Why do we want the world to end?

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkC-Jy6zomQ

Transcript

Around the turn of the century, we hit the motherload of apocalyptic disaster movies - we've got everything: natural disaster, virus, aliens, zombies, angry plants - I guess a decade ushered in under the rumoured threat of mass technological collapse and then sandwiched between an extreme act of terrorism and the end of the Mayan Calendar is going to have... a certain vibe. ["The food is following an unusual pattern of destroying famous landmarks first before spreading to the reast of the world"] But while we still get the odd falling tower of liberty, they're not the blockbuster staple they were from the mid-90s to 2000s - so whatever happened to disaster movies? Well... I mean.... Oh... right. [credits play] Ok sure so essentially "you best start believing in [disaster movies] Miss Turner, you're in one", but that doesn't mean the audiences appetite for apocalypse has gone away, just that the following decade gave rise to a different kind of devastation. The world didn't end in 2012, but that year instead gave birth to a new doctrine, a simple phrase that seemed to define our existence, now and in perpetuity, with no end in sight: June 28th, 2012 - @Horse_ebooks... everything happens so much - truly, the most evergreen tweet - the following year Alexis C. Madrigal declared in The Atlantic that the web was now lost to infinite feeds and timelines, organised only by 'nowness' - and making the 2010s a decade sandwiched between the new stranglehold of social media and a pandemic. The looming threat no longer that this will all end, but that it won't. At this point even a zombie apocalypse would be like great another thing I have to deal with. The End, in its various guises, continues to live between a fear and a fantasy. A fascination that increasingly feels a lot like longing.

Our history of predicting the end is long and repetitive. ["the world will end next week"] and some responses remain just as predictable. Dystopian and post-apocalyptic landscapes continue to thrive in place of immediate disaster, but no fiction is more dystopian than the one weaved by Doomsday Preppers. Generally white American men projecting a fantasy driven by all the worst impulses the genre could be accused of: "wealth and power and individualism" summarises Mark O'Connell, author of Notes From An Apocalypse - and it's one of the more obvious crosspollinations of fear and fetish. "Preppers are not preparing for their fears" O'Connell writes, "they're preparing for their fantasies", so quick to renounce civilisation because they were "never fully convinced by society in the first place". Instead longing for a "return to modes of masculinity our culture no longer has much use for". A realm where they can reclaim the absolute authority of which they feel modernity has robbed them. Even this obsession with apocalyptic survival betrays an underlying preoccupation with superiority, just waiting impatiently for civilisation to fall so they can say I told you so. ["all the

non-believers they get to eat dirt, and the believers get to spit on their grave"] Not all preppers are writing survivalist fanfiction, as Michele Moses writes in the New Yorker "the impulse to prep is as much a response to governmental failings as it is to apocalyptic fantasies." A reaction to their inadequate handling of catastrophes, but still a bleakly isolationist one. Jill Lepore diagnoses this pessimism as the dominant force of modern dystopian literature - no longer a "fiction of resistance; it's become a fiction of submission ... of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century... Its only admonition is: Despair more." This turn towards helplessness and hopelessness is perhaps the natural culmination of The Modern Apocalypse. Raptures and seismic events are so last century, you know everything's online now! And the fear of a swift end is replaced with the fear of a gradually encroaching Armageddon. The knowledge that there is no way to preserve our way of life from destruction because destruction is our way of life. The end of days is now every day, and "there is no one cause, no locus of apocalyptic unease", as O'Connell concludes, "It's all horseman, all the time." It increasingly feels not like the world will end, but that it already has. ["oh this is from 2009"] But it's not just dystopian fanatics who have forged a survival strategy based on isolating themselves. "In a January 2020 column about omnipresent noise-cancelling headphones and the desire to block out our surroundings... The Economist argued, "The shared world is increasingly intolerable." This is how journalist Kyle Chayka begins their New York Times piece 'How Nothingness Became Everything We Wanted', writing of a "culture-wide quest for self-obliteration", identifying the phenomenon in everything: "noise, decoration, possessions, identities and face-to-face interaction". This retreat is maybe a rejection "of the overstimulation that defines contemporary existence" or simply an inability to continue to cope with it. "It's as if we want to get rid of everything in advance" Chayka concludes, "including our expectations, so that we won't have anything left to lose."

"No more love, no more beauty, no more pain," once perceived as a threat, this trade-off in The Invasion of the Body Snatchers is kind of a vibe right now. In Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel 'My Year of Rest and Relaxation', the narrator seeks sleeping pills that "turned everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away. ... my emotions passing like headlights that shine softly through a window, sweep past me, illuminate something vaguely familiar, then fade and leave me in the dark again." Journalist Jia Tollentino compares this "liberatory solipsism" to "what is commonly peddled today as wellness.", as well as resembling "a form of cognitive interaction induced by social media, which positions the user as the centre of the universe and everything else—current events, other people's feelings—as ephemeral, increasingly meaningless stimuli." These tactics are like emotional bunkers, a sliding scale between armed individual shelters and "protect your peace". But while the former provides a coping mechanism built on the promise of evading death, even at the end of the world, the latter presents the tantalising offer of bringing us closer to it. Moshfegh's narrator's ultimate goal is to acquire enough medication to effectively sleep for an entire year - not actually being dead but not being awake either - a state once described by tumblr user

'tokyosluts' as "a win-win". "an open relationship with death". "death with benefits". A longing for the ultimate nothingness that could contain a Freudian dash of the 'death drive' if one were that way inclined. A force supposedly "at work in every living creature... striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter" And we don't have to go as far as prescription to feel its effects. Tech writer Max Read detects the same Freudian phenomenon in social media, saying that what it offers "is not death, precisely, but oblivion -an escape from consciousness into numb atemporality". It's the "turn on, tune in, drop out" of late-stage capitalism, where, naturally, resistance once again gives way to submission - this is the dream of a personal apocalypse - one pill or post at a time.

It's no surprise that there's relief in oblivion - freedom from responsibility, obligation, monotony. It's why there's at least one destruction montage in every zombie movie. And a sense that, if the worst has happened, then at least we can stop worrying about if and when the worst will happen. There's a certain fantasy in losing everything, "If you have less," says architect Koray Duman, "you feel like you're more free." So why stop at possessions? Or maybe we just want a chance to explore what other avenues were available to us - or to just feel like we ever had any choice at all. ["I love my life. I just sometimes wonder what would happen if it was blown to smithereens and I got to start all over again."] The slow apocalypse of our personal lives is the claustrophobic shrinking of our future, even more-so than the threat of monotonous suburbia that descended on the later half of the 20th century - a nightmare many can now only dream of. We still suffer the pain of seeing our whole lives play out as soon as we enter education - but now college, marriage, mortgage and kids has been surpassed by a vague but endless hustle and grind. "All plots move deathward" repeats Don DeLillo's protagonist in White Noise, but the future used to be a place of possibility, brave new worlds of space travel and the internet. Now all we can see are the possibilities no longer available to us. If the state of the world feels unbearably uncertain, the state of our own private worlds feel unbearably predetermined, and apocalypse allows the former to fix the latter. You know, a win-win.

In Niki Lindroth von Bahr's short film The Burden, characters evoke nostalgic choreographies of early Hollywood, echoing romantic dreams that have been lost, whittled down to a 9 to 5 - or, more likely, even less forgiving hours. It "uncovers life in a disillusioned, emotionally detached society" writes Georg Csarmann at Short of the Week, "with the excrescence of mind-numbing capitalism epitomized by the aisles of a brightly lit supermarket and the cubicles of a call center." Ideal conditions to make "the apocalypse" a "tempting liberator", as the film's synopsis dictates. ["no aches, no pains... when the burden is lifted from my shoulders"] And the isolation of these spaces suggests that, as much as we might be hemmed in, we are simultaneously cast adrift, the roads that would have provided salvation now severed. And yet, despite this rupture, everyone is still singing the same song. United as if in some kind of ancient ritual, connected to each other and to our aural histories, the one thing that remains reassuringly unchanged and universal. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," as Joan

Didion famously begins her book of essays, 'The White Album', "We live entirely... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria — which is our actual experience."

So we tell ourselves stories about the end of the world, because apocalypse "vaults us over the epistemological chasm of the future," O'Connell writes "clear into a final destination... and you can see at last where the whole mess is headed." Every uncertainty, every shifting phantasmagoria, boiled down into one final unmistakable collapse. But also because it transcends the distance between us on the most fundamental level - the ultimate primetime event. "Catastrophe is our bedtime story," suggests a character in Don DeLillo's 'Zero K', because "It is an escape from our personal mortality. ... We face the end but not alone. We lose ourselves in the core of the storm". It also provides an antidote to potentially troubling realisation that we're not the objective centre of the universe after all, and life will indeed go on without us. There might be some comfort in conflating the end of me with the end of everything, but the post-apocalypse can also offer a counter-reassurance, that maybe what feels like the end of everything, is not in fact the end of us - on either a macro or micro scale. Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel 'Station Eleven', begins with a pandemic that wipes out most of the world's population - and filming for the HBO adaptation began in February 2020 before being abruptly postponed for reasons that weren't at all ironic... But the story within, unfolding over the 20 years that follow, isn't so much the usual apocalyptic fight for survival as it is about "the persistence of community and the creation of art." The ways that art is both a tool for processing trauma and connecting us. The title is taken from a comic book written by one of the characters, in the wake of her own personal devastation, her loss of everything, and completed just before that same seismic shift hits everyone on a global scale - one of its few copies saved and cherished by an eight year old girl, who grows up to join a post-apocalyptic theatre troupe - touring the wreckage of civilisation, performing Shakespeare. The adaptation of artistic work is shown as not only just as important as our adaptation to life after a cataclysmic event, but as the same thing. Stories are what allow us to make sense of our world. "Most of the art featured on the series doesn't exist in its original form." writes Katy Waldman in the New Yorker, "It comes filtered through individuals, who carry and change it in time—shaping, recontextualizing, extracting what they need." There's a line repeated from the comic book: "I've found you 9, maybe 10 times before... and I'll find you again". Always presented devoid of context, it holds no fixed meaning - but as characters repeatedly cycle through love and loss, it comes to resonate most clearly with returning home. Which is not a return to how things were, nor a resurrection of things we can never get back, but just acknowledging that we've found peace and joy and stability before, and we'll find it again. Part of the post-apocalyptic fantasy is just wanting to know we can survive devastation. Kyle Chayka writes that "Numbness beckons... when problems seem insurmountable, when there is so much to mourn.", but we "don't need to sooth [ourselves] into detachment" in the words of artist Anna Fusco.

”I don’t need to sterilize devastation from my library of emotions. Devastate me, baby! I trust I’ll know what to do.”

We dream of the end because we want release from the unending process of ending, the everything that happens so much, because we want to know that we survive, or because we want to be free from the burden of having to. But even as we fortify our bunkers, the fictions we weave demonstrate that no matter how increasingly intolerable the shared world becomes, we still want to share it. Horse_ebooks is the defining text of the last decade because its succinct wisdom is derived from reduction - sentences cut short, context discarded - reflecting our desire to remove ourselves more and more until there’s nothing left - but, stripped of specificity, we’re also left with statements that were far broader than intended, inviting in at the same time as they withdraw, allowing us to build new meaning, new stories, new lives. Adaptation is in our bones, we have to trust we’ll know what to do. “Inherently, we’re very resilient.”, says Dr Robyn Gershon, ”We’ve been preparing for probably as long as we’ve been humans.” And we can adapt, no matter how hostile the environment [turn on noise cancelling] Ah, much better.

Jazzy Extras

The reception to this video has been really lovely ☒ I actually wasn't very confident in it and was worried it wasn't up to my usual standard, but it seems to have really resonated with people which I'm very happy about. And it's funny how many videos on the end of the world have been uploaded this month! I actually started on this one about a year ago, but then shelved it to do the Dear Evan Hansen one - I could have been ahead of the curve! I have it titled in my notes as 'I'm in Love with the End of the World', which will always be the title in my heart. (I also considered having 'Apocalyptic Ideation' in the thumbnail but my mum said it was "a bit up your own arse", she always keeps me grounded ☒)

Cutting Room Floor

Remaking the American myth:
O'Connell writes about preppers' reference to 'savages' in their imagined post-apocalypse, as if they're recreating colonialist history.

Mass scale:
Scale plays a big role in the apocalypse... obviously. "Science fiction films are one of the purest forms of spectacle; that is, we are rarely inside anyone's feelings." claims Susan Sontag in The Imagination of Disaster. I considered talking about our inability to empathise on a mass scale, and how that is both a tool for survival and a hinderance to collective action. There's a relevant line in Carriers (2009): "the sick are already dead". This online archive of GoFundMe donation messages is a poignant addition, but I may indeed include it in another video soon, my favourite quotes from the accompanying essay:

- " I've always found solace in the fact that the words *caregiver* and *caretaker* mean the same thing."
- "In care, we know our limits because they are the places where we meet each other. My limit is where you meet me, yours is where I find you, and, at this meeting place, we are linked, made of the same stuff, transforming into one because of the other."
  Also relating to Station Eleven from Station Eleven Finds the Sublime in the

Apocalypse by Hillary Kelly: "By interspersing Hamlet's insistence that his grief is particular and not culturally mandated ("But I have that within which passeth show; / These but the trappings and the suits of woe") with young Kirsten staring at her phone in shock as she reads that her parents are two of the billions dead, the show turns the calamity of a mass-extinction event into an individual tragedy — for us, for Kirsten, and for her audience in the lawn chairs."

Apocalypse is a first world problem:

I could have said a lot more about the perspectives the fiction I used portrays (generally white, middle class, global north), but I think that's an angle other channels can do better. Here are some notes and quotes I gathered anyway:

- we don't need apocalypse for the world to end - the world has ended many times, for many people, individually, over and over
- O'Connell concludes that if the apocalypse is understood as the dismantling of a system of haves and have-nots into a resulting world consisting solely of have-nots (the "collapse of civilization"), then it has already arrived for most people in the world. Apocalyptic anxiety is a bourgeois problem: "Wasn't the impulse to catastrophize, to imagine the collapse of one's world, only the pursuit of a mind shaped by leisure and economic comfort?"
- "Black women," Heven Haile writes in "The Unbearable Whiteness of the 'Disaffected Young Woman' Genre" for i-D Magazine, "are not afforded the luxury of dissociation due to the continuous cycle of racial violence we are forced to confront."
- "Their grief mostly lies with the oppressive nature of patriarchy and how it stifles their ability to fully reap the benefits of whiteness." - "Sad Girl" Books Can Be Racist by Laurann Herrington [Buzzfeed]

What we deserve:

There's a biblical invocation of apocalypse that considers it a punishment for our sins, and there's a line in the TV adaptation of Station Eleven (it may be in the book too, but I haven't read it so I don't know lol) "It isn't your fault, it's just what happened". I did come across a passage from the book, about a child who reads the bible and comes to see the pandemic as a cleansing of the earth: "I think maybe he's picked up some strange ideas about, well, about what happened... He thinks the pandemic happened for a reason," Clark said. [...] "Everything happens for a reason," she said. She didn't look at him. "It's not for us to know." (260–261) This explores apocalypse in a biblical sense, as retribution - the idea that if bad thing happen we must deserve it, it must be our fault - compared to what I believe the message of the book/TV

adaptation ultimately is ”It isn't your fault, it's just what happened”.
There's also a quote from Don DeLillo's 'The Names': “Wasn't there a sense, we Americans felt, in which we had it coming?”

Utopia:

Utopia ended up not being particularly relevant to what I wanted to discuss (other than a lost utopic vision maybe playing a role in current malaise), but here are some quotes collected from A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction by Jill Lepore

- ”A utopia is a paradise, a dystopia a paradise lost.” - how this pessimism follows the optimism of the 2000s (technology, Barack Obama)
- ”In its modern definition, a dystopia can be apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic, or neither, but it has to be anti-utopian, a utopia turned upside down, a world in which people tried to build a republic of perfection only to find that they had created a republic of misery.”
- ”Mary Shelley's 1826 novel, “The Last Man,” in which the last human being dies in the year 2100 of a dreadful plague, is not dystopian; it's merely apocalyptic.”
- ”Utopians believe in progress; dystopians don't. They fight this argument out in competing visions of the future, utopians offering promises, dystopians issuing warnings.”
- ”After the war, after the death camps, after the bomb, dystopian fiction thrived, like a weed that favors shade. “A decreasing percentage of the imaginary worlds are utopias,” the literary scholar Chad Walsh observed in 1962. “An increasing percentage are nightmares.”

The song 'Toby' by 'Proper':

Has the lyrics:
”Both parents are dead as of last week
None of my kids speak to me, I guess this is fifty?
But is it fucked up I feel relief?
I can finally live for me, what's my life gonna be?”
Actually the whole song fits the theme pretty well.

The Last of Us, Episode 3:

I could make a whole video about this episode, but I'm sure someone already has. I loved the changes to Bill and Franks story, becomes about letting people in rather than always keeping everybody out.

The call of the void:

I feel the urge to throw your keys or your phone or yourself off a bridge is relevant here, but not enough to include.

Paranoia Agent:

- In 2004 Satoshi Kon's 'Paranoia Agent' conjured a paranormal attacker who would target those under too much psychological stress - as if outsourcing the body's own defence mechanism - unfolding in Tokyo under allusions to the atomic bomb, it set personal trauma against psychological scaring on a national level.
- [on My Year of Rest..] it's set in the year leading up to 9/11, it's a novel similarly in the shadow of national catastrophe - but just as the dramatic impact of disaster movies have been displaced, Moshfegh's reclusion is one of slow, deliberate action rather than the explicit violence of an attacker

It wasn't anything someone said:

The Short of the Week review also talks about one of my favourite lines in the film: "As one of the fish sings, "It wasn't anything someone said, I just read between the lines and then made up my mind". I don't know about you, but that sounds achingly familiar. This small piece of observational sing-song reminded me of how my own egocentric pessimism can drive a wedge between myself and other people, preventing my chances of true connection with others and my own happiness, while the perceived opinions are only a figment of my own imagination."

Quotes:

- "In a blinding flash of inspiration, the other day I realized that 'interactive' anything is the wrong word. Interactive makes you imagine people sitting with their hands on controls, some kind of gamelike thing. The right word is 'unfinished.' Think of cultural products, or art works, or the people who use them even, as being unfinished. Permanently unfinished. " - Brain Eno
- "Positions of resistance are neutralized. Ennui itself is a brand: In December, Pantone announced two colors of the year for 2021; the first was Ultimate Gray." - Kyle Chayka
- "No one seems to want anything; there is no enthusiasm for desire in this culture, only the wish that we could give it up. It's an almost Buddhist rush toward selflessness with the addition of American competition and our habit of overdose: as much obliteration as possible." - Kyle Chayka

- ”It was all there in strange microcosm: the frontier mythos of freedom and self-sufficiency, the overwrought performance of masculinity that utterly failed to conceal the cringing terror from which it proceeded, the sad and fetishistic relationship to consumer goods, the hatred and mistrust of outsiders. Lurking on the forums and blogs and Facebook groups of these preppers — reading their literature and even listening to the occasional podcast — I came to see their movement as a hysterical symptom of America itself.” - Mark O’Connell

- ”Doomsday prepping has always been an individualist fantasy. People like to imagine their success in an apocalypse because they don’t believe in other people. They buy the lie that they can win the end of the world because it lets them feel strong while caving into fear.” - Hank Green

- ”I am not joking when I say: it is easier to read Ulysses than it is to read the Internet. Because at least Ulysses has an end, an edge. Ulysses can be finished. The Internet is never finished.” - Alexis C. Madrigal

- “Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else.” - Don DeLillo - White Noise

- ”We aren’t presented with any choice in how we live,” writes Ariel Saramandi in a review of Moshfegh’s novel, ”we’re forced into neoliberalism, presented as the greatest solution.”

- ”A story about ruin can be beautiful. Wreckage is romantic. But a politics of ruin is doomed.” - Jill Lapore

- ”If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.” - Rem Koolhaas

- But crises pile on crises. In 1993, Brian Massumi writes, “what society looks toward is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life”.

- ”They also remind us that beauty requires human interaction. I don’t mean that buildings and fairgrounds and railway stations and temples can’t look eerily beautiful empty. ... Their emptiness trumpets an existence mostly divorced from human habitation and the messy thrum of daily life. They imagine an experience more akin to the wonder of bygone explorers coming upon the remains of a lost civilization. They evoke the romance of ruins. Beauty entails something else. It is something we bestow. It will be the moment we return.” - Michael Kimmelman

- ”There is no mythological template to help us make sense of the current mutated form of the end times. We don’t know how to think about it, how to give it the

form of myth or story, and so it metastasizes and spreads, a blood sickness in the culture." - Mark O'Connell

- "We live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." - Susan Sontag, The Imagination of Disaster
- "Is it possible to be terrified and bored at the same time? Is it possible to be bored of terror?" - Mark O'Connell
- "Shakespeare's been real quiet since Horse ebooks entered the scene" - tweet

I would also like to note that I was several chapters into *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* before realising that it was not a memoire and was in face fiction.

Reading List

Essays and articles:

- The Internet is a Dead Texan by Scott Beauchamp [Return]
- Wide Awake in America by Jennifer Richardson [Fiction Advocate]
- What Drives Doomsday Preppers by Michele Moses [New Yorker]
- How Nothingness Became Everything We Wanted by Kyle Chayka [NYT]
- Interview with Niki Lindroth von Bahr, Director of "The Burden (Min Börda)" in Stop Motion Geek
- The Death Drive at the End of the World by Ben Ware [e-flux]
- Review: In 'Station Eleven,' the World Ends, Beautifully by James Poniewozik
- The 10-Year-Old Tweet That Still Defines the Internet by Kaitlyn Tiffany [Atlantic]
- Everything Happens So Much by Lindsay Zoladz
- 2013: The Year 'the Stream' Crested by Alexis C. Madrigal [Atlantic]
- Going Postal: A psychoanalytic reading of social media and the death drive by Max Read
- Group Therapy for the End of the World by Kyle Chayka [Garage]

- The Reality Show That Wants to Save the World (But Probably Won't) by Kyle Chayka
- A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction by Jill Lepore [New Yorker]
- Review of The Burden by Georg Csarmann [Short of the Keek]
- The Imagination of Disaster by Susan Sontag
- My Year of Rest and Relaxation: how Ottessa Moshfegh's book pre-empted lockdown by Octavia Bright [Penguin]
- Station Eleven Finds the Sublime in the Apocalypse by Hillary Kelly
- Station Eleven found a silver lining in the post-apocalypse by Nicole Clark
- In Station Eleven, the end of the world is a vibrant, lush green by Emily St. James [Vox]
- In "Station Eleven," All Art Is Adaptation by Katy Waldman
- King Lear, Station Eleven, and the Shakespearean Apocalypse: Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism by James S. Baumlin
- "Sad Girl" Books Can Be Racist by Laurann Herrington [Buzzfeed]
- JUNKSPACE by Rem Koolhaas
- The Great Empty by Michael Kimmelman [NYT]
- standing on the shoulders of complex female characters by Rayne Fisher-Quann [Sunstack]
- Ottessa Moshfegh's Painful, Funny Novel of a Young Woman's Chemical Hibernation by Jia Tollentino [New Yorker]

Books:

- Notes from an Apocalypse by Mark O'Connell
- "The Culture of Calamity: Disaster & the Making of Modern America" by Kevin Rozario

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