

THE APOCALYPSE : REPEATING, INTERRUPTING

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What was once fearsome now merely surprises or amuses. What once caused anguish and trembling is found on supermarket shelves or in art galleries. The end of the world is no longer a terrifying vision, a threat of annihilation not to be taken lightly, but an idea to be played around with. We have fun scaring ourselves. Some might say that we no longer believe it, but at the same time, we keep going over the story. One is reminded of Umberto Eco's remark on the passage to the year 2000 and the media hysteria for end-of-the-world scenarios. Comparing this media overkill to the passage to the year 1000, which excited millenarian panics, undocumented and therefore ignored, he declared: "The lack of records led us to believe there were no such fears during the night of 31 December 999. And now the surfeit of records will lead our descendants to suppose that all humanity was terror-stricken during the night of 31 December 1999*i* Twelve years later this terror still seems to linger on, fed by highly-publicised events which make us all fear the worst, from the attacks of 11 September 2001 to the 2008 recession, the breakdown of Europe, etc.

Imagining the end betrays a fundamental fear – the fear of death that we know is inevitable, or the fear of a universe that we cannot control. And yet to judge from contemporary artistic and cultural productions it seems that this sense of apprehension has never been so immediate. Indeed, they even go further than replaying the main themes, and reflect a fundamental transmutation of its very logic.

The contemporary vision of the end is strewn with countless crisis situations.

A crisis is a dynamic form, which tends towards its resolution; that is to say it unfolds towards an end which governs it. An actual crisis and the present it brings with it are at once oppressive and fascinating in their superficial effects and the exacerbated perceptions they produce, yet they inevitably seek closure. But in the contemporary vision, this present-in-crisis no longer closes, for the simple reason that it is endlessly self-propagating. The crisis never goes away; its reality is constantly reiterated. And this repetition, the vicious circle of a dreaded end, pushed back and then played back, replaces transcendence with exhaustion. Repetition then becomes the dominant pattern, a process which can only be terminated by an interruption.

The traditional dichotomy between a cyclic end and a linear end – between a religion-based traditional vision of the end and an essentially profane modern vision – has given way to a choice between the end as a logical conclusion and the end as a simple interruption *ii*. This end is no longer the gateway to any transcendence heralding a return to order; on the contrary, it folds in on itself creating a warp that offers no escape and leads to a cycle of repetition. It is a negative form of repetition that far from being a quest for perfection opens onto deterioration, an ever more debased and obsessive replay of the same situation. Actions are repeated like some habit one can't break.

Contemporary works often exacerbate the elements of this habit. They use a combination of processes of fragmentation, exacerbation and defamiliarisation to break down the mechanisms of our experiences, here picking out a belief, there isolating a reflex or a prejudice. Their insistence tells us that the end is not in the future, but is already here, a fundamental feature of our relationship with the world, a reality we just have to deal with – or laugh off.

i "À toutes fins utiles", in *Entretiens sur la fin des temps*, Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 240

ii B. Gervais, *L'imaginaire de la fin : temps, mots et signes*, Montréal, Le Quartanier, 2009.