). This is why the necrophilic poetics of *Numancia* have more in common with modern dystopias and the brand of horror fantasy that—as Elizabeth Scarlett reminds us—activates the power of the uncanny and the abject to reveal hidden wounds and "expose the terrors underlying everyday national life" (184) than with the Messianic apocalypticism that has resurfaced today in nationalistic alt-right websites and fundamentalist Christian media; not to mention Trump's divisive rhetoric (Castillo and Egginton).

In her informative contribution, Scarlett focuses on Spanish horror films, particularly the zombie variety, in arguing that "the transition from being alive to being one of the undead in the Spanish zombie genre perhaps mirrors the swiftness with which the market economy can turn citizens into financial nonentities" (201). Carmen Moreno-Nuño coincides with Scarlett in pointing out that while the cinematic topos of the apocalypse has enjoyed fertile ground in Spain for decades in explicit dialogue with Hollywood themes and conventions, recent Spanish films deserve close scrutiny for their abandonment of commonplace comforts in their indictment of predatory structures and representational failures. As she writes, "Spanish apocalyptic cinema can be utilized as a very effective tool for understanding the deep uneasiness that results from our rapid-fire interconnected global world; and also, for the uncovering of the conventional nature of representation, as the comparative analysis with Hollywood shows" (221). Reflecting on our uncertain political present, Moreno-Nuño wonders whether Hollywood will respond to the current unrest with yet another wave of end-of-the-world blockbuster movies. Meanwhile apocalyptic dystopias are clearly on the rise, not just on the big screen but in TV series like the widely popular adaptation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and countless best-selling paperbacks, including new printings of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *A Brave New World*.

Moreno-Nuño suggests that the April 4th, 2017 screening of Radford's *1984* is a direct response to Trump's doom and gloom rhetoric and a reflection

of “the widespread belief that life as we know it is under threat” (206). But the resurgence of the dystopian genre, while accentuated by current political demagoguery, may be symptomatic of larger and longer processes of dehumanization which are inherent to the neoliberal world order and what Michael Sandel has called the *market society*: a society where market relations, market values and market incentives effectively dominate all aspects of life. Sandel urges us to have an honest debate about where the logic of the market belongs and where it doesn’t. We could ask, for example, should market values and market incentives be imported into our educational institutions? Should our governments operate like corporations? Should corporations and the global market drive the conversation on climate change? As environmental author and activist Bill McKibben writes in *Oil and Honey* (2013): “If your goal is to efficiently tap the tar sands, you need a corporation. But to decide if tapping the tar sands is a good idea, you need to keep corporations out of it. Their relentless simplicity will combine with their wealth to overwhelm reason, science, love. If you want honey, you need a hive of bees. But if you were trying to decide if making honey was a good idea, bees would be the last creatures to ask. You know what their answer is going to be” (103–104).

In his afterword to the Signet Classics paperback edition of Orwell’s *1984*, philosopher Erich Fromm makes the point that dystopian fantasies—he explicitly mentions the books authored by Orwell, Huxley and Zamyatin—are far-reaching humanistic warnings meant to awaken us from the dehumanizing inertia of managerial industrialism and the drowning of truth-seeking voices in a sea of demagoguery and propaganda: “It was quite obviously their intention to sound a warning by showing where we are headed for unless we succeed in a renaissance of the spirit of humanism and dignity. [Orwell] is simply implying that the new form of managerial industrialism [. . .] is conducive to an era of dehumanization and complete alienation, in which men are transformed into things and become appendices to the process of production and consumption” (325). Fromm’s commentary is particularly illuminating in his treatment of truth and reality in industrial societies. He specifically refers to Alan Harrington’s notion of the *corporate truth* in *Life in the Crystal Palace*: “If I work for a big corporation, which claims that its product is better than that of all competitors, the question of whether this claim is justified or not in terms of ascertainable reality becomes irrelevant. What matters is that as long as I serve this particular corporation, this claim becomes ‘my’ truth, and I decline to examine whether it is an objectively valid truth. [This] is one of the most [. . .] destructive developments of our own society that man, becoming more and more of an instrument, transforms reality [. . .] into something relative to his own interests and functions” (321–22).

We can see an exponential acceleration of this process in our age of inflationary media, with the emergence of reality-proof media silos like Fox News and alt-right outlets like Breitbart News, Infowars, and Alex Jones. Reality and truth have de facto become a matter of choice based on our individual interests and aprioristic ideological identifications. As D. Castillo and Egginton have argued in *Medialogies* (2017), this is the most dangerous promise of the market society and of the medialogy that's coextensive with it: the right to our own individual reality for as long as we can pay for it. Isn't this the ultimate form of market fundamentalism of which the Trump phenomenon is merely a symptom? If these remarks seem the product of anachronistic overreach when applied to a novel written in 1948, we would argue that there's no shortage of Orwellian lines that speak directly to our present: "Who controls the past', ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past' [. . .] 'Reality control,' they called it" (34–35); "A few lines of print and a couple of faked photographs and [what was] unimagined an hour ago was now fact" (46–47); "there is need for a moment to moment flexibility in the treatment of facts [. . .] If the facts say otherwise, then the facts must be altered" (212–13); "you must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of nature. We make the laws of nature [. . .] we can shut them out of existence" (265); "There will be no art, no literature, no science" (267); "This is the world we are preparing [. . .] an endless pressing, pressing, pressing upon the nerve of power" (269)."

We read these unsettling lines with a sense of dread informed by the very exactness of their insight into our present political and media contexts. Yet, we could also turn to Aldous Huxley's earlier novel *Brave New World* (1931), which many see as a competing vision of a nightmarish future we may be inhabiting in our own day. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, originally published in 1985, Neil Postman makes the point that while we were fixated on the Orwellian nightmare of a totalitarian State built on information-suppression machines, brutal policing, and physical and psychological repression, the final decades of the twentieth century were bringing us ever closer to the brave new world described by Huxley: a society built on the promise of unlimited and instant gratification in which humanity is drowned in stupefying, addictive, sedating and trivializing media-technologies. As he writes: "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared that we

would become a trivial culture” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 20th Anniversary edition, xix). In Huxley’s own words, “You can’t consume much if you sit still and read books” (Kindle 570). It is Huxley’s world that is closest to Baena’s reading of how our current moment is witnessing the conflation of consumptive and acquisitive time: “Consumerism, or inflated medialogy, are consumption in acquisitive timing mode: never accomplished except in ‘the future.’ Never an ‘at last’; product before need; medium as message; death distributed in advance, as a *mort-gage*” (266).

A recent series of articles in such outlets as CNN, Forbes, and The Guardian make the case that the Trump phenomenon proves Neil Postman right and that we are indeed living in Huxley’s stupefying *technopoly*. In a piece titled “Amusing Ourselves to Death with Donald Trump,” Forbes contributor Chris Teare expressed this idea directly in the middle of the 2016 political season: “As Donald Trump moves toward the Republican nomination, a book may help explain the otherwise inexplicable. Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* first made an impression on me 30 years ago when I was a television anchorman. The author’s argument, and the fact than none of the newscasts viewers seemed to be learning anything other than whether they liked my smile or voice, led me to leave TV and return to education. That a reality TV star running for the highest office is being taken seriously by millions of Americans would not surprise Postman” (Teare n.p.).

More recently, Neil Postman’s son, Andrew Postman, brings his father’s legacy to bear on the age of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. He focuses on the trivialization of our public discourse and the fragmentation and spectacularization of the news media. He is also convinced that his father all but named Donald Trump as the new face of authoritarianism in our technopoly: “How engaged can any populace be when the most we’re asked to do is to like or not like a particular post, or ‘sign’ an online petition? How seriously should anyone take us, or should we take ourselves, when the ‘optics’ of an address or campaign speech—raucousness, maybe actual violence, childishy attention-craving gestures or facial expressions—rather than the content of the speech determines how much ‘airtime’ it gets, and how often people watch, share and favorite it? [. . .] So, yes, my dad nailed it. Did he also predict that the leader we would pick for such an age, when we had become perhaps terminally enamored of our technologies and amusements, would almost certainly possess fascistic tendencies? I believe he called this too” (Postman n.p.).

While it is hard to argue with these observations, it is also undeniable that Orwell’s “double-think” and “newspeak” resonate with fake news and Trump twitter just as strongly as any conceit in Huxley’s brave new world. Isn’t it possible that we are inhabiting—or at least are headed for—a nightmarish

dystopian combo? Given the alarming rise of religious fundamentalism and white supremacist fascism and misogyny, and the terrifying rate at which we are polluting the planet, we might also look in the direction of Atwood's theocracy in *The Handmaid's Tale*. But shouldn't we also fear the post-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake* as we consider the potential impact of groundbreaking biotechnologies and genetic engineering? Yet, even within the utterly terrifying nightmares crafted by the masters of modern dystopias, we can sense unrelenting hope and, at times, excited anticipation for what could be humanistic paths of resistance, transformation, and regeneration. Against the divisive demagoguery and authoritarianism of wall-erecting, fear-mongering nationalism and Messianic Imperialism, the poetics of dystopian tragedy urge us to rediscover and fight for "the spirit of humanism and dignity," in the words of Erich Fromm. Scarlett notes a similar investment in "human dignity," predicated on love and the transcendence of self in recent end-of-times Spanish films: "Many films muster some version of 'love conquers all' to greet total destruction with a semblance of human dignity (maintain *bios*, in Agamben's term). Meeting the apocalypse in an embrace is presented as important, as are renewal of ties and reconciliation" (201).

While Andrew Postman acknowledges that his father did not provide any kind of solution or conceit that would help us imagine a way out of the seemingly unavoidable apocalypse of humanity prophesied in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, his own dire warnings come with an urgent recommendation: We must reassume and protect the responsibility of citizenship; we must make ourselves and "our children aware of our information environments, which in many instances have become our entertainment environments [. . .] Check sources. Consider what wasn't said. Ask questions. Understand that every storyteller has a bias—and so does every platform" (Postman n.p.). Ultimately, what Andrew Postman is advocating is nothing less than the art and politics of responsible, active and vigilant "reality literacy"—as some of us have called it (D. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*).

Notes

1. We would like to thank Humberto Huergo for suggesting the epigraph as well as for pointing us in the direction of Derrida's and Didi-Huberman's apocalyptic musings.

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