

INGL 3300-066--“Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film” ---Ingl3300-066
UPRM, Fall 2015, Dr. Gregory Stephens (**Lecture 2, Aug. 18, 2015**)
Plato’s Cave, “The Comforts of the Apocalypse,” and *The Giver*

A) Plato’s Cave (*An allegory for the human condition*)

An allegory conveys a **veiled meaning**. It is an extended [metaphor](#).

A famous metaphor is the [All the world's a stage](#) monologue from [As You Like It](#):

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
—[William Shakespeare, As You Like It, 2/7^{\[1\]}](#)

The world is not literally a stage... but people do act according to scripts. We don’t literally live in a cave, but metaphorically, this describes the human condition.

In Plato's "[Allegory of the Cave](#)" (Socrates) there are a group of people who live chained to the wall of a cave, watching shadows play on the wall. The shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality.



Imagine a society of people who live in a cave. The cave dwellers are tied to a bench, unable to move or turn their heads, even to look at those sitting next to them. Behind them is the entrance to the cave, allowing daylight in, and just outside the cave is a road where people pass by. The cave dwellers can see on the wall in front of them their own shadows and the shadows of the passers by - nothing more. For them, the shadow world is the only reality, and the voices of the passers-by are understood as the shadows speaking.

Socrates asks if it is not reasonable that the prisoners would **take the shadows to be real things** and the echoes to be real sounds, not just reflections of reality, since they are all they had ever seen or heard. ...

But one among the cave dwellers frees himself

[DISCUSSION: what would be his first reaction? Blinded by sun.] But after some time on the surface, the freed prisoner would acclimatize, Socrates suggests. He would see more things around him... He would understand that the Sun is "in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing."

By stepping out of the cave, he learns there is another world, three-dimensional and brilliant, illuminated by the sun. He realizes he and his fellow cave dwellers have mistaken the world of shadows for the world of substance. Very possibly, he would want to go back to the cave and **share the good news**.

Socrates asks Glaucon: "Were he to return to the cave, wouldn't... it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it's not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn't they kill him?"

***PLATO's Cave illustrates why we so often use allegories instead of "telling the truth" directly. The truth is dangerous. To lead people to new vision, it is often more effective to lead them there indirectly—using humor, allegory, etc.

READING GUIDE QUESTION:

How does Jonas in The Giver function like the escaped prisoner in "The Cave"?

B) "Comforts of the Apocalypse" and Review

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

"**We're living through a dystopia boom; secular apocalypses** ... are fictions of infinite extrapolation, stories in which **today's source of anxiety becomes tomorrow's source of collapse.**"

What are those “*sources of anxiety*” that drive us to imagine apocalypses?

What does **secular** mean?

Why does the author specify “secular apocalypse”?

“Apocalypse” is a synonym for “revelation”; “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).

The original apocalypses were Judeo-Christian scriptures. They tried to make sense of complete devastation: the end of the world, as the Jews knew it. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament; the book of Revelations in the New Testament.

Historical context: series of conquests. Where were these scriptures written? In Israel/Palestine, a crossroads which was over-run repeatedly by great empires.

READ FROM Gross & Gilles 72-73

[a new way of thinking: from myth/creation, to destruction & the end of time]

What led up to the book of *Revelations*: Romans arrived 63 BCE.

“Hebraic expectation under Roman rule was for a total upending of the age—an *escape from the terrors of history*.” (85)

The rhetoric of apocalypse: [earthquake, famine, false prophets, wars and rumors of wars]

“this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (Mat 24:35)

“Constantly waiting for the end of the world is exhausting.” (88)

Destruction of Jerusalem in CE 70.

Revelations written in the aftermath, probably about CE 96.

The book spans three literary genres: the epistolary, the apocalyptic, and the prophetic. It begins with John, on the island of Patmos in the Aegean, who describes a series of prophetic visions, including figures such as the Whore of Babylon and the Beast, culminating in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

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).

These days, the apocalypse is “a pattern of thought that assumes that the end of our way of life is imminent” (Gross & Gilles, 13-14)



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."*

“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.**”)

[Goodman continues:] there is a neurotic way of picking at a wound, of catastrophizing, of visualizing the day the wounded limb turns gangrenous and falls off..... This **hunger for crisis** ... has its origins in a religious impulse, esp. "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.

As the literary critic Northrop Frye wrote, typology is not just religious, but 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.**

REVIEW:

Why do scholars like Amy Murphy argue that endless descriptions of the “end of human civilization” function as an expression of our “**utopian desires**” ??

We can see 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?

C) Reading *The Giver*

In what way can we see in *The Giver* that utopia and dystopia “are **antithetical yet interdependent**” ??

(Kumar 1987: 100).

What is good about the world Lowry describes?

What is missing?

Have you seen a similar quasi-utopian world?

Maybe, The Truman Show?

Why is control of memory so important?