

Joel's Choice

Apocalyptic Fantasies, Dystopian Hope, and the Post-Human Question

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Apocalyptic stories are generally fun escapist forms of entertainment, and this is especially true of the apocalyptic stories that have dominated popular culture for more than two decades now. Zombies in varying forms, emerging from divergent sources, and aimlessly shambling about a broken world, infest the contemporary imagination.¹ But *The Last of Us* stands apart from the typical zombie stories of the last few decades, and serves as a unique contribution to the genre of apocalyptic literature and media. In *The Last of Us*, the Infected aren't generated from industrial catastrophes such as nuclear fallout, chemical spills, or lab-created diseases, but rather from the accelerated global climate shift that alters the environment enough that Cordyceps can migrate beyond its "natural" boundaries to a new environment—the human.

To properly understand apocalyptic fantasies like *The Last of Us*, it's important to read them within the framework of capitalist-driven social forces, because it's easier to imagine the world ending than it is to imagine capitalism ending. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, "Apocalypse is a failure of the imagination, a giving up on the future instead of a commitment to the difficult work of composing a better present."² Cohen is pointing to "dystopian hope" which resides at the heart of contemporary apocalyptic stories.³ Dystopian hope resonates with consumers as escapist *and* renders catastrophic futures *as desirable*, as the only way to "reset" civilization so that we (the survivors) can right the wrongs of society.

Joel's ultimate refusal to save humanity, stripping the survivors of the reset they desire, and, instead, opting for a post-human existence in the aftermath of Cordyceps, puts *The Last of Us* in a unique position to answer what the right thing to do is in the aftermath of an apocalypse. Joel's decision to save Ellie is justified by rejecting the dystopian hope that resonates with consumers of apocalyptic stories. Joel is a different kind of survivor.

It's Different in the Daylight

Devastation and revelation are the two sides of apocalyptic storytelling. “Apocalypse” is generally understood to be a revelation of some sort, usually divine in nature, but this needn’t be the case. In fact, on the devastation side, some catastrophes are described in apocalyptic terms even though they don’t meet apocalyptic standards. For instance, in the wake of a Category-5 hurricane, news reporters might describe an apocalyptic landscape. Such descriptions compel the imagination. So when someone is confronted with an apocalyptic story, they conjure up similar ideas, while omitting more relevant or pertinent details necessary to understand an apocalyptic world. For instance, an apocalypse can’t be localized, but must be global and total in its reach; everyone may be affected to different degrees, but everyone must be affected.

A dystopia can come into existence without any apocalyptic underpinnings just as surely as an apocalypse could occur without causing undue destruction in its wake. Dystopias and apocalypses are usually conceptually linked because the world is often depicted as falling apart. It’s critically important that, when addressing apocalyptic stories, we remember that utopian and dystopian communities both exist. Utopias and dystopias are sociopolitical arrangements, while apocalyptic forces are imposed on communities and are totalizing in their destruction.⁴

A destructive apocalypse would certainly destroy the world as we currently know it, but the way people chose to live in the aftermath would be describable in utopian and dystopian terms. The aftermath of many destructive apocalypses would most likely be a dystopian setting. *The Last of Us* doesn’t depict the aftermath of the apocalypse in dystopian terms except for the abandoned cities we’re shown. The larger world seems to have escaped the destruction of the Cordyceps infection and serves as the basis for dystopian hope.

The Last of Us is an apocalyptic story, albeit a unique one, and our first task is understanding what makes this apocalyptic tale substantially different from, say, *The Walking Dead*.⁵ *The Walking Dead* is one of the most popular apocalyptic stories ever told, but the focus of the story is squarely on the time immediately *after* the fall of humanity. This is generally true of most apocalyptic stories that use some variety of infected as the apocalyptic catalyst for society’s downfall. In Robert Kirkman’s narrative the reader goes from normal to zombie apocalypse in the first page turn, which accounts for roughly six weeks. *The Last of Us*, by contrast, jumps forward twenty years and forces us to contend with a significantly different set of questions about the post-apocalyptic world. Not only that, but it generates its apocalyptic catalyst from an environmental force derived from climate shift, or, what we might think of as a genuinely green apocalypse.

When You're Lost in the Darkness

While it might seem like all apocalypses are the same, the reality is that not all end-of-the-world stories are similar.⁶ *The Last of Us* eschews the usual approaches by simply allowing Cordyceps to evolve beyond its natural boundaries. As Dr. Neuman points out in 1968 in episode 1, there is no cure for something like a fungal outbreak. Fast-forward to September 24, 2003, and Dr. Ratna Pertiwi in Jakarta, at what is ostensibly Ground Zero, says the only reasonable response to the infection is to “bomb” the city. Dr. Ratna’s response indicates that there still isn’t a cure available for a Cordyceps fungal infection. In fact, that her first thought is to bomb a city suggests that she may not believe a cure is even *possible*. Here we get the seeds of a typical apocalypse.

Simultaneously across America and, presumably, the world, people transform into monsters and begin spreading the fungal infection, causing widespread chaos.⁷ The chaos is depicted in the military response, houses ablaze, planes falling from the sky, and a massive conversion of uninfected to infected in a short time span.⁸ Life as we know it is over. If *The Last of Us* were a typical “zombie story,” then most of its narrative would follow survivors of the initial outbreak as they attempted to navigate the immediate post-apocalyptic world. Instead, *The Last of Us* jumps forward twenty years and presents a world well beyond the immediate aftermath of social collapse.

For instance, we know that the military bombed most major cities to contain the spread of Cordyceps, yet all the Quarantine Zones (QZs) are in major cities. These facts suggest that the bombs dropped weren’t nuclear, but also that there weren’t many dropped; otherwise, the major population hubs, like Boston, Atlanta, Kansas City, or Pittsburgh, would’ve been leveled, something which clearly isn’t the case. Moreover, if the Cordyceps infection happened at roughly the same time, as Joel suggests to Ellie, then given the nature of the infection and how widespread it is, it’s unlikely that chemical plants, oil refineries, nuclear facilities, mining operations, and so on would have been safely shut down or taken offline in the chaos that would have ensued from the start of the infestation and the days immediately afterward.

These facilities and their adjacent problems—like slurry ponds or soil or air toxification—would devastate the world in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event, especially since most of these types of industry are in or near major population centers which were being bombed. Even if all of these industries were properly shut down, the bombs would’ve destabilized them and the major population centers would’ve been uninhabitable in the immediate aftermath. But *The Last of Us* avoids these problems which might cease, in many instances, to be life-threatening problems after two decades, and this goes for a whole host of problems that would typically

emerge in the immediate aftermath of a post-apocalyptic world. The essence of dystopian hope that *The Last of Us* emphasizes so well is that the world will survive a catastrophic apocalyptic event and we can go on living in it with concerns only for the monsters and marauders that populate the planet.

When looking at the world that emerges in *The Last of Us*, it's clear that the frailty of human civilization has impeded the ability of communities to navigate the world. In such a world, highly specialized knowledge, in many communities, would vanish. Medical expertise, various types of engineering, high-level mathematics, agriculture, history, technology, and philosophy would be hindered in growth, development, and their ability to adequately handle Cordyceps as a common and pervasive enemy. The frustration of not being able to handle the state of world is made explicit by Joel when he tells Tess, "Vaccines, miracle cures. None of it works. Ever."

Over two decades, once vanquished diseases would reemerge in human society without vaccines and qualified people to administer them. Building and building maintenance would be incredibly difficult, especially as heavy machinery became unusable. Communication would be increasingly difficult as batteries failed, and travel would not only be dangerous due to raiders, hunters, slavers, and Cordyceps, but also, after two decades, roadways, dams, bridges, and other infrastructure would fall apart. These changes would mark a return to a more natural, that is, less human environment. In short, the world would be incredibly hostile to humans *regardless* of the threat posed by Cordyceps. Dystopian hope, perhaps evidenced best by the community in Jackson, Wyoming, would lead us to believe that we can turn things around, control for the worst, and do better than merely subsist. We would believe we can conquer the world anew.

We Always Win

Though the Infected are the main feature of the collapsed world in *The Last of Us*, the significant difference between this story and other similar narratives is how they approach dystopian hope. The problem with contemporary apocalyptic storytelling is that stories often trade on the same trope—with the end of civilization as we currently understand it, there's the possibility for something better. Once the apocalypse happens, if we can just weather the post-apocalyptic landscape for a couple of years, then we can rebuild society and build it back better than it was. All we need is a little time and the right plucky group of survivors to remake the world.⁹

These types of stories invite us to consider what we would do differently and, importantly, *why* we would do things differently. Everything can be called into question. Every social stigma can be erased, every injustice wiped clean, and everybody gets a fresh start if you can just survive a year or two. *The Last of Us* depicts no such opportunity. Twenty years of

battling the elements, each other, Cordyceps, and so much else, and human society is still teetering on the edge of total collapse. We can see this examination of dystopian hope in the communities that Joel and Ellie interact with throughout their story. These communities encapsulate the essence of why apocalyptic and dystopian fictions are problematic, but they also help explain why Joel's choice to save Ellie is incredibly significant.

Dream of Sheep Ranches on the Moon

In *The Last of Us Part I* and season 1 of the show, the vaccine is central, as it is in most stories of the genre. The critical difference between *The Last of Us* and its counterparts is that the solution to the apocalypse of infected is left in the hands of Joel. Having begun to see Ellie as a surrogate for Sarah by the time they reach Salt Lake City, Joel can't sacrifice her for the greater good.¹⁰ Joel's reluctance to deliver Ellie to the Fireflies overrides her desire to follow through because, "it can't all be for nothing." Once Joel learns the truth from Marlene, that the fungus must be removed from Ellie's brain, resulting in her death, he must decide whether to allow her to be sacrificed for a possible vaccine or attempt to save her from the Fireflies by any means necessary. Joel's decision is the most significant break with other apocalyptic stories because Joel doesn't give in to dystopian hope, but rather, effectively ends humanity's chance to return to pre-apocalyptic fantasies.¹¹

It's abundantly clear, regardless of which community you view it in relation to, that there is no going back to the way things were and there is no bringing civilization back better than before. Not only have several QZs been overrun by infected or revolutionaries, but several have also been abandoned. After twenty years, this instability certainly indicates an ongoing backsliding into primitivity for those still living in the shrinking QZs. Access to material goods, the loss of manufacturing, increased population density or, worse, the loss of people, all tally up to increased hardship and the inability of FEDRA to provide security for people.

Tommy's group, to the extent it would be possible, has no designs on expansion, evidenced by their unwillingness to allow outsiders to join their collective. Perhaps with a vaccine, they would change their mind, but Joel's decision to save Ellie effectively eliminates that possibility. However, the vaccine *would* help the Fireflies. The Fireflies openly recruit people, have a large network of cells that could draw people away from the QZs, or use those people to overthrow FEDRA, allowing the Fireflies to take immediate possession of FEDRA's resources. Marlene's willingness to sacrifice Ellie hinges on this vision and the promise of a return to pre-apocalyptic civilization. That Marlene doesn't see the world as irrevocably broken in the way that Joel does is apparent in their exchange in the parking garage of the hospital. Marlene tells Joel that Ellie "lives in a broken world that you could have saved."

Joel refuses to sacrifice Ellie because he no longer thinks of her as cargo and doesn't suffer from dystopian hope.¹² But Tess clearly does when she reveals her bite to Joel and demands that he make and keep a promise to deliver Ellie to the Fireflies. She may have been without hope before, but Ellie's immunity has restored it. At the end of their journey, Joel still doesn't believe a vaccine is possible, and even if it is, he doesn't believe the world could ever go back to the way it was. Joel's choice to save Ellie is motivated by the wrong reasons, his care and concern for Ellie, but he ultimately chooses to do the right thing; with or without a vaccine, we can't return the world to its pre-apocalyptic condition.

Not Today You New-World-Order Jack-Boot Fucks

Joel helps us see that dystopian hope is flawed. His choice isn't just to save Ellie, but to force humanity to rethink how it's going to live in a post-apocalyptic world.¹³ There are many similarities between *The Last of Us* and other apocalyptic tales, but the significance of *The Last of Us* is that it doesn't ask us to think of how we would rebuild the world into something better. Rather, it asks us to consider how we're going to inhabit a post-apocalyptic world in which we're not the most dominant force for change. Joel's choice to save Ellie places all the survivors into a post-human condition where being human must begin to mean something radically new.

Notes

1. Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: O/R Books, 2016), 16.
2. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Grey," *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 285.
3. For a more thorough examination of this concept see my *Apocalyptic Ecology in the Graphic Novel: Life and the Environment after Societal Collapse* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2020).
4. Though I won't pursue the dystopian aspect of *The Last of Us* further, for more on dystopian social arrangements, see Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For more on the intersection of dystopia and apocalypse see my *Apocalyptic Ecology in the Graphic Novel: Life and the Environment after Societal Collapse*.
5. Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead: Compendium One* (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2009).
6. Nuclear origins betoken a different post-apocalypse than does a viral one; say, the world of *Snowpiercer* versus *The Walking Dead*. Human-made viruses can become apocalyptic in different ways which might hinge on how fast the virus is able to spread or who is at risk, as in stories like *Y: The Last Man* or *Sweet Tooth*. Even stories that rely on climate shift usually focus on rising oceans or unbreathable air to draw attention to the perils of our current situation.

7. This claim is grounded in the narrative of the HBO show rather than the video game, given the Jakarta story arc which sets the foundation for the outbreak in the show.
8. The timespan of the Cordyceps apocalypse is a somewhat difficult thing to nail down. In the video game, there is a boy's journal that is discoverable in Bill's town which insinuates that the apocalypse still hasn't reached the town several weeks after the outbreak. However, the HBO show seems to insinuate that things go from bad (Jakarta) to worse (apocalypse) in about thirty-six hours, and is widespread and simultaneous, although this is complicated by the flashback scene at the beginning of episode 3 which shows the military "evacuating" Bill's town with no Infected in sight.
9. Most zombie stories opt for incredibly high numbers of the population to be infected with whatever makes people zombies, the point being that the world is overrun with zombies. However, in stark contrast, there is a discoverable military missive in the video game which puts the infection rate at approximately 60 percent. This is far lower than similar tales and means that there are somewhere between 3 and 4 billion survivors. In the United States that would leave about 130 million people uninfected. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to pursue this further, but this does complicate both my analysis of *The Last of Us* and also its fit in zombie end-of-the-world narratives.
10. Though there isn't space for it here, there is an interesting way to think through Joel's reluctance to sacrifice Ellie using Jacques Derrida's meditation on sacrifice in *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
11. Joel repeatedly says that trying to save the world is "a pipe dream" (see episode 4) and his realist outlook on the state of the world after twenty years is a foreshadowing of his inability to sacrifice Ellie.
12. Though there isn't room for an analysis of it here, Joel's development of feelings for Ellie raises important questions for how people interact *in a world* and especially a world where nature is defined by the Anthropocene. The end of the Anthropocene, which I am arguing takes place in *The Last of Us*, would likely fundamentally change *how we love one another*. For an excellent introduction to this idea, see Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam's *Love in the Anthropocene* (New York: O/R Books, 2015).
13. For more on the Anthropocene and how it relates to apocalypse see Dawson, *Extinction*, 20–21.