

# Towards A Bright Post-Apocalypse

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It was Walter Benjamin (1974 [1940]) who observed that we only experience history such as it is, when it stands still. However, he referred more so to the study of history, which was always the study of a mere snapshot of the true events, or indeed to the material ruins of the past: buildings, cities, civilisations, standing unmoving like Ozymandias' words in Shelley's poem. Today, we experience history's standstill in a different sense. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused most countries to institute some degree of lockdown or quarantine. As a result, our societies and our economies have come dangerously close to grinding to a complete halt. This pandemic is unsurprisingly causing a lot of anxiety and concern, and I argue here that it is not the disease itself people are anxious about, but rather the unknowns of the future. It has become clear to many that society as we know it cannot remain the same - permanent changes will happen. The problem is not that capital-E Events (Badiou 2003) such as this pandemic invariably result in change. Rather, it is our inability to imagine alternatives to the status quo that results in anxiety for the future.

To explain this, we must first turn to Jacques Derrida (Fisher 2014) and hauntology. Derrida observed that we never experience things as fully present, but either as reflected through past events or distorted by expectations of future events. Music is a great example of this. Taken in isolation, a note lacks any melodic quality, and it is only by comparing previous notes while anticipating future notes that we make any sense of the melody itself. It is never fully present but emerges through an interplay between the past, the present, and the future. Taking a step back, all experiences are like this. We can only make sense of the present by looking to the past, and anticipating the future. Our experiences are, so to speak, haunted by that which no longer exists and by that which does not yet exist.

Hauntology, as applied to culture, is much more specific. The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2014) popularised Derrida's concept within cultural theory. He argued that we have reached a cultural impasse, as societies under neoliberalism are increasingly incapable of anticipating new futures. Neoliberalism, Fisher writes, demands short term solutions and is therefore aggressively geared towards reproducing itself. Even areas with rapid developments - digital technologies, for example - do not open up new modes of cultural or social being or exploration. These new developments, instead, are subservient to pre-existing cultural modes. Our experience under neoliberalism is not only hauntological in this sense, as we seemingly paradoxically turn back to past forms of cultural forms as a means of reliving the anticipation of futures that never were. Fisher concludes, simply, that the future has been cancelled (2014).

This is perhaps most succinctly summarised in a quote often attributed to Slavoj Žižek or Fredric Jameson (Fisher 2009: 2), that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." Here, we return to Benjamin. We're not only standing face-to-face with history, insofar as many directly observe how the world is going to change substantially, but we are also faced with the unknown future, and an inability to project it. The social and economic hegemony has inculcated us into a performance of constant consumption and pleasure. As Žižek (2012) summarises it, we are no longer subjects of duties, but subjects of pleasure. This system is geared towards constantly moving forward - to constantly expanding. As a result, the performative aspects of capitalism no longer make sense, and perhaps more importantly, they are increasingly impossible. We, as subjects, are therefore incapable of performing what is expected of us. We can no longer perform our subjectivity under capitalism; we cannot perform ourselves.

It is not all as bleak as this all sounds. Despite the anxiety it adds, this 'dress rehearsal' for the end of the world also offers an opportunity to find new modes of being. The sudden change in the status quo, while uncomfortable and disconcerting, may force new ways of performing everyday life, to embrace a new normal out of necessity - something many of us are already doing. Potentially, this is a first step towards breaking Fisher's hauntological impasse (2014). By introducing new means of performing social and cultural behaviours, new social and cultural forms may emerge that become permanent. As we're forced to resituate ourselves in the world - what Fredric Jameson calls cognitive mapping (1990) - we may stumble upon new, permanent ways of seeing the landscape before us. While this may indeed be a 'dress rehearsal' for the apocalypse, it may truly result in the death of a world, and the birth of another.

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