

Apocalypse NOW!

Radical Negativity and the Performativity of Ending in Queer Theory

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SUMMARY: This essay analyses apocalyptic rhetoric in recent queer theoretical writings on negativity and temporality, in particular the invocation of an end, and its use for political radicality. The suspension of progressive time in favour of alternative temporalities, such as reversion, circularity or endless presence, has for long been a strategy of subcultural performance, coming out narratives, AIDS activism, and other queer politics. Such strategies stage a rupture within the linearity of time and the symbolic order of discourse. The author illustrates the potentials and pitfalls of this rhetoric gesture by elaborating its inherent dialectics between the disruption and the emergence of temporality. The dialectics consist precisely in that by radically negating historicity, apocalyptic rhetorics make history. Invoking the end of future thus empowers the one who is speaking, as it installs an immediate urgency for action and interpellates queer subjects. Yet, the assumed radicality often hides the privileged condition of its formation. By universalising the particularity of this perspective, it runs the risk of turning radical

negativity into radical affirmation. In conclusion, the author claims that it is the loss of futurity rather than, as some antisocial approaches argue, the active destruction or negation of futurity that ought to be regarded as queer momentum. For when the experience of a queer loss results in a work of mourning, it aims at reappropriating the future and articulating it in unforeseen and queer ways.

Apocalypticism and Radicality

Much work has lately been dedicated both to queer negativity and queer temporality[1]. In the following, I would like to scrutinise one particular figure that combines these two approaches, namely the invocation of an "ending of the future." Acting on Carl Schmitt's assumption that all political concepts are merely "secularized theological concepts" (1985: 36), one could call this "the apocalyptic rhetoric" within queer politics. I would like to argue that this apocalyptic rhetoric provides powerful potentialities but it is not without pitfalls. More precisely, it is my aim to elaborate the inherent dialectics between the disruption of time and the emergence of new temporalities. Staging a rupture within the linearity of time and discourse, apocalyptic rhetorical strategies look at time as if the end of time has arrived. However, the dialectics consist precisely in that by radically negating historicity, they make history.

The suspension of progressive time in favour of alternative temporalities, such as reversion, circularity, or endless presence, has been a strategy of religious and political rhetorics of so-called millenarism for a long time, as Steven Seidman (1993) has argued. This discourse draws on an age-old repertoire created by preachers and religious movements that have been warning against the ever-nearing end of time (cf. Cohn 1957; Bercovitch 1978). "The end" disrupts linearity and marks the border between time and eternity. Paradoxically the end of time, seen as apocalyptic *eschaton*, is therefore the moment of pure presence. This is why the end of the future coincides with positivity rather than negativity.

As much as the consciousness of a near end disrupts existing social bonds, it creates new forms of communities, too. These communities develop strong affective links as they see themselves as staunchly committed to the same fate. Thomas Long therefore qualifies apocalyptic visions as strong catalysts of identity and community: "Perhaps no discursive form has been as pervasive as a means of composing communal identity, one that requires a community either to renew or to redefine its mission" (Long 2005: 63). Moreover, the inner distance this kind of belief can establish to the constraints of society and of everyday life bestows a sense of power. Religious communities like early Christians and numerous sects living in the spirit of a near-end of secular time showed great

solidarity within their troops and displayed strong resistance against social authorities. Very often, power and ownership structures were relativised as a consequence (cf. Cohn 1957). Hence, apocalyptic discourse can produce a political impact. Apocalyptic rhetorics have been central to various discourses on radicality and pertain to queer political rhetorics (cf. Giffney 2008) as much as to their opponents (cf. Runions 2008). As James Berger observes: "The desire to see the old order disintegrate links such religiously and politically disparate apocalypticists as the romantic anarchist Henry Miller, the poststructuralist Michel Foucault, 1970s Punks, more recent cyberpunk science fiction writers, and Christian New Right theologians like Hal Lindsay" (1999: 7).

According to Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay "On the Concept of History," stagings of "the end" disclose the revolutionary opportunity that is contained in any moment of time. Benjamin calls this time "messianic" (2003: 397) because it makes "the continuum of history explode" (395). He thereby refers to the tradition of Jewish millenarism, while giving it a Marxist twist. Moreover, he construes messianic time as radically empty so as to give way to a future that is most unlikely und most unknown.

Radical Queerness and Queer Temporality

Across history, queer movements have also articulated such a messianism when they did what was simultaneously most desired and most unexpected, like reclaiming queerness instead of normalcy. They have, moreover, at times resisted the reproduction of heteronormative linear time and have cleared the space for a way of being together that is still undefined (Halberstam in Dinshaw et al. 2007: 181 et seq.). By actively refuting teleological pragmatism, queer movements have succeeded in destabilising and subverting the dominant order that imposed such a contradiction. They have either shown that time was literally "out of joint" (as Elizabeth Freeman (2008: 159) reminds us of Hamlet's famous saying) or have interrupted it themselves. Of course, these movements were rooted in earlier aesthetics and politics, like in the manifestoes of aesthetic vanguards or in the punk movement, which proclaimed the end of the future in 1977 in the famous song by the Sex Pistols (Halberstam 2008: 142; Nyong'o 2008: 108 et seqq.). And, among others, it was obviously punk style that had a great influence on queer culture and politics (cf. Fuchs 1998; Cole 2000: 114; Nyong'o 2008: 108; Munoz 2009: 97-114).

Endings and disruptions of progressive time occur in subcultural performance, coming-out narratives, AIDS activism, and (other) queer politics (cf. Halberstam 2005: 161). Coming-out narratives explore the reversion of progressive biographical evolution and

question heteronormative patterns of the future life. Thus, they can be regarded as "a steadfast refusal to facilitate heteronormativity's future in any way" (Giffney 2008: 58). Subcultural festivities constitute an "outside" of progressive time. They break the rhythm of capitalist labour time and unfold a joyful "now" that is supposed to never end. By this means, they resemble the sexual experience of orgasm, which halts time for a moment of pure presence and most tellingly translates into French as a "little death" (*petite mort*), thus exposing its connection to the death drive. Indeed, the Christian imaginary has associated sodomy with "end times" over and over again (Dellamora 1994; Runions 2008; Shannahan 2011: 16). As Dervla Shannahan observes, "in religious eschatological narratives queerness is often positioned as signifying the proximity of the end" (2011: 17).

The deep insight that time was "running out" triggered queer AIDS activism, as queer filmmaker Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (USA 1992) and *Teenage Apocalypse Trilogy* (*Totally Fucked Up*, USA 1993; *The Doom Generation*, USA 1995; *Nowhere*, USA 1997) so poignantly illustrate. Analysing the rhetorics of crisis that the AIDS crisis provoked, Thomas Yingling spotted "a specter of apocalypse in which AIDS functions as the demonic counterpart to the beneficent "end of history" coded in myths of America" (1991: 298; cf. also Sontag 1988: 78; Dellamora 1994; Dickinson 1995; Coviello

2000; Long 2005). For the infected, time was literally ending and there was "no future," as some novels by Sarah Schulman so well reflect (for instance, *People in Trouble* [1990] and *Rat Bohemia* [1995]). In his book *AIDS and American Apocalypticism*, Thomas Long therefore reminds us that "by the early 1990s queer apocalyptic representations of AIDS were ubiquitous" (2005: 13). Within this tradition, Long characterises the political manifestoes that invoke "the end" as "Jeremiad," and he argues that Larry Kramer created the most notable of these. Yet, the queer activist group the Lesbian Avengers made a similarly polemic move when they declared in one of their leaflets: "We are the apocalypse" ("Dyke Manifesto" quoted in Long 2005: 125).

Finally, I also consider the rhetoric gesture of Lee Edelman's book *No Future* (2004) as apocalyptic when he annihilates progressive narratives of a queer future and incites us "to insist that the future stop here" (31). Noreen Giffney has also convincingly qualified Edelman's rhetorical gesture as "queer apocalypticism" (2008: 58; see also Runions 2008: 90)[2], arguing that "a book such as Edelman's situates itself within the immediacy of that endpoint as it unfolds" (61).

The Performativity of Ending

However, these various apocalyptic queer moments are not only "destructive." Rather, in the case of apocalyptic AIDS activism, they have contributed to the creation of a queer coalition and have helped to overcome normative limitations of gay and lesbian identity politics. In the case of Edelman's *No Future*, they produced a considerable amount of texts that advocate variously for and against the "antisocial turn" in queer theory.

As a discursive strategy, apocalyptic rhetorics have powerful effects. Invoking the end of the future empowers the one who speaks it, as it installs an immediate urgency for action—that "fierce urgency of now"[3]. At the same time, it radically challenges the existing conditions of social recognition, as Giffney has spelled out: "This apocalyptic [sic] gesture—read here as a cathartic letting-go of the rules governing self-actualisation—puts pressure on the desire for recognition, on the very teleology of desire itself in the acceptance of the fact that recognition depends on the desire of another, one who in the case of reproductive futurism, may withhold at any time the "Humanising" gaze from those marked out as Queer" (2008: 69). Thus, one further productive effect of the apocalyptic gesture is the interpellation of a queer subject, and one might say with reference to Benjamin's essay on the concept of history, the interpellation of a queer subject "as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (2003: 391). Inspired by this essay, Richard Kim wrote about the investment in

queer futurity as being other people's queer past: "We have a utopian and queer investment in futurity. It might be because we have a queer relationship with some future person, who might or might not identify as queer [...] such a person might, in a moment of danger, seize hold of our present as their memory. Our present, and our present relationship with the past, might be that momentary, irretrievable spark of hope in their past that, though we are dead, will reveal to them a way to survive at the margins of time and space" (2000: "Fuck the Future?", unpublished manuscript, qtd. in Duggan 2002: 385).

It is my contention that apocalyptic rhetorics can therefore be interpreted as a performative metaphor. They do not denote literally what they say but rather they refer to something that does not yet exist, actively engaging in the production of its future reference. Paradoxically, it is only by thoroughly embracing negativity that this effect can fully emerge. As soon as this discourse becomes conscious of its metaphoricality, it loses its radical momentum and becomes mere mild irony.

Proclaiming "the end" and denying futurity are performative speech acts in and of themselves. By closing down any discourse on futurity as a form of progressive time, they provoke a collapse of the symbolic order. This is an irruption of the real, which, in the end,

although it can never be symbolised, turns out to be symbolically more productive than ever, as it urges us toward a historically new organisation of the symbolic order[4]. According to Benjamin's short but highly inspiring essay "The Destructive Character" (1931), destruction creates an empty space that waits to be filled[5]. This is precisely the dilemma of any antisocial discourse that survives its utterance: by rejecting productivity, it becomes highly productive. By foreclosing sociality, it inevitably contributes to the emergence of new and different social "assemblages," to use a Deleuzoguattarian notion (Woltersdorff 2012). Even the characters of Jean Genet's novels, who Leo Bersani (1995: 113-184) suggests are paradigms of queerness's antisociality, constantly participate in the production of social assemblages. With regard to this contradiction, although not using dialectical terms, Tomasz Sikora distinguishes between two types of ends: either the void or the "breaking up of boundaries and structures, a release and re-orientation of flows" (2011: 4).

In his book *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, James Berger locates an inherent contradiction at the heart of any apocalyptic text: "But nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does

the world itself. In nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end* " (1999: 5 et seq., italics in original)[6].

What kind of future is then supposed to end in the discourse of radical queer negativity? And what remains after the proclaimed "end of the future"? In the style of Edelman's own terminological distinction between the "child" with a lowercase "c" and the "Child" with a capital "C" (2004: 19), I suggest that "the future" that queer oppositionality is expected to be able to stop is precisely a "Future" with a capital "F." The capitalisation stands for the symbolic and ideological charge that is conferred to the object it designates[7]. However, the Symbolic and the Real do not conflate. This incongruity is responsible for an aporia: even after proclaiming the end of time, time goes on. And if time really was about to end (which might be the case indeed), discourse has no power to make it go on. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Michel Foucault therefore concluded: "Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death" (232). In the AIDS movement, activists have scandalised precisely this inequity of different horizons of time.

Queer theory's discourse of pure negativity and negative purity is therefore shaped by an inherent dialectic. For even by affirming this very discourse, new futurities are produced-futures that are determined to be more open than the normalised and normalising

futures of discursive teleology (Munoz 2009: 19-32). This performative speech act is highly productive as it elicits radically new answers. Queer apocalypticism and antisocial thinking thus inserts itself into a long philosophical tradition of "radical philosophy" (cf. Wolf 2002) and an even longer aesthetic tradition of modern vanguardism. In the theory of performativity, this phenomenon has been referred to as "emergence" because of the incalculability of its effects (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008: 138-160). "Emergence" rather than "constitution" of queer subjects and communities is ultimately the true political programme of queer apocalyptic rhetorics[8].

Radical Negativity and its Discontents

By realising its own finite condition, the subject can empower itself paradoxically in a gesture that feigns sovereignty over life and death. However, what I find problematic about this gesture are some very unpleasant side effects. For one, whoever claims radical negativity is in a very privileged and apparently unassailable and unconditioned position[9]. It evens out any difference that cannot be subsumed under its own radical difference. It is, as Pierre Bourdieu (2000) would call it, the "scholastic perspective" of pure critical observation, allegedly exempt from any involvement in the objects it contemplates. In short, it claims universality, while in fact it is very particular. Traditionally this has been the standpoint of those whose

normative power has the privilege to remain invisible. It is a standpoint that can be afforded during a conference, on a talk show, at a demonstration, at an art performance, or at a sex party but it is not sufficient to survive-unless we agree that we want to survive as queers (and some "apocalyptic" gay barebackers would probably not agree with that).

Indeed, surviving "queerly" is only possible when the unbearable conditions of survival are both affirmed and negated. We should bear this dialectical interdependence in mind if we want to avoid a fragmented and particularistic view of the political and historical process. For even radical negativity can easily turn into affirmation. Thus, antisocial approaches run the risk of merely repeating the logics of corporate capital[10], while it is queer politics' task to undo capitalism in order to make history queer[11].

If we consent to Theodor Adorno's (1973: 281) definition of "utopia" and assume that "the subject's non-identity without sacrifice would be utopian," antisocial postures cannot be regarded as utopian because sacrifice still remains inscribed at their very heart[12]. Allegedly, we ought to sacrifice the wish for social belonging and the hope for another future in order to become "radically queer" (in the antisocial logic). Giffney (2008) has therefore very rightly argued that Edelman's invocation of radicality remains at the level of the

individual, whereas other radical queer discourses do indeed call for a collectivity that is yet to be fostered.

In conclusion, I argue that it is the loss rather than the active destruction or negation of futurity that ought to be regarded as queer momentum. If we bear in mind that, psychoanalytically speaking, loss can cause trauma, and if we further account for queer's apocalyptic claim to "end things and traumatic events" (Giffney 2008: 57), then we can think of different ways of confronting the trauma of loss. According to Sigmund Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning, the antisocial position would be the melancholic one (cf. Love 2007: 160-163). In contrast, when the experience of a queer loss results in a work of mourning, it aims at reappropriating the future and articulating it in unforeseen and queer ways. In the end, it could turn out to be a somehow different entanglement of radical queer politics in the death drive: to echo Lacan's definition of the death drive, this would be a queerness "in the process of coming, insisting on being realized" (1991: 326).

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[1] Among the most representative works are Bersani 1995; Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Dinshaw et al. 2007; and Freeman 2010.

[2] Although Runions (2008: 104) classifies Edelman quite on the contrary as "anti-apocalyptic," he has something similar in mind, diagnosing as "apocalyptic" what Giffney (Giffney 2008: 61) would call instead "eschatologist".

[3] Cf. Martin Luther King`s famous speech he delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on the 28th of August 1963.

[4] As Floyd (2010: 5 et seq.) highlights, Edelman`s understanding of the symbolic order precisely does not allow for a historical conception, as he lays his focus on the repetitive feature of "History."

[5] "The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space-the place where the thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without occupying it" (Benjamin 1999: 541).

[6] I am grateful to my anonymous reviewer for this reference.

[7] In his *Mythologies* (1972), Roland Barthes analysed this phenomenon semiotically as the creation of modern myths.

[8] With reference to Immanuel Kant, you could also distinguish between "indeterminate" and "determinate" negation (cf. Floyd 2010).

[9] I remember my grandmother who, for a decade, used the invocation of her "near end" as a powerful pressuring tool.

[10] Unlike Edelman (in Caserio et al. 2006: 822), who insists on the

productivity of capitalism, both Karl Marx and later the Frankfurt School stressed capitalism's negativity. In order to conquer new markets, they argued, capital must destroy the old ones; by maximising productivity, capital tends to destroy the workforce. Cf. Joseph Schumpeter's (1942) notion of entrepreneurship as "creative destruction"; cf. also Nyong'o (in Crosby et al. 2012: 132).

[11] Benjamin (1999: 542) therefore affirmed that "the consciousness of historical man" was inherent to the destructive character.

[12] Using Adorno's writings on utopia, Floyd (2010) has argued that there is a somehow unacknowledged utopianism in antisocial theorising after all.

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