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# **Death and Apocalypse in the Digital Megamachine**

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## Introduction

The concept of apocalypse is intimately related to ideas about death and politics. Foregrounding death therefore opens a specific conceptual vantage point on apocalyptic discourse and imaginaries. Religious apocalypse in the earlier Judaeo-Christian conception, for example, suggests possible cataclysm and therefore physical death and destruction, but the post-apocalyptic in this context also suggests a kind of eternal life free from the rule of time, the body, and mortality; typically conceived as an immortality of the soul in union with God. This state of immortality can only be achieved through death (Wolfe 2019). In contrast, the modern techno-apocalypse posits immortality in more literal terms, as an immortality of the material body in which physical death is sought to be averted altogether.

Immortality is therefore integral to the notion of apocalypse, which, in turn, can be thought in terms of a quest to overcome various limits associated with life. Twentieth-century Western thought provides one way of tracking this shift from immortality of the soul to material immortality, through various recurring tropes about life, about death, about life after death, and about life without death. Indeed, this literature can even be understood as a neglected entry in the apocalyptic archive of the West. Psychoanalytical concepts of the death-drive and later attempts to read social formations, such as industrial capitalism, as forms of institutionalised death-denial are not normally thought to be part of this archive, but they nonetheless give us a glimpse into the immortality projects that characterise the contemporary technological condition and the forms of apocalypse attached to it.

Contemporary technological ambitions like Transhumanism are an attempt to sustain individual life that eradicates life's very source of uniqueness. Similarly, other Silicon Valley ideologies, such as Longtermism, eclipse the present through an abstract form of perpetual deferral. Meanwhile, contemporary streaming media and their mode of algorithm-enabled entertainment enact a form of total capture that produces living deadness. All represent ongoing forms of apocalypse with whose politics we must now come to terms.

This article reflects a series of discussions held over the course of three months under the aegis of a working group on death and politics at the Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies. It explores the historical and contemporary relevance of ideas about death in the work of Lewis Mumford, Norman Brown, and Jacques Derrida, as well as related secondary literature dealing with death and technology. Mumford provides an initial avenue into thinking the contemporary technological condition in psycho-social terms related to technological immortality projects. Brown illuminates the psychoanalytical underpinnings of immortality not as being 'beyond death,' but, instead, as registering a form of death-denial characteristic of modernity. And Derrida helps contextualise the relationship between death, technology, and responsibility.

Each of these psycho-social dimensions of death and its beyond echo through the interstices of digital life. To illustrate these echoes, the readings are brought into conversation with contemporary media artefacts;

specifically two episodes of the Channel 4/Netflix show *Black Mirror* (*Fifteen Million Credits* and *Be Right Back*), and a music video by Father John Misty (*Total Entertainment Forever*). The overarching question pursued throughout is this: What do these concepts and media representations of death reveal about apocalyptic thinking in general, and what can this help clarify about the apocalyptic character of the present moment in history?

## Technics and Death

As an early thinker of the fraught relationship between technology and modern civilisation, Lewis Mumford imagines the relation between life and death through the idea of the megamachine. To put it simply, the megamachine is social organisation itself; not an apparatus overlaying society, but “a machine composed of human parts” (Mumford 1967: 11) forming a technological-power complex. The megamachine has, Mumford argues, always been involved in solidifying class power and helping to achieve the aims of ruling elites. From Egyptian pyramids to Jeff Bezos’ rockets, the megamachine is productive, but this productivity is normally tethered to the immortality projects of the ruling class (Hager 2020; 2023).

The significance of death in all this is underlined in a little-known but excellent research article by Gregory Swer (2003), entitled “The Road to Necropolis: Technics and Death in the Philosophy of Lewis Mumford.” In this article, Swer highlights Freud’s influence on Mumford and also the tension between the two. According to Swer, Mumford takes on the idea of the death drive, but rather than positing it as universal, he casts it as historically conditioned, a product of the mono-technical megamachine. The point, then, is that the contemporary capitalist megamachine inculcates a death drive that gears individual and social life toward death in interesting ways. The megamachine produces outward destruction, to be sure, but also a mausoleum of social life; a living death that sees the human aspire to the machine state, a seemingly immortal fixity that freezes the flux of life. Being folded into the megamachine thus yields two forms of death drive. We want to annihilate ourselves because living life as part of a machine is stultifying (the inward death drive), and we want to destroy or kill others as an aggressive overflow of a mutilated psyche (the outward death drive).

Mumford’s analysis rests on a fundamental opposition between flux and fixity. For him, the machine state is free from flux and change, it is eternal. It therefore produces in the human who aspires to it a form of encrustation or solidification that is incompatible with the flux of life. Identification with the machine in this way amounts to a tendency toward death. This leads us back to the figure of apocalypse. The apocalyptic here is not a technology-induced cataclysm, although the capitalist megamachine might one day produce such an event. Rather, the apocalypse is something the megamachine already produces and maintains: frozen, immutable, dead life under the sign of immortality.

Mumford’s analysis also raises the question of politics. We live in a megamachine which has, for centuries, served the elites. “Parasitic upon it, the capitalist class identified itself with it” (Swer 2003: 48). Can we turn this around? Can there be a ‘good’ megamachine that serves the life instinct of those who are living

participants in technological society, rather than churning out people both outwardly violent and dead inside? Mumford suggests by drawing a line between ‘bad’ authoritarian-monotechnics and ‘good’ democratic-biotechnics. This duality is central to Mumford’s project and so too therefore is the idea of reformatting the megamachine. Assuming this is possible, what would this entail? If we currently live in a technologically-induced living deadness, then what would it mean to return to life?

## **Be Right Back**

The *Black Mirror* episode “Be Right Back” offers a disturbing meditation on themes of immortalisation and a return to artificial life in the form of a digitally-crafted soul. At various points, the plot echoes questions raised by Mumford about fixity as a form of living death.

*Black Mirror* is a British anthology series that first aired on the British television channel, Channel 4, between December 2011 and December 2014. It then moved to Netflix, with a further three seasons released between 2016 and 2019, and a sixth season underway. As compared to serialised drama, the classic anthology drama format means that each episode consists of a stand-alone plot and cast of characters, although there may be an overarching genre, theme, or tone that holds a series together. The anthology format was quite common in both US and UK television in the 1950s and 1960s, but became gradually scarcer through the 70s and 80s, and was pretty well absent after the 1980s. *Black Mirror*, perhaps ironically, uses this retro format to explore contemporary techno-dystopian themes. It typically extrapolates from current technological developments to investigate the darker sociological and political prospects of a near technological future. In this way, it offers up a kind of negative commentary on contemporary trends.

*Be Right Back* marked the opening of the second season and first aired in February 2013. The narrative for this episode concerns a young heterosexual couple, called Ash (played by Domhnall Gleeson) and Martha (‘Ma’ played by Hayley Atwell), who are busy moving into Ash’s deceased mother’s house in the countryside. The episode is rich in scenic nature shots, highlighting a rural setting that stands in stark contrast to the slick technological artefact the episode is concerned with, and Ma is consistently shown to be aware of and interacting with these surroundings in various ways. Ash, in contrast, remains at a distance, his attention heavily mediated by the smartphone he carries around and constantly consults. The ‘natural’ rural setting is initially juxtaposed with Ash’s reliance on technology and, later, the somewhat ‘unnatural’ events that take place. For instance, we get a hint near the beginning of what is to come as, although relations between the two protagonists appear to be loving and comfortable in the early scenes of the episode, Ash’s smartphone use repeatedly hinders communication between the couple. At one point, a frustrated Ma points to his smartphone, saying “you keep vanishing down there.”

Soon we learn that Ash has tragically died in a car accident and, at his funeral, a distraught Ma is approached by a friend who suggests she sign up for an online service that might help her with the overwhelming grief she is suffering. This turns out to be a service that offers contact with the dead via a computer AI programme that

reconstructs the deceased using their social media, emails, and other online data. Ma is initially resistant, but when she finds out she is pregnant, she eventually signs up. At first she communicates with this reconstruction of Ash via email, then via voice communication, and finally, the reconstructed Ash persuades her to order an artificial replica of his body so she can interact with him in the material world.

In some ways, the replica Ash seems more available to her than he was in real life; he's focused on her rather than his smartphone, and is there at her beck and call, eager to please. But as time moves on, this begins to irritate Ma, and she becomes increasingly aware of discrepancies between this replica and what she remembers of the real Ash. In a fit of pique she shouts: "You're not enough of him" and she takes him to a nearby cliff edge, appropriately named Lovers Leap, and asks him to jump off. Replica Ash is confused. "I never expressed suicidal thoughts or self-harm," he says. To which she retorts: "Well, you aren't you. You're just a few ripples of you. There's no history to you. You're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking and it's not enough." The sequence finishes with her screaming out across the ocean at the top of the cliff, followed by an abrupt cut to a scene taking place years later, where we see Ma and her young daughter celebrating her birthday. At this point we don't know what's happened to the Ash replica, but her daughter insists on an extra slice of cake to 'take upstairs' and we see Ma pull down the ladder leading to the attic, where Ash's replica now resides, neither alive nor dead.

Implicit here are a plethora of questions about death and grieving, about what constitutes a life, and about the role of technology in contemporary society. For instance, Gleeson's subtle performance of differences between the real Ash and his replica is quite revealing – for the replica, he uses economy of movement and stillness, a less varied emotional repertoire, and slightly odd pauses as he processes information. This performance elicits a sort of uncanny feeling for us, as audience, resonant with the 'uncanny valley,' a known phenomenon in robotics and computer animation for film and television that describes the eerie feeling that viewers often get when something that isn't human appears too close to being human. Replica Ash is a kind of mausoleum to individual life, reflecting carefully curated parts of the real Ash in conversation with a technologically mediated social life. Even before death, Ash had turned life into a technologically readable life, becoming part of the machine himself.

But rather than prolonging or promoting a continued flux of life through technology, replica Ash becomes immortally fixed as he is confined to the attic. Earlier in the episode, the human Ash tells Martha about how his mother moved photographs of deceased loved ones to the attic as a way of dealing with her grief. And so too, replica Ash ends up in the attic, with all the photos of dead relatives. In some respects, replica Ash operates as a sort of repository for Martha's memories of Ash in a similar way to the photographs, except that instead of allowing her memories to fade, she is haunted by an artificial memory that refuses to die. Her daughter visits him in the attic on weekends. Martha reluctantly follows, caught in a cycle she can't escape, unable to move on, wishing he were more fully dead.

In a secular context of uncertainty about the concept of the soul, technological replica might promise a way to extend life beyond death. This is, indeed, the transhumanist dream: that one day, one might be able to upload one's 'essence' onto a technological substrate and thereby live forever. It is a contemporary reworking, perhaps, of the Christian desire to achieve unification with God after the apocalypse; now an elite dream of technologically enabled immortality. But this, we learn here, is a fool's errand; the drive to technologically overcome death becomes an obsession which ultimately negates life.

## Life Against Death

Norman Brown's concept of death-denial provides a somewhat different, though related, way of grasping the modern subject's bearing toward death. In particular, a chapter from Brown's first book, *Life Against Death*, entitled "Death, Time, and Eternity," posits the disavowal of death as a central characteristic of Western civilisation. Here we put this chapter into conversation with Derrida's writing of death.

Brown represents another case of Freudian thought in mid-century America. Before Marcuse, he was perhaps the first campus hero Freudian in the states. The book *Life Against Death* became a kind of sixties counterculture bible. Published in 1959, the book was part of a broader backlash against the shackles of post war society. It's one part Freud, one part Nietzsche. The Freudian aspect is a detailed engagement with the concept of the death drive. The Nietzschean component is a messianic call to overcome the denial of death he saw as plaguing modern society.

Brown's central concept is that of 'death denial.' And this concept of death denial provides us with an interesting point of contrast with Mumford, who took something different from Freud. Mumford wanted to historicise the death drive, casting it as a product of monotechnics. Brown embraces the late Freud's vision of the universal death drive; what he wants to historicise is our relation to it. What is unique today, he argues, is the denial of death. For Brown, this repression of death means the denial of one's finitude, individuality, and therefore life. In other words, death denial frustrates life. This argument operates both on the level of the individual psyche, as psychic repression, and on the level of the social, as general repression. Brown describes general repression as the work of a neurotic culture, a neurotic culture of death denial. There is perhaps something anachronistic about Brown's emphasis on autonomy. The thrust of the argument feels almost libertarian at times. But Brown does not advocate the triumph of the ego. Autonomy from social repression is autonomy from the repression of death, which would amount to something like ego-death.

He also advances a critical argument about the politics of death denial. For Brown, death denial doesn't just entail life denial in the present, it fuels immortality projects on a social or political level. These are precisely the kind that Mumford discusses (pyramids, cities, and so on), but Brown also talks about more abstract forms (money, accumulation, future value). This is one of two key points of intersection between Brown and Derrida's analysis in *The Gift of Death*.

## Life Through Death

The Derrida text is an ambitious standalone read and is perhaps best read in relation to his wider body of work. Nonetheless, the second chapter in *The Gift of Death* offers some poignant reflections on the role of death not only in relation to individual life, but also in relation to others, to collective life, and to politics.

*The Gift of Death* is Derrida's perhaps most sustained engagement with religion and related questions of responsibility. A main insight of the chapter pertains to the way death undergirds responsibility to others. In this reading, death is the most singular experience; it is not something that can be transferred to, or experienced by, others. Death is therefore the very ground for alterity.

He says: "Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place" (Derrida 1995: 41). In that sense it is perhaps the only defining boundary that exists between the self and the other. And it is from this condition that responsibility to the other arises. It is, as he says, "from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense, only a mortal can be responsible" (Derrida 1995: 41).

This engagement with responsibility is to be understood in Derrida's wider critique of modern ethics as a programme or a universalising claim; for him, the ethical and thus the political moment arises only in the uniqueness of the moment, when the self encounters, or is seen by, the other, and there is no knowledge as to how one should act. But this linking of mortality with responsibility poses an interesting challenge to the immortality projects we see presently foregrounded in Silicon Valley. Would immortality make responsibility impossible?

This question brings the issue of politics to the fore. What is the relationship between death and politics? What kind of politics might arise from the grounds of immortality? More broadly, how should we read the politics of immortality in the digital age? What is the immortality politics of the Silicon Valley elite?

Transhumanism has its roots in the 1990s, when the idea first emerged that digital technology might provide a bridge to immortality. It is a prominent philosophy among high profile tech entrepreneurs, including Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, who invest large sums of money in 'cracking the problem of death' via physical life-extension and speculative forays into purely digital life. Similarly, Longtermism espouses the belief that we should prioritise practices and policies that best facilitate the trillions of lives possible in the long-term future, including heretofore unknown forms of digital life.

Brown provides a lens for understanding the politics of Longtermism. For Brown, immortality – as a broader refusal to accept finitude – is a form of future-orientation that undercuts life. The projected future crowds out life in the present. In making this point, he draws on the economist John Maynard Keynes' critique of purposiveness:

The purposive man is always trying to secure a spurious and delusive immortality for his acts, by pushing his interest in them forward into time. He doesn't love his cat, but his cat's kittens, nor, in truth, the kittens, but only the kitten's kittens, and so on forward forever to the end of catdom (quoted in Brown 1959: 107-8).

By focusing on a far, far future, purposiveness devalues the present in politically significant ways. This is precisely the logic of Longtermism. Death denial doesn't just entail life denial in the present; it fuels socio-economic immortality projects on the macro scale, such as the kinds attached to the ideology of the distant future.

For his part, Derrida provides the means for a critique of transhumanism. With Derrida, we can think of the transhumanist pursuit as a politics of irresponsibility. An immortal being cannot be a responsible being, so the politics of transhumanism is a politics that cannot ethically relate to others. Wherever technologies for individual life extension are prioritised, questions about the social and political fabric of life are left to founder.

There is much more to be unpacked in both Derrida and Brown. We cannot hope to do justice to either here. Instead, we only note how Derrida begins the chapter with a brief critique of technological civilisation and the individual within such a society. The individualism of a technological civilisation, he writes, relies precisely on a misunderstanding of the unique self; it is an understanding of individualism relating to a *role* and not a *person*. This seems very apropos in the context of pervasive digital media technology. The singular, unique, or irreplaceable self is lost when technological processes press the human into roles, functions, characters, and so on. Meanwhile, technology as a vector for immortality projects deprives the human of uniqueness through non-death and reduces the human to a primarily functional category.

## **Fifteen Million Merits**

The desire to live forever is one thing. The experience of undead life is another altogether. Another *Black Mirror* episode, *Fifteen Million Merits*, explores precisely this issue through the lens of dystopian entertainment. The episode aired in 2011, as the second episode of the show's first series. The story is set in a dystopian media complex full of screens. Seemingly imprisoned inhabitants spend their days on stationary exercise bikes collecting 'merits' for their physical efforts. These merits, in turn, function as currency to cover basic costs of living, a narrow set of entertainment options and, for a high price, the chance to partake in an opportunity for social advancement.

It is a claustrophobic yet cartoonish setting in which every single space is dominated by loud and blaring screens that broadcast day and night. Inhabitants are required to watch an endless stream of digital entertainment or else lose 'merits.' This is ensured by a pervasive system of surveillance: every screen doubles as a surveillance device. The inhabitants too lead a dual existence, as flesh and bone humans, encased within physical spaces of control, performing the labour, and as avatars, for which clothing and other consumer goods can be purchased through gamified interfaces. A harbinger of the Metaverse.



The social system exhibits class hierarchies familiar to us: the working middle class peddles along, keeping the logic of the system afloat. Those that are unable, or unwilling, to rack up merits on the exercise bikes are relegated to cleaning the facilities and serve as fodder for sadistic humiliation by those on the bikes. The underclass. And everywhere the peddlers face a latent threat of sliding off their bikes and into this underclass. Meanwhile, there is class that sits atop the media complex, an upper class constituted by those that have climbed the social ladder through proving their talents as entertainers. To do this, one must first have earned enough merits – 15 million – to buy entry into a talent show. The three judges of the talent show are the cruel godhead of the system.

The story focuses on a young man, Bing Madsen, played by Daniel Kaluuya, who lives a monotonous life unexpectedly punctuated by an infatuation with fellow inmate Abi Khan (Jessica Brown Findlay). In their brief encounter, Bing recognizes that Abi has an extraordinary talent, a voice that cuts through his ennui and awakes something inside of him. Bing has 15 million merits at his disposal, an amount he inherited from his brother (who died of unknown causes). He gives all his merits to Abi and urges her to share her voice with the world, perhaps hoping her voice would save it.

Abi signs up for the talent show and delivers her performance without flaw, a rendition of the 1964 R&B hit *Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)*. The panel of judges decide there are already too many singers, but they see scope for a different form of celebrity. She is offered a gig as a porn star. Abi must now decide: continue on with the deadening repetition of the bikes, providing energy for the production and broadcast of images which she is then forced to consume, or put her body behind the camera and become part of the spectacle itself. She takes the job.

Bing is distraught. Tormented by porn adverts that feature Abi in her new role, he is thrust into an even deeper abyss, his own personal apocalypse. Bing has been consumed and spat out by a digital media megamachine. So, he hatches a plan: to subvert the system by killing himself publicly. He racks up another 15 million merits, enters the show, and once on stage, launches into a rage against the machine, all the while holding a knife to his own throat, threatening to make a media spectacle of the system's own death drive. The talent show judges are shocked, thrilled. They offer him a job as an entertainer, to rehearse the same suicidal rant on a dedicated channel for the masses, twice a week, on repeat. He is moved to a sleeker, more spacious apartment as a reward, but he is not allowed to die. Instead, he is condemned to repeat the same spectacle, endlessly.

Everything about the episode is claustrophobic: the never-ending barrage of images and sounds, the small spaces in which the inhabitants live, the constant surveillance, the lack of actual choice, the sparse dialogue, the lack of meaningful human engagement, the inability to die. The technologically produced homogeneity is stifling. Everything is mediated through screens. Everyone is living and eating in order to go on functioning, to perpetuate themselves and the arrangement in which they find themselves trapped. This recalls Derrida's assessment of individualism in a technological civilization, where the human is conceived not as person, but as a purely functional entity, relegated to a specific role. Human life, in turn, is reduced to perpetual cycles of

production and consumption. The protagonist Bing and his fellow inhabitants seem to have already lost any drive to live beyond mere survival: the overall mood and demeanour of the characters suggests they are *barely* living; they are already dead; the living dead, the undead.

Consider again Derrida and his assessment that it is through the singularity of death that one comes to have responsibility. In a world of living dead, how is the unique, singular self constituted? If everything, including death, is routed through the homogenising force of digitally mediated life, then perhaps there can be no individuality. This would mean there can be no responsibility either. Bing's fate suggests as much. The allure of upward mobility, which amounts to little more than survival, thwarts his death drive. He avoids the taking of responsibility, becoming instead a functional element in a digital megamachine of total entertainment.

### ***Total Entertainment Forever***

The stifling living deadness of digital life expressed in *Fifteen Million Merits* is an extreme expression of the contemporary mood. It's now been over a decade since the episode first aired and the social body is more digitally saturated than ever before, with perpetual entertainment always available at the tips of one's fingers. The result is a shrill caricature of life, perhaps closer to death than physical death itself. This sentiment is perfectly captured in the music video for Father John Misty's 2017 song, *Total Entertainment Forever*.

Both the *Black Mirror* episode and the music video make use of bright colours and cartoonish set designs to reveal an aspect of Campagna's *Prophetic Culture*, at once "funny and disquieting", a kind of "dream painting" that, in its overt ridiculousness, resembles "the style that is known since the Renaissance as 'the grotesque'" (Campagna 2021: 110). While the *Black Mirror* episode offers viewers the nihilistic image of a life without any possibility of escape, the music video suggests we actively opt-in for a distorted version of reality. The former suggests an abundance of bad life, the latter, something else: a neo-Baroque, saturated to the hilt to keep annihilation at bay.

Before even looking at the lyrics or the accompanying video, it is obvious that Father John Misty's use of superlatives in the title suggest we have crossed a threshold. *Total Entertainment Forever*: every word implies an endless, all-encompassing, and ultimately anaesthetising sensorium that stops the future from unfolding. Meanwhile, the music video sets various layers of meaning into contact with one another: the Ronald McDonald outfits as scathing parody of incompetent officers, the fetishization of uniform, and the expansion of capitalism; Macaulay Culkin's role as a virtual reality version of Kurt Cobain, subtly replacing one media casualty with the next.

"The channels are all the same," the first lyric to stand out, could be understood as a progressive, ground-breaking statement where the raced and gendered hierarchies of hegemonic structures are removed; perhaps even a reference to a utopian place where prejudices no longer reign. But in this case it means nothing of the sort. The irony of the "freedom to have what you want" is the freedom to both literally and metaphorically plug

in to a virtual reality console where we are all, as equals, in equal part both consumers of media product and part of the product itself.

The word death doesn't appear at all in the song, perhaps a testament to the undeniable and powerful taboo that actual death has become in Western society. Opting for omission of the actual words 'death' or 'dead,' which Philippe Ariés (2013: 83) has called the ultimate taboo "as shameful and unmentionable as sex was in the Victorian era," the lyrics instead address the physicality of decay. Father John Misty finishes with the following lines, sung over a shot of a man dressed in archaic naval uniform, now disintegrated into a charcoal mess of cardboard and tape, with an Oculus Rift headset stuck to his face:

When the historians find us, we'll be in our homes

Plugged in to our hubs

Skin and bones

A frozen smile on every face

As the stories replay

This must have been a wonderful place

This goes beyond mere zombification through technology. It's more akin to self-vampirisation, where taking part in the immortality project of media entertainment elites amounts to consuming oneself. But it cannot go on forever, it must eventually lead to an end. In this case, the end is figured through the tradition of the grotesque, in the form of a prophecy about a culture falling outside of time. Father John Misty's anthropocentric 'we' here is used to signal the removal of selves from humanity, all the while, the regurgitation of digital media content continues, an inhuman flow of effluent. Nicolas Bourriaud (2016: 9) puts it well when he says that, "we inhabit an overfull world, living in archives ready to burst, among more and more perishable products, junk food and bottlenecks." Such is the picture painted by this video too.

Both *Fifteen Million Merits* and *Total Entertainment Forever* suggest an everyday apocalypse of the self, premised on population-wide media damage: 'undead' celebrity immortality on the one hand, 'undead' mass viewership on the other. In each we see depicted a digital media megamachine with no need for narrative endings, functioning instead on the operating principles of endless, life-denying entertainment in bite-sized chunks. Both also underscore the hierarchical nature of the media megamachine. Finally, they highlight the peculiar form of capture at work in contemporary, algorithm-enabled streaming platforms, which provide many different ways to choose the same course of action. Perhaps this is a form of undeadness, insofar as it robs us of the uniqueness that Brown and Derrida associate with death?

## Death and Apocalypse

The concept of apocalypse is intimately related to ideas about death and politics. But the politics of death is a living matter, a moving target. What then is the relationship between death and politics today, in a technologically saturated present? And what does this relation between death and politics say about apocalypse?

The above questions suggest a distinction between death and apocalypse that dissolves under closer scrutiny. In *No Apocalypse, Not Now...*, Derrida articulates the difference between individual death and the apocalypse (here understood as total nuclear apocalypse) by pointing to the difference between the remainder of cultural and social memory that limits individual death and the total obliteration of the archive in the apocalypse (Derrida 1984: 27). There are memories after individual death. Not so after total nuclear apocalypse. With individual death, there is an 'after', a remainder. But there is no 'after' if all archives of humanity are fully eclipsed. This absolute finitude, without remainder, is impossible to imagine. Which means every apocalypse to date has been no apocalypse, only death.

But there is another way to approach the issue. Our brief exploration of death and apocalypse suggests that immortality is key. Ideas about living forever and attitudes toward immortality take on a distinct character in the context of technological modernity. Striving for immortality is a means of striving for a remainder, of striving to leave traces behind for a life after the apocalypse, individual or otherwise. It is also a striving for power, most clearly made manifest in Silicon Valley dreams of extending one's 'essence' into infinity (the transhumanist dream) or radically extending one's influence on the future through the policy apparatus of the present (the Longtermist ambition). Both are immortality projects and both are thoroughly political.

Brown was critical about immortality projects, whose politics rests on a form of life produced through death denial. Mumford also said that immortality projects are a way of freezing the flux of life. But in addition, Mumford underlined the connection between immortality projects and class power, how immortality projects are class projects, and how this produces both internal death and external destruction. So, we have the politics of repression, the politics of technology, and the politics of class. All can be articulated through death. Both death and apocalypse are, and perhaps can only ever be, narratives that reflect the contemporary human imagination.

In conclusion, then, our discussion on death suggests three broad ways of thinking about apocalypse. The first is straightforward. World death. Technological modernity might one day produce an apocalyptic event. A cataclysm. The second relates to a different kind of death. An inner death. Technological modernity already produces an apocalypse of the self on an everyday basis. The third must be extracted from Brown. Brown is an interesting case because he makes his own messianic call for apocalypse; it is, ostensibly, a case study in apocalypticism. But Brown's analysis also suggests a question: Can one truly live in a society that cannot

imagine its own death? This is a transposition of Brown's argument about individual death denial onto the level of the social. If we cannot imagine the death of civilisation, can we live life?

Apocalypse is fundamentally a means of imagining the end that entails the suggestion of a new beginning. But can we do the former without the latter? Can we imagine the end without an after? Isn't the legacy of apocalypticism that we can't? Perhaps the appeal of modern apocalypticism is precisely this: that it denies the death of civilisation by always suggesting an aftermath, a post-apocalypse, rather than the absolute erasure of all archives. Only there is a twist. Digital media megamachines thrive on archives, swelling them by the minute, feeding the death-drive. Yet the more we frantically record the ephemeral, the more we plough ourselves into technological advance, rotting the archive, fuelling the apocalypse.

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