

Transcendence Amid the Apocalypse

Finding anybody who hasn't wished, in earnest or otherwise, for a nuclear war during their morning commute would be a tall order. Some waterlogged, reptilian lobe in our brains still holds that perverse desire for a world that has blown itself to bits, erasing every shred of crosswalks, tax returns, and iPhone models in one fell (irradiated) swoop. Of course, the sentiment flies in the face of the human development narrative:

We went from caves to huts, from huts to villages, from villages to cities, from cities to functional societies. For all the doom and gloom that pervades our media, humans have done a remarkable job of keeping civilization's vast machine up and running. When we compare the tooth-and-nail, skull-cracking reality of our past to the sanitized portrait of the present, what do we *really* have to complain about?

Plenty, our intrusive thoughts seem to whisper in reply.

Many of us feel enslaved to institutions that are too large—indeed, too entrenched—to ever be uprooted or altered. We feel powerless against the corruption of overreaching police forces, state governments, and corporate interests. We feel patronized by sign-in Captcha systems that demand proof of our humanity.

And so, in turn, what provides respite from this onslaught of modern neurosis? Fantasy and science fiction, of course. But the tropes we embrace are a far cry from the hopeful, utopian visions we ought to recognize as a possible outcome for human development. Instead we grasp at brutal, tyrannical empires and barren worlds. We crave tales in which darkness has already swallowed the masses, unleashing genocidal AI constructs, plagues born of blood rituals, and nuclear winters that make *Red Dawn* look subtle. If art gives any indication as to our social trajectory, we ought to be worried.

After all, many of today's best-selling fantasy novels—created in an age of #MeToo and broad pushes for human rights—are chock full of rape and vigilante justice, the very acts that we have universally rejected as abhorrent. They play with the chillingly real dangers of privacy invasion, ideological repression, body mutilation, and a thousand other impending threats.

But even the best op-eds on this topic fall back on a worn-out, even naive, foundation to explain this discrepancy: Humans want simplicity. They want a world in which all of our *real* fears are sublimated into overblown life-or-death struggles, and our petty concerns bleed into the backdrop of bigger issues.

In some sense, I agree with this idea. But there's a fundamental element that underlies our ennui, and rarely have I seen it discussed, let alone named as the prime mover to our secondary fears. This is, perhaps, because this element is not confined to fiction. It is an explanation for true, inescapable human dread, trailing us all from dawn to dusk. What these theories fail to recognize is the frailty of sentient life when matched against a chaotic, capricious universe.

In short, they sidestep the quest for human transcendence.

I'm not talking about the uploading of consciousness into hydraulic, nano-augmented bodies. This form of transcendence is one rooted in spirituality and timeless contemplation. A recurring backbone to apocalyptic stories (whether based in reality or an alternate fantasy setting) is the presence of mindless, irreconcilable evil, and, in turn, the pursuit of ideals and benevolence in the face of this uncaring tide. Demonic forces and human savagery are equals in the world of speculative fiction, and they play on the same instinctive sense of morality (and its violations).

Looking out at our modern world, many of us surely wish that we could push back against evil by doing something as tangible as rescuing a colony of kidnapped clones or confronting a race of flame-eyed squid monsters. But our world provides no easy paths to morality. There are no villains with skull thrones, nor fleets of black-clad super soldiers preparing for imminent invasion. Instead we are left adrift in a sea of automated answering machines and charity fraud cases, all the while wondering what the hell we were born to do.

When we engage with fantasy and science fiction set in a ruined world, we see a chance for humanity to rise from the ashes of its cutting-edge, quantum-computing arrogance and follow a perennial path. A path of love, of hope, of appreciation for all sentient creatures. No matter how ash-strewn or ancient the land may be, there are fundamental aspects of goodness that shine through eons, through the rise and fall of cultures, through every aspect of what we consider to be “the world.” In fiction, “the world” is a malleable and ever-changing concept that is determined solely by the writer's imagination, and the reader's subsequent investment in it. We feel a sense of human dignity that extends beyond the realm of fantasy and breaches the realm of possibility.

While religion may not have a firm place in fantasy any longer, many of its ideas and traditions still wander into the genres we enjoy. We prize heroes that recognize the sanctity of life, that eagerly give away their possessions, that are ready and willing to destroy themselves and their body if the situation demands it. All of these traits align with the various religious practices of our world, and in that sense, they reflect truths that transcend any human creation. These truths are numinous yet more necessary than ever, and their form—whether in mass paperback binding or issued from a pulpit—means little in the final analysis.

After all, what values can be considered more necessary for existence than love? Maybe *Interstellar* had a point. Anything that enshrines a being's sacrifice to fellow beings (or to deities, for that matter) is an expression of the inherent goodness within all sentient life. And in the midst of worlds that are blackened, scorched, and bloodstained, goodness is the only thing capable of undoing the mistakes of a flawed species. Anything else is an aberration of the human (or alien) ego, which operates on a need for power and domination. Genre fiction, in many senses, presents rejections of this pride and sense of cosmic mastery. It presents tales of machines destroying their creators, weapons massacring their users, and magic corrupting its wielders.

Not everybody who enjoys fantasy and science fiction will find value in spirituality, but those who are receptive to it will find ample fuel within their leisure time. They will find fuel in the wastelands of *Mad Max* and the circling carrion birds of *Game of Thrones*. If even one person decides to try meditation after reading my work (or any fiction, for that matter), then the work has been an overwhelming success.

In these troubled times, transcendence of the human condition has become more necessary than ever. Submission to ideals that are greater than ourselves is the only sanctuary from apps, advertising, and hollow pleasures emphasizing self-pleasing and narcissism. This sentiment, in itself, may appear needlessly alarmist, but the reality is far more frightening:

It's the only way to keep fiction from morphing into fact.