

K In our work of the last decade we have both gravitated towards formulating an understanding of crisis that does not passively register as a periodic feature of capitalist normalcy, but rather as the starting point of an expanding intensification. Seeking out historical homologies and exemplary individuations, we have both attempted to de-sensationalise the notion of crisis and move towards material expressions for its factual normalcy within modern capitalism. But while in Fordism and Post-Fordism crisis was a form of narration, ideologically marked by a (sudden) onset, a dramatic climax and an (improved system reboot) end; within the current period of financialised capitalism, crisis is perpetually dramatised. So the crisis, which has been proclaimed since 2008, by now no longer appears as just another periodic and inherently systemic phenomenon of brutalist capitalist ‘*progress*’. Instead the idea of progress seems to have vanished as this crisis has institutionalised itself as a series of climaxes which appear not only in what is defined as the economic and political sectors of society, but has also spread into and mutated all spheres of human and non-human life. The contained modern temporality, within which crisis was but one re-turning technology of human life under capitalism, seems to disintegrate as crisis spreads, multiplies, intensifies and institutionalises itself. One of capitalism’s central features, the idea of perpetual progress – illustrated in the historical spiral of crisis, breakthrough and prosperity – seems to have turned from catalyst to cataclysm, from spiral to circle. Yet, capitalism is nowhere near vanishing from the face of the earth. How then are we to narrate our desires for exiting a situation in which the forms of narration through which we have been identifying ourselves have to themselves re-materialise in a different order?

A Lately there’s been a noticeable drift from the use of the word ‘*crisis*’ to the use of the word ‘*catastrophe*’ and a proliferation of catastrophic and apocalyptic scenarios in anything from popular culture to theory (ostensibly feeding of popular culture).¹ So what do we (the authors of this text) understand by ‘*crisis*’, ‘*catastrophe*’ and ‘*apocalypse*’? And why is it so important to us to distinguish between these terms and point out their distinct, if overlapping, categories and dynamics?

¹ For example Sven Lütticken’s recent writings on art in a state of catastrophe; Maurizio Lazzarato’s expansion of the notion of crisis into one of catastrophe; The Invisible Committee’s *To Our Friends*; *Black Box: A Record of the Catastrophe*, Volumes One and Two published with PM Press this year and conferences like Tanja Widmann and Barbara Reisinger’s *Post-Apocalyptic Self-Reflection* which took place in Vienna earlier in 2016.

We have come to resist the term ‘*(financial) crisis*’ for what has occurred since 2008 mainly because it implies two (diametrically opposed) fallacies. The first serves the dominant discourse by obscuring the extent to which these developments were foreseeable, as well as the extent to which the ‘*management of the crisis*’ e.g. through so-called austerity measures, has itself intensified the downward economic trajectory, bringing no tangible economic recovery for the vast majority. The second originates with a reading of Marx, in which capitalism’s cyclical crisis will ultimately, dialectically work towards an overcoming of capitalism itself (the latest version of which would be [Paul Mason’s PostCapitalism](#)).²

Somewhere on the further end of this spectrum [Accelerationists](#)³ argue that intensifying the self-destructive tendencies of capitalism will hasten its collapse and bring about radically new conditions. Critiquing these positions, [Benjamin Noys](#) refers to [Gopal Balakrishnan](#)’s, observation that ‘*the “acceleration” of capitalism since the 1970s, especially its technological developments of new cybernetic production forces, did not indicate some “exhilarating new cultural condition” but rather “[c]apitalism’s culture became an organized semblance of world historic dynamism concealing and counteracting a secular deceleration in “the real economy.”*’⁴ and concludes that ‘*Accelerationism, as cultural and theoretical moment, is predicated on economic deceleration – there is a disjuncture, or even inversion, between the superstructure and the base.*’⁵

This is also where we find a whole array of apocalyptic and post-human scenarios entering the stage, which promise to shake up ossified humanist thought but often offer little more than planet-crashingly boring science-fiction fan-boy speculations about *the-world-without-us* ([Eugene Thacker](#))⁶ instead.

It’s why I feel the need to distinguish these terms, justifying the decision to turn from one term to another, and not use them interchangeably (as e.g. [Accellerationism](#) does), probably also because I’m instinctively really against anything that has a reactionary, ‘*end of the world*’ death-wish flavour too it.

You have proposed we speak of the current moment in terms of catastrophe. Where might we go from there?

2 Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, Allan Lane, 2015.

3 The latest version of that being Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a Work Without Work*, UK: Verso, 2015.

4 See for example <https://unfashionablylate.wordpress.com/2011/02/20/the-neverfuture>

5 See Benjamin Noys, ‘Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis’, *Mute* <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/apocalypse-tendency-crisis>

6 Eugene Thacker’s most popular book in this regard would be *In the Dust of This Planet (Horror of Philosophy vol. 1)*, UK: Zero Books, 2011. This became the first of a series, the third volume of which is *Tentacles Longer Than Night (Horror of Philosophy vol. 3)* which came out in April 2015.

K I couldn’t agree more with your rejection of the current nihilism-chic. The Accelerationist tropes you mentioned make it pretty obvious where this kind of theory comes from: it is mostly borne out of academia, performing a seemingly infinite theoretical radicality that knows nothing of its consequences because it is by definition only a mind-game, entirely based on the stable subject position of its (male) authors. This is something which has always been appalling about radical chic in academia, but right now it also signifies a very acute theoretical problem because what these pseudo-goth writers propose is a fundamental ontology of negativity. Theirs is a negation of all life and thus is first and foremost misanthropic, or to use the more (academically) fashionable term: inhuman.

But, as writers such as [Donna Haraway](#), [Rosi Braidotti](#), [Katherine N. Hayles](#) or [Sadie Plant](#)⁷ have demonstrated, there is an a-humanism that can describe an *epistemic* (instead of a fundamental) ontology of negativity and thus perceive our present as the catastrophe that it is, without opting for an eternal death-wish. Where the pseudo-radical gesture of fundamental negation would rather die than question its own categorical justification, the epistemic understanding of absolute negativity questions exactly the categorical justifications that our lives are based on as they become more and more impossible. They are thinking catastrophe not as that of the *other* but as that of the *self*. Thinking catastrophe is thus: not prolonging the logic of capitalist consequence, but attempting to materialise a thinking against ones own thinking,⁸ a human life beyond the capitalist subject form – or in [Gilles Deleuze](#)’s and [Félix Guattari](#)’s words, desiring an exit, not freedom (micrological escape routes instead of macrological dictums).

In [Walter Benjamin](#)’s writing, and in a whole lineage of political thought since, the concept of catastrophe has thus signalled not so much the end of the world, but more the emergence of a lived, materialised temporality which emerges through the interruption of oppressive normalcy. [Benjamin](#)’s famous dictum that what is catastrophic is that the present reproduces itself, points in exactly that direction. [Walter Benjamin](#) in his eighth thesis [On the Concept of History](#), written in 1940, had argued, that ‘*the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule*’ and that ‘*it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency*’⁹ to enable a revolutionary ‘*leap into the open air*’.¹⁰ So the reason why I would argue that the present is catastrophic is because it reproduces and expands a naturalised, a passivised state of emergency: the present

7 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, UK: Routledge, 1991. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, UK: Routledge, 1997. Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, UK: Polity, 2002. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, UK: Polity, 2013. Sadie Plant, *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, USA: Doubleday, 1997.

8 Sabeth Buchmann looked at such a constellation in relation to artistic production during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in her *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Helio Oiticia*, Germany: B_books, 2007.

9 Walter Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften I.2*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, p.392.

10 Ibid. p.396.

tense is non-reproduceable, yet it reproduces itself. These are catastrophic times, because these are times which are taking themselves apart.

From another vantage point, this situation could be described as the replacement of the administrative difference and competition between the bourgeois (capitalist) and materialist (socialist) versions of north-western modernism by the violent opposition of belief systems that are inherently incommensurable with one another. This is not least owed to the fact that not only did the bourgeois side largely bank on an inherently imperialist understanding of modernity, but so did, in many ways, its materialist counter-part. Marxist Internationalism in its dominant versions did not engage much in a more transversal understanding of different global modernities or materialisms until the anti-colonial resistance movements of the 1960s. And, as [Chris Marker](#) demonstrates in his 1977 film *Le fond du l'air est rouge*, May 1968 in Europe and the US was in many ways a repercussion of the anti-colonial struggles preceding those events. But ultimately anti-colonialism obviously did not result in de-colonisation, but rather in an actualisation of colonising power. So, if we differentiate catastrophe from crisis also by a sense of temporality that is characterised as a perpetual state of disintegration, if 'catastrophe is', as [Sadie Plant](#) and [Nick Land](#) argued in 1994 'the past coming apart',¹¹ then one can argue that for large parts of the world modernity has meant a life in catastrophe to begin with. And, regrettably that means that while the capitalist past is falling apart, so is the Marxist past.

However, most northern anti-systemic movements which grew out of the struggles of the 1960s did not ultimately sustain their own de-colonisation, but lapsed back into that very disintegration of transversal politics and nationalised struggles that capitalist (and also state-socialist) modernity enforced. So retrospectively we might end up arguing that the opposition of capitalism versus socialism has to be fundamentally re-anchored with respect to their shared externalisations of historical catastrophisation. Socialism offered the more humane modern systemic form of reproduction – but it nevertheless also enforced an understanding of emancipation as rationalisation. And it is not least this rationalisation that has again and again presented itself not only as a medium of externalising catastrophe on a social level, but also as one of internalising it as individuals. It is this rationality which [Gilles Deleuze](#) and [Félix Guattari](#) dissect in their epic *Anti-Oedipus*¹² in which they rightfully assess that ultimately [Marx's](#) materialisation of human history did not go far enough. It materialised work as labour, but took for granted the juridical and psychological stability of the modern subject, its status as self-property. Thus it imported an idealist kernel, this modern subject, the human in its functionalised form, into its hopes for socialisation and thus turned the question of emancipation into an administrative measure, one of labour, instead of an existential one, one of life.

11 Sadie Plant and Nick Land, 'Cyberpositive', Matthew Fuller (ed.), *Unnatural: Techno-Theory for a Contaminated Culture*, Underground, 1994.

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

A I want to bring us back to your initial question about the necessity for forms of narration that could articulate our desire for exiting this catastrophic present – and could go further where others have not gone far enough because of the context in which this exchange between us will appear and its investment in probing forms of narration.

I also bring this up because we have been wondering, and still are, if it is possible to reclaim narrations of horror and abjection as sites in which neither subject nor object are properly constituted and departing from which these may be radically reconfigured.

When examining writers such as [Kafka](#), [Dostoyevsky](#), [Celine](#) and [Sade](#) in *Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection*¹³ [Kristeva](#) observed that [my emphasis]:

The one who tries to utter this 'not yet a place,' this no-grounds, can obviously only do so backwards, starting from an over-mastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code. But in the last analysis he refers to fear—a terrifying, abject referent. We encounter this discourse in our dreams, or when death brushes us by, depriving us of the assurance mechanical use of speech ordinarily gives us, the assurance of being ourselves, that is, untouchable, unchangeable, immortal. But the writer is permanently confronted with such a language. The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs.

Is a fully mastered code deformed under the real conditions of horror, or does the writer [Kristeva](#) describes simulate the de-forming effect of (real and imagined) conditions on the text by drawing on his (still intact) mastery of the code – or should we rather speak of a convergence of both?

K I would say that it is a necessary convergence of both, no? While the simulation stages an analysis of the present that within itself claims consistency, this consistency itself is in a state of deformation. But this might be exactly why the idea of horror seems so very productive right now – because its form is the form of consequential deviation, it measures out the consequences of consequential forms of behaviour, of the social as a genuinely pathological state. And again, I would say that this distinguishes what you have argued in relation to horror from the fan-boy love of horror: the latter seeks out the sensationalism of extremities, the voyeuristic love of catastrophe, while what you are referring to is rather a consequential simulation that always finds itself gravitating back towards reality, because reality on the most banal level contains so much horror. So for me consequential horror signifies a narrative structure that today opens up a life form – rather than an infinite death – and again, with [Deleuze](#) and [Guattari](#), no freedom, but an exit.

13 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, USA: Columbia University Press, 1982, p.38.

So this would be another, and aesthetic argument for characterising our present as a state of catastrophe. Crisis implies a standard deviation from normalcy – but I would, just as you do, refuse to accept the systemic brutalisms of our present as normalcy. Rather, it seems that modern time is out of joint, and that is because the rationalisation it has been based on cannot survive its own consequences.

So one way of seeking out exits would be by retrospectively estranging one's own pre-histories. If *'the past'* is *'coming apart'* we might as well seek out what is uncovered by its disintegration. If we look at contemporary theoretical de-borderings of European cultural history, like Erhard Schüttpelz's proposition to fundamentally expand our notion of modernity towards its spatial as well as temporal minorisation,¹⁴ or Siegfried Zielinski's development of what he calls *'variantology'*,¹⁵ digging into deep time tracing back media inventions and their transversal cultural belonging, we find that here it is not least this normalised modern temporality itself whose construction becomes questionable. Not all culture turns towards horror, but ours surely does...

A I recently started reading Alexander Etkind's *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, in which he examines post-catastrophic culture in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The introduction is remarkable so I will quote from it at length:

After the French Revolution, relatives of the guillotined victims used to gather regularly for Bals des victimes, or Victims' Balls. Women wore a red ribbon marking the point where the guillotine cut. They cut their hair to bare their necks, imitating the haircut given the victim by the executioner. Inviting the women to dance, men would jerk their head sharply downward in imitation of decapitation. Dancing and flirting, they manifested their mourning for their fathers and mothers in macabre details.

It is possible that the whole story of these Victims' Balls is a subsequent, nineteenth-century romantic legend. Many authors have repeated it, however, as I am doing now. Whether the French decadents of the postrevolutionary generation really gathered at Victims' Balls or not, they fantasized about doing so, passing these fantasies on through generations, all the way to us. These legendary balls provide a prototypical case of what I call mimetic mourning—a recurrent response to loss that entails a symbolic reenactment of that loss.

[...]

14 Erhard Schüttpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven: Weltliteratur und Ethnologie 1870-1960*, Germany: Fink Wilhelm GmbH + Co.Kg, 2005.

15 See a complete documentation of all related publications, <http://variantology.com/?lang=en>

In contrast to some later concepts, such as Freud's repetition compulsion and the connected ideas of trauma and the posttraumatic, the stories of Victims' Balls presume that their participants operate in full consciousness of their individual losses and their collective mourning. Sharing experience is a source of pleasure, and this is why we retell such stories also with some residual pleasure.¹⁶

This shared pleasure (in the mere retelling!) really gets me and I think this is what turned me towards horror in the first place.

Directly following this passage Etkind introduces the *'Fifty-Year-Effect'*, and states that (in relation to literature) *'ffifty years, or two cultural generations, is how much is needed to make the work of mourning culturally productive.'*

How many years does it take right now? On the mass entertainment level I think it took until Cloverfield (2008) for 9/11-style skyscraper smashing to appear in popular culture, but that interval between event and its becoming commercially and culturally 'productive' is getting shorter every year. All the popular horrific TV series of late (like *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, *The Leftovers* etc.) are not just normalising the trauma and disposability of our lives, they are doing it instantly, on-demand and occasionally with pretty high levels (or at least instances) of formal innovation.

I know this isn't what Etkind was referring to, but considering the role that passing of time plays in mourning, I wonder if the speeding-up of *'making it productive'* alongside the persistence of constant low-level trauma is what forms all these deformed forms?

K I think it is interesting to look at the functions and political desires of artistic or cultural production in this regard. Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia¹⁷ and argues that the former overcomes the loss of the loved object in affirming its finitude while the latter is experiencing this loss as one of the self, as an irredeemable deprivation of one's own life. This seems to resonate with the TV series you mention, only that they are not collectively mourning by fetishising collective melancholia, which seems to be a rather reactionary move. But, it poses the question of form, of the subject form and its life forms, its culture and sociality, yet again as one of catastrophe. To me Lu Märten's work is exemplary in framing such questions of an expanded sense of form. She was a contemporary of Walter Benjamin, but she was self-taught, and a proletcultist, a feminist publicist, and well, a

16 Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Cultural Memory in the Present), USA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p.1ff

17 See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', 1917, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/medical/clerkships/psych/misc/articles/freud.pdf>

woman, so, unsurprisingly, her work is hardly known today. She worked as a journalist and published a lot, but her main work, *Wesen und Veränderung der Künste* (1924),¹⁸ argues for a sense of form beyond art. Raiding hundreds of years of cultural history, she demonstrates that each society produced an understanding of form of which its artistic productions were mere points of repercussion, and she argues that in order to revolutionise art and society alike one needs a fundamentally expanded sense of form. I guess this is what we both desire in thinking about catastrophe, no? And it is what can be found in [Deleuze](#) and [Guattari](#), in [Haraway](#), in [Kathy Acker](#), in [Sadie Plant](#)...

And also this is what is fundamentally lacking within the opposition of capitalism and socialism as modernist models. Their self-legitimation was not primarily argued through social or cultural forms, but as competing systems of reproduction – an inherently functionalist understanding of form. Their equally administrative understanding of human life allows them to agree on that very temporality which today presents itself as infinitely catastrophic: the insistence on the linearity of human (re)production. This linearity is disturbed in what you quoted from [Etkind](#), but it remains intact in the TV series you mentioned. Horror might today serve as a fictional mode of creating what [Benjamin](#) called ‘a real state of emergency’, not in the sense of nihilism but within the perspective of a sociality in a state of trauma.

And this might not only be why horror is back, but also why historically seemingly more shady movements like mannerism (late 17th century), symbolism (end of the 19th century), or Russian futurism (beginning of the 20th century) today regain an enhanced relevance, or even just an enhanced legibility, because they propose different temporalities, they defy linearity, because they defy the idea of modernity as progress.

Where one sees catastrophe as nothing but an ending, the perspective at stake is highly problematic because it assumes the normalcy of the reproduction of the very status quo that became catastrophic. Where, on the other hand, an understanding of catastrophe begins from putting into question the past that led to this present, there is a fundamental reconfiguration of the material residues at stake which we are faced with within our catastrophe, and so there is the possibility of another epistemic order that is built not from the unthinkable brutality of an absolute break but from understanding catastrophe as the consequential diversion and deformation you describe. What evolved as a crisis of financialised capital in 2008 has turned into a catastrophe not least because this no longer is a crisis that can be re-aligned with an intensified exploitation of human life as human labour. This catastrophe was not a crisis of labour – it was and is a crisis of life.

¹⁸ Lu Märten, *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen/Künste* *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste: Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen*, Germany: Verlag Werden und Wirken, 1949.

A In a text from 1995, in which [Kathy Acker](#) lays out her own drive towards narration in face of this crisis of life, she writes, via recourse to [Hannah Arendt](#), that:

Arendt knows that writing, narration, does not end suffering: writing masters nothing. Narration, writing does something else. It restores meaning to a world which hardship and suffering have revealed as chaotic and senseless. When Arendt talks about story, about narration and narrative, she is not talking about a master narrative. She is talking about language as it moves from one point to another point. She is talking about meaning as it reveals itself and so is co-equivalent to language. Hannah Arendt suggests that the meaning of a ‘committed act’, that is her phrase, is revealed only when the action itself has come to an end and become a story susceptible to narration. That is, ‘insofar as any mastery of the past is possible’, thus, insofar as any mastery of suffering is possible, ‘it consists in relating what has happened.’¹⁹

But what if the action itself *doesn’t* come to an end? What if you are still in the middle of it? Or rather not even *still* in the *middle* – there is no middle, there is no foreseeable end, the next action already overlaps the existing one without ending it and so forth?

¹⁹ Kathy Acker, ‘Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Spring 1995, vol. 28, no. 1, Identities, p.94.