

COLLISION

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Aesthetics After Hegel

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

Apocalyptic scenarios in science fiction often represent the end as a horrible possibility – something we, the audience, should think would be absolutely terrible. But what about artworks that depict apocalypse as something desirable? Is such a desire ethical? I want to pursue these questions as they apply to Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), in which ecological and biological misdeeds lead to the extinction of human civilization and the emergence of asexual, anti-social "neo-humans." I argue that Houellebecq's vision of the future, with its starkly beautiful descriptions of an overheated, polluted, and geologically ravaged Earth, aestheticizes annihilation, making collapse seem not only inevitable, but attractive. My essay then makes the case for a metaphor likening Houellebecq's apocalyptic scenarios to G.W.F. Hegel's "system," his overarching philosophical model that accounts for everything from individual consciousness to governments, art, and natural phenomena. This metaphor is borne out by the fact that Hegel's system contains a few apocalypses of its own, namely the famous "end of art" and "end of history." Critics of Hegel's system (e.g., Gianni Vattimo) accuse it of squashing freedom, of demanding that everything eventually be sublated into a static unity that tolerates nothing outside itself. Proponents of Hegel's system (e.g., Catherine Malabou), however, regard it as an organic mechanism that allows for change, contingency, and difference. I argue that Houellebecq's apocalypse can be understood as a system analogous to Hegel's, and interrogate the ethics of such a system. Is the choice to represent environmental catastrophe as both beautiful and preordained (qualities that Hegel attributes to his system) one that ultimately denies the importance of the individual, of difference? Or, can there be room for freedom and chance in narratives of unavoidable doom?

KEYWORDS: Hegel, Houellebecq, apocalypse, infinity

The Ethics of Apocalypse

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Fictional narratives often put forward the illusion of hope. This is an illusion, of course, for naturally fictional characters are not real, do not possess agency, and thus cannot control their existence. But what are the ethical ramifications of a narrative that offers no hope? I speak here of an apocalyptic story in which disastrous outcomes are known well in advance, and in which characters believe that they lack freedom of will. My paper explores the nature of the aesthetic pleasure we experience when contemplating artworks that deny the possibility of freedom. Would it be fair to read such a story as a totalizing system in which human agency is rendered irrelevant? Would it be perverse for readers to enjoy such a story? Is there an ethics to apocalyptic narrative?

I ask these questions as they pertain specifically to Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*,¹ which alternates between the accounts of two characters: Daniel, a present-day superstar comedian, and Daniel25, his clone who lives several millennia in the future. The relationship between these two accounts, which trade off chapter-by-chapter, is initially unclear. Daniel seems all too familiar with his jaded

descriptions of contemporary mores, whereas Daniel25's writing is dispassionate, referencing a leader called the "Supreme Sister" and obscure cataclysmic events. As the novel unfolds, these two accounts begin to form a composite picture of global collapse. For despite Daniel's rancor, his ruinous affair with a twenty-something nymphomaniac, and his cynical film scripts replete with pornography and ultra-violence, he comes to believe that he will be resurrected as a clone in a utopia where aging, disease, and death will have disappeared, and where humans will be free to indulge in perpetual love and sensuality. This is his "possibility of an island", an era he imagines in which a younger, perfected version of himself will love an equally young and perfect woman. This may strike us as a fantasy, as normally such an idea would strike Daniel. But caught up as he is with the Elohimite cult, which claims to have mastered genetic cloning, Daniel comes to view this possibility as certainty.

So in the present, Daniel's nihilism mixes with the hope that no matter how deplorable the human race is now, it will one day evolve to enjoy a happier, more peaceful existence. But this is not to be. Daniel25 describes a nuclear war (occurring not long after Daniel's suicide) that culminated in atomic bomb detonations at both of the Earth's poles, unleashing an ecological catastrophe called the "Great Drying Out". All cities have been destroyed, with a small fraction of the human population surviving in primitive brutality. An even smaller number has survived as clones of the original Elohimite members, and these are scattered across the globe, each one occupying its own mechanized, hermetically sealed compound. Daniel25's account incrementally reveals that little of what Daniel envisioned about the future has come to pass. The clones – "neo-humans" as they call themselves – live in isolation from one another and communicate only through computers. Neo-humans have lost all desire for food and sex, and experience no emotions beyond curiosity and disgust at the spectacle of human civilization. Neo-humans put to rest any fantasies that the Elohimite cult might have entertained for a better, more loving world.

Houellebecq extends little genuine hope to Daniel, or at least no hope besides that necessary to end his meaningless present life in order to prepare for an impossible future one. But Houellebecq affords absolutely no hope to Daniel25, who speaks of neo-human existence as machine-like and determined, and who knows ahead of time that his final act of leaving his compound for the outside world will change nothing. In other words, the world in POAI is closed off from possibility and contingency. |

therefore view this novel as a system, a philosophical paradigm that relates separate phenomena to some intelligible whole. The world set into motion by POAI – its system – is closed because Daniel is powerless to avoid both personal and global catastrophe, and Daniel25 portrays that catastrophe in retrospect as unavoidable and well-deserved.

Among the POAI system's starkest claims is that parents experience no love or satisfaction from raising children. Human offspring are nothing more than emotional and financial burdens from infancy through adulthood, and parents:

would have to take care of children, above all, like mortal enemies, in their own house...they would remain slaves until the end of their parenthood; the time of happiness was indeed over for them.²

The irrelevance of children becomes formalized when the Elohimite cult announces its first successful human clone, for now the biological imperative to procreate vanishes. Children are literally no longer necessary, and the Elohimites begin a campaign to convince their followers to stop having them.

By Daniel25's time, the absence of children means that neo-humans persist by means of an infinite progression of copies of the same few people. Daniel25 considers his predecessors (Daniel through Daniel24) as doomed to thinking the same thoughts, and regards the outside world as similarly constrained. Daniel25 makes one decision that might suggest agency: to leave his compound and search for a rumored colony of neo-humans on Lanzarote, an island in the Canaries. This might appear to prove that Daniel25 sees some value after all in (neo-)humanity. Yet Daniel25 later repudiates that decision, and his final observations of the outside

amply legitimated the final verdict the Supreme Sister had reached concerning humanity, and justified her decision to do nothing to thwart the process of extermination in which it had engaged for two millennia.³

But while Daniel25 depicts humans as worthless, he describes post-cataclysmic Lanzarote – his "possibility of an island" made into reality – as statically beautiful:

air and water temperatures were equal, and must have been around 37°C, for I felt neither hot nor cold; the light was bright but not blinding. Between the tide pools, the sand was piled into holes that resembled little graves. I lay down in one of them; the sand was warm and silky. Then I realized that I was going to live here, and my days would be many.⁴

Daniel25 may not admit it, but his description makes clear that the infinite succession of his remaining days are not without pleasure. And we as readers, in turn, may contemplate the endless stretch of days before him with a certain fascination.

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Apocalyptic stories are usually open systems because they offer hope for the future, or at least delay hopeless revelations until the end of the story. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), for instance, begins with Sarah Connor convinced of the inevitability of nuclear war. But Sarah's son John reasserts hope: there is "no fate but what we make." Even a dark tale like *Planet of the Apes* (1968) saves its hopelessness for the ultimate scene. We don't know that Taylor has been on Earth all along – an Earth where humans have blasted themselves back to the stone age, and where apes rule – until he discovers the Statue of Liberty rusted and all but submerged in sand. Only then do we know the truth, and then the credits roll. But in POAI, there are no final surprises, and readers know that the end for Daniel (i.e., suicide) and Daniel25 (i.e., solitary reflection) will change nothing in the world at large. Indeed, Houellebecq depicts apocalypse as both inevitable and seductive. Daniel25's descriptions of the world outside reveal that nature has reclaimed formerly human territory with a vengeance; forests stretch over what once were car-parks or industrial areas. The Atlantic Ocean has evaporated, leaving vast plains of white sand, new rock formations, and a balmy climate. Armageddon here is definitive, but also beguiling.

What are the ethical implications of artworks that contain such absolutist systems? In POAI, there are no characters who would challenge the prevailing theory that humanity is doomed, no actions that would shake this theory, no moments of randomness that might complicate the fatalist narrative. We can enlist a critique of POAI's system from another, more

famous philosophical system, Hegel's, which shares with POAI the fact that it too enlists endings as integral moments of dialectical progression.⁵ Hegel makes endings – of art, of history – central to the system, though he would argue that endings and beginnings feed into one another in an eternal circle.⁶ He also accounts for everything, from being and ontology to nature, human psychology, history, and religion, with the system, to the extent that critics like Vattimo have accused Hegel of creating a totalizing theory that tolerates nothing outside itself.⁷ Yet there is clearly a difference between the closed system in POAI and the open system of Hegel's dialectical logic, and this difference amounts to their respective senses of the nature of infinity. Hegel writes that the good or "true" infinity in dialectical thought resides within the finitude of the present moment: "It *is* and *is there*, present before us."⁸ There is, in other words, no infinite existence divorced from the finite particularizations of daily life; true infinity embraces contradiction, contingency, and possibility. POAI's infinity, however, denies all hope of change for humanity, conveniently passing it off as the privilege of the mysterious Future Ones who will someday descend to Earth. In POAI's bad infinity, the same few players perpetuate humanity's miserable existence without adding anything substantially new. Free will and hope are inaccessible because change itself is identified in advance as impossible.

What POAI offers is a critique of our current tendency to aestheticize suffering. In watching unstoppable destruction, we aren't led to sympathy or hope for Houellebecq's characters, because they themselves lack hope. In Virilio's words, this experience is "pitiless", for it inculcates within the spectator numbness toward suffering.⁹ What is left can be described as a mechanical curiosity for the particulars of destruction. What would the world look like after a nuclear war and environmental collapse? What would the Atlantic basin look like once drained of most of its water? If these questions seem too particular to Houellebecq's novel, we could easily expand this discussion to include artworks that treat the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., that occurred on September 11, 2001. Commercial films like *United 93* (2006) or *World Trade Center* (2006) are gripping because they explore the details of an event in which individual agency was utterly obliterated – what it might have felt like to be trapped aboard one of the hijacked planes, or under a mass of rubble that had once been the Twin Towers. Even an understated treatment like William Basinski's formidable electronic music work, *Disintegration Loops* (2002), is built on the simple formula of automatic decay: we listen to a loop of musical material over

and over, until the tape on which it was recorded several years ago literally falls apart and takes its sounds with it. In all these examples, the absence of hope and freedom leaves only an intellectual interest in decay and death.

I close with a few thoughts that hopefully will provoke an ongoing discussion on the ethics of apocalyptic artwork. We might reflect on the dividends of a work like POAI that, on the surface, might seem to be an abjectly depressing novel. Its greatest achievement may in fact be its graphic illustration of what happens to audiences faced with artworks that withhold hope and freedom. For while we might regard lowbrow forms of entertainment like porn, torture porn, or snuff film as existing on a plane entirely removed from that of a novel like POAI, Houellebecq's book articulates in conceptual terms what porn and violent films demonstrate on a very basic level. In both cases, the absence of hope or freedom leads to an aesthetic experience in which nothing fatal is hidden or withheld, and in which human agents are reduced to the status of automatons. It's easy to fall prey to Daniel's descriptions of the outside world, suggesting that a post-human world would be a more beautiful and peaceful place. In so doing, we end up believing, with Daniel, in a possibility that in reality affords no possibilities at all.

• Notes •

¹ Michel Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Henceforth referred to as POAI. Translations from the French are mine.

² *Ibid.*, 384.

³ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 470.

⁵ GWF Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

⁶ *Ibid.*, §17.

⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 19: Self-consciousness in Hegel's system is "totally closed to the possibility of truly encountering something other than Spirit itself."

⁸ GWF Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. AV Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 148.

⁹ Paul Virilio, "A Pitiless Art," in *Art and Fear*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Continuum, 2003), 25-66.

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