

INGL 3300-066--“Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film”

UPRM, Fall 2015, Dr. Gregory Stephens

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE (Aug. 13, 2015)



Post apocalyptic New York City wallpaper

THREE OBJECTIVES TODAY

- 1) Go over draft syllabus, and requirement. Emphasize: must order two books
 - 1). *The Giver*, 1993 by Lois Lowry;
 - 2). *The Road*, 2006 by Cormac McCarthy;Other required stories & essays will be posted on class webpage (e-courses) <https://ecourses.uprm.edu/course/view.php?id=934>
- 2) Pass out questionnaire – In-class short writing
- 3) Readings that frame utopia vs dystopia relationship, and the origins of post-apocalyptic “vogue.” “Comforts of the Apocalypse” from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, is assigned reading, and is on the [class webpage](#).

A paradox: Although the post-apocalyptic is most often characterized as being about the “end of human civilization,” critics such as Amy Murphy rightly point out that this genre usually functions as an expression of our “**utopian desires.**”
Murphy, Amy. "Nothing Like New: Our Post-Apocalyptic Imagination as Utopian Desire." *Journal of Architectural Education* 67.2 (2013): 234-242.

Hence we can see already that although the post-apocalyptic seems to be a version of the *dystopian*, in fact it often serves *utopian* purposes. Doesn't the world look better to almost all of us with a whole lot less people?

Utopia and dystopia “are **antithetical yet interdependent**” (Kumar 1987: 100).
Kumar, Krishnan. *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*. New York: Blackwell, 1987.

Now a closer look at how three texts frame the issue.

a) Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge UP, 1989).

She begins by observing: “The end of this millennium has displaced 1984 as a focus of speculation, and **apocalypse is in vogue.**” (1)



POSTAPOCALYPTIC FASHION AND STEAMPUNK STYLE

What, then, is “Apocalypse”? It is a synonym for “revelation,” or “to uncover, reveal, disclose” (10), or in literal translation from the Greek: “**the lifting of the veil**”—*a time when all things are revealed*. (Gross & Gilles 2012: 13).

Judeo-Christian template. “the plagues and torments which the apocalypticist describes are a **source of consolation** rather than dismay... Thus, apocalypse is not merely a vision of doom: For its original audience it was, on the contrary, a luminous vision of the fulfillment of God’s promise of justice and communal salvation.” (2)

Zamora sees this as part of the cultural matrix in both Latin America and the U.S.:

On arrival Columbus in his letters and diary cited Revelations, and Isaiah, a “new heaven and new earth.” He initiated what was to become a perennial imaginative **association of America with the promise of apocalyptic historical renewal.** (7)

Americans on both continents have inherited a sense of the eschatological significance of their historical and national destiny. (9)



[What Is Your Job After The Apocalypse?](#) (playbuzz)

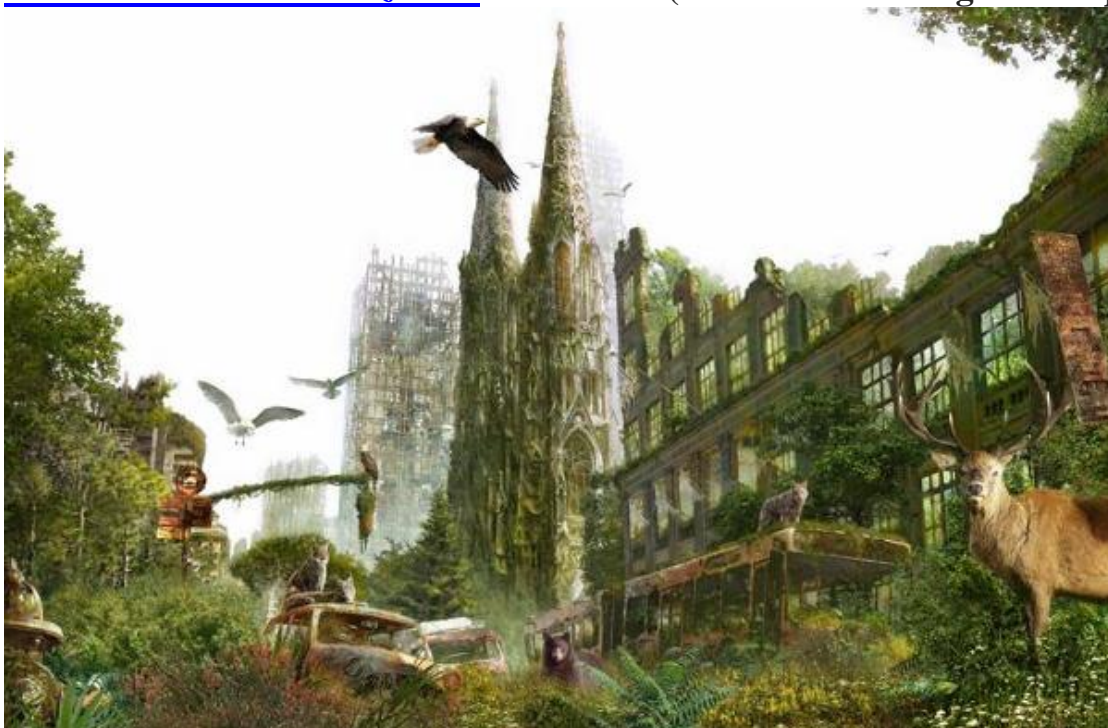
Why has this vision of life amidst the ruins/after the collapse become so popular?

One answer is supplied by *Fight Club* (novel 1996; film 1999) which could be seen as a part of a paleo-men’s movement. Its argument: a return to “manly values” requires a destruction of consumer culture, which has feminized men:

Tyler Durden - In The World I See ([Fight Club Scene](#))

"In the world I see - you are stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison on the empty car pool lane of some abandoned superhighway. Feel better, champ."

[Nature Reclaims Civilization](#) Slideshow (Anne Frank & Fight club quotes



Apocalypse Now: [Unstoppable man-made climate change](#) will become reality by the end of the decade

GENDER: The relative absence [at that time] of female authors in the genre. "Is it that the militantly destructive elements of the myth of the apocalypse contradict what we traditionally consider to be the female impulse to create, nurture regenerate? Or is it a question of scale?" (7)

b) Mathew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us about America* (Prometheus Books, 2012)

A journalistic critique of the excesses of what they call the “Apocalyptic Decade.”

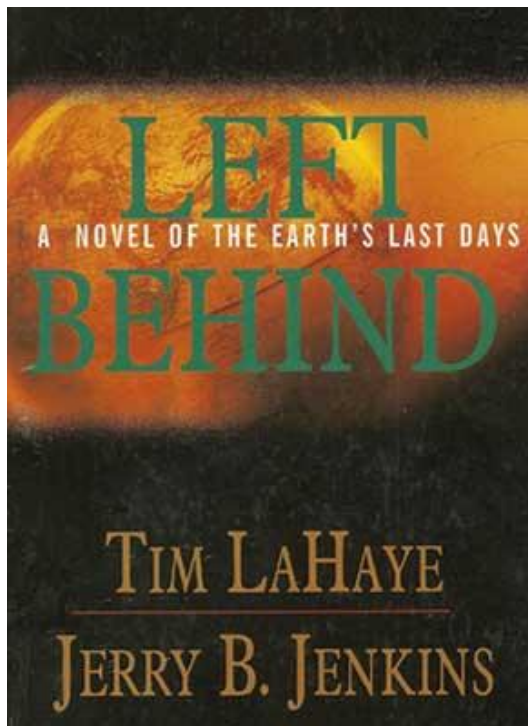
Note: neither author is an academic. Both live in Moab, Utah. Gross was director of Internet Communications for the Howard Dean presidential campaign in 2003-2004. He is a former rock drummer and river guide.

Gilles is co-founder and director of Sol Kula Yoga and Healing in Moab. Her essay “The Politics of Victimization” went viral, reaching two million readers worldwide.

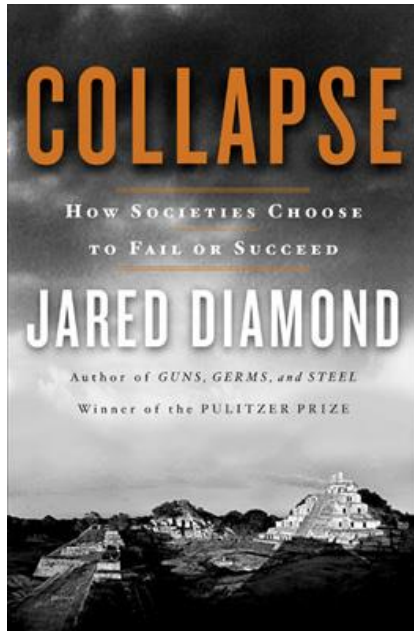
Despite hostility between the Left and the Right, the apocalyptic is actually “the *common lens through which most Americans are now looking at the world.*” (12)

It is called “The Rapture” on the right, and “Collapse” on the left.

Some of their examples: *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which sold more than 63 million in the first decade.



Historian Jared Diamond on the *Collapse of Civilizations*, a best seller for years.



Cormac McCarthy's 2006 *The Road*, a “postapocalyptic sci-fi potboiler”—won the **Pulitzer Prize for fiction**. That indicated how what had been “genre” fiction has now entered the mainstream. It is now “conquering literature.”



[Dressing for the Apocalypse](#)

In U.S. culture “the word is used as shorthand for the more accurate phrase *apokalupsis eschaton*—the revelation of knowledge at the end of time” (13).

In the narrowest and most accurate sense, apocalypse is a literary genre of Jewish or Christian texts, like *Daniel*, and *Revelation*. But it has acquired a broader cultural meaning: “it is a pattern of thought that assumes that the end of our way of life... is imminent” (13-14)

The authors ask: “How have we come to interpret nearly every event through the prism of the apocalypse?” (19)

c) Rob Goodman, “The [Comforts of the Apocalypse](#),” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Aug. 19, 2013).

We're living through a dystopia boom; secular apocalypses have, in the words of *The New York Times*, “pretty much owned” best-seller lists and taken on a dominant role in pop culture. These are fictions of infinite extrapolation, stories in which today's source of anxiety becomes tomorrow's source of collapse.



Literature such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series, and Alan Weisman's 2007 best seller *The World Without Us*, is the product of what the philosopher John Gray has described as "a culture transfixed by the spectacle of its own fragility."* Call it dystopian narcissism: the conviction that our anxieties are uniquely awful; that the crises of our age will be the ones that finally do civilization in; that we are privileged to witness the beginning of the end.

(Nothing new under the sun..... Walter Benjamin famously wrote that our “self-alienation [is such that] **we can contemplate our own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure [a spectacle] of the first order.**”) [yet... Goodman continues:]

...there is also a neurotic way of picking at a wound, of catastrophizing, of visualizing the day the wounded limb turns gangrenous and falls off. It's this **hunger for crisis**, the need to assign our problems world-transforming import, that **separates dystopian narcissism from constructive polemic**. And this hunger, too, has its origins in a religious impulse, in particular, the impulse called "typology."

Typology was originally a method of reading the Old Testament in the light of the New. More broadly, typology **speaks to the sense in which** past events prefigure the present, or **the present finds fulfillment in the future**. So Adam is a type of Christ, the Flood is a type of baptism, etc.

Typology would be a theological relic were it simply a means of reading Scriptures. But **as the literary critic Northrop Frye wrote, it is a far-reaching "mode of thought,"** built on the "assumption that there is some meaning and point to history ,... that despite apparent confusion, even chaos, in human events, nevertheless those events are going somewhere and indicating something." Needless to say, **this mode of thought is deeply appealing and deeply consoling.**



Post-[Apocalyptic Steampunk Girl](#)