A Hole that Does not Speak: Covid, Catastrophe and the Impossible

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By Jack Black

> *What about this possibility which, one way or another, is always caught in its own*
> *impossibility?*
>
> Maurice Blanchot[1]

I.

Covid-19 presents itself as a strange catastrophe. It has neither destroyed the planet nor has it erased humanity… but it has, in many ways, served to upend and alter what was previously considered 'normal.' As a result, what is perhaps the most notable characteristic of the Covid catastrophe is the very way it endures. Beyond any notion of catastrophic shock, the Covid catastrophe continues, indeed, it lingers in daily news cycles, changes to working environments and restrictions on travel. It is an enduring presence, from which any determination of its 'end' is either nullified by an unending stream of Covid reports, or worse, ignored altogether. On this basis alone, is it even possible to discern an 'end' to Covid?

Answering this question requires us to ascertain whether Covid represents a new form of 'ending' or a continuation of the end, the latter of which can be identified in the Fukuyamian 'end of history'. As noted by Alenka Zupančič, what the "end of history" proclamation provided was "the disappearance of any real Outside" and, as a consequence, this "meant that we have reached a point where we are living in times that cannot end, at least not for any intrinsic reasons or contradictions."[2] The ideological significance of this failure has meant that political events – such as the election of Donald Trump – are often viewed as a catastrophe to the very prevalence of a political system that can only account for disruption and change by directing culpability to some abject 'outside' force… either an asteroid or some other form of natural disaster. Consequently, whether it be fantasies of 'the End' or even a humble acceptance of our own guilt, in each case we resort to similar frameworks of protective reassurance – all of which help us to 'make sense,' temporally overcome, but ultimately avoid the far more catastrophic acceptance of the present deadlock.

To this extent, the Covid catastrophe is not 'new,' but rather a mere continuation of the fact that, for many, the very social and political frustrations

enacted under Covid-19 remain a miserable component of the day-to-day lives of large proportions of the world's population – many for whom the Covid catastrophe has bared no considerable change or alteration to their daily lives. Certainly, such examples do not seek to encourage feelings of guilt – or worse, a far more perverse 'race to the bottom' ('well, if you think this is bad, imagine how bad it is for those in the third-world'); instead, it is to recognize the catastrophes and cataclysms that constitute our presence on this planet.

It is in this regard that the Covid catastrophe lays bare a certain paradox in how we confront the End:

> In the last couple of years, after the SARS and Ebola epidemics, we were told again and again that a new much stronger epidemic was just a matter of time, that the question was not IF but WHEN. Although we were convinced of the truth of these dire predictions, we somehow didn't take them seriously and were reluctant to act and engage in serious preparations – the only place we dealt with them was in apocalyptic movies like Contagion.[3]

Echoing these sentiments, Kamran Baradaran highlights how these failures follow the structure of fetishist disavowal: "I know these warnings are true, but at the same time I do not take them seriously; these catastrophes will not happen for several centuries, so why bother?".[4] What this disavowal posits, however, is a failure to acknowledge the elementary inconsistency of our social and political systems, as well as nature itself. Therefore, instead of attributing an end to that which has become 'accepted' (the end of history), and while refraining from the 'unexpected' end of something which was widely known, but disavowed (I know very well, but nonetheless…), we can begin to approach the Covid virus in a proper Hegelian mode: as an 'end' for which the Covid catastrophe has always-already happened.

II.

This orientation towards catastrophe, as that which has always-already happened, is not an attempt to bluntly accept the ongoing hardships which the virus has brought to light and made worse; nor, as the below will discuss, is it an attempt to offer some simple closure to what has occurred. Both of these falsehoods advocate a 'no simple

way out' approach (for better or worse, we're left with Covid). If anything, such claims should be unconditionally accepted: no matter what our course of action, we will have to acknowledge the various catastrophes that continue to shape our future on Earth.

What remains of crucial importance is the extent to which our current catastrophic predicament reveals a sense of fatigue: a re-symbolization of the normal which is now accustomed to catastrophe. We are in danger here of ending up like the dystopian future depicted in Alfonso Cuaron's, *Children of Men* (2006): a world, for whom after becoming bereft of children, simply trudges along with no real sense of how the catastrophe occurred or how it can be curtailed (instead, it would seem that in accordance with the film's depiction of internment camps the path of fascism is all that remains). Mladen Dolar approaches this fatigue in relation to Walter Benjamin's "dialectic at a standstill" (*Dialektik im Stillstand*): a "state of maximum tension" that Benjamin believed would help to invigorate an "awakening."[5] Instead, Benjamin's desire for the standstill to encourage a "waking-up" is, today, repurposed to "the point of [an] excessive fatigue which rather instigates indifference and irritation."[6]

For Gavin Jacobson, this "excessive fatigue" would suggest that we are already existing in a *Children of Men* present: an "eternal present, ideologically directionless and politically unmotivated to improve our lot."[7] It is this catastrophe – the lack of any end – which provides "a weird immobility" to the pandemic;[8] one reflected in the constant threat of further lockdowns or a mutation of the virus beyond the reach of present vaccines. Again, what seems to characterise this fatigue is "a fake appearance of normality,"[9] one that, echoing *Children of Men*, serves to avoid and/or obscure the question: what is to be done?[10]

In answer to this question, we can echo Žižek's contention that one trap to avoid is "futurology," which, "by definition ignores our not-knowing."[11] Here, he notes that: "Futurology is defined as a systematic forecasting of the future from the present trends in society. And therein resides the problem – futurology mostly extrapolates what will come from the present tendencies."[12] Such extrapolation from *present tendencies* can be identified in examples of 'risk management.' In his articulations on our "risk society," Beck sought to underline the fact that, today, whether rich or poor, we remain subject to the same levels of risk which, at best, must be analysed and thus rationalised under present conditions. What this argument

ignores, however, is the fact that this risk is dependent upon those very conditions and forms of action that subsequently seek to prevent the risk it creates.[13]

As an apologist of 'risk,' such management poses a number of 'riskier' contentions. Indeed, why, following Beck, would we use our current knowledge to manage the risks involved in oil spills and other ecological catastrophes instead of confronting the (disavowed) knowledge that such spills are a direct result of an economic infrastructure that encourages oil consumption?[14] In addition, what risk is there for the company manager or corporate/financial CEO, who, while exposed to risk, has the knowledge to manage and reduce (i. e. 'cash-in') this risk, leaving lower-level employees and banking customers subject to the subsequent risk of losing it all?[15] In each instance, any mitigation and modification is just as likely to maintain or even cause the very risk that such management sought to curtail. Instead, what these risks fail to consider – in fact, what they fundamentally ignore – is the very Real risk of acting on what we know we do not know.

One way of approaching this knowledge is to conceive the Covid-19 virus as a hole that does not speak:

> The message that some people might read from [… this hole] is phantasmatic. And these phantasms circulate like the virus itself, from one cell to another. We know about the transmission and we can make projections like an election poll, we can make forecasts like a weather forecast, we can use all the instruments of the symbolic apparatus to generate data around this hole in knowledge. But the hole itself remains and it doesn't speak.[16]

In such instances, it is of particular importance not to provide this 'hole' any deeper meaning. Any meaning attributed to the catastrophe is itself a way of curtailing the anxiety that we face when confronted with the indeterminacy of the Other's desire – a desire which the virus provokes. It is our lack of knowledge regarding the Other's desire which posits a 'hole' that serves to expose how "in today's constellation, the big Other is *against* us: left to itself, the inner thrust of our historical development leads to catastrophe, to apocalypse."[17]

However, it is when left with the catastrophe of the Other – that is, with the realization of its indeterminate form – that we can begin to determine the 'new.' Note the following from Vieira:

… when we encounter an otherness with an essentially indeterminate desire, in addition to the anxiety that it can bring, something new can emerge. The Other of anxiety is imagined by Lacan as a giant praying mantis. What does this inscrutable thing, anxiety, do? This Other, as a Praying Mantis, the devil, but also the mugger on the corner or even the loved one, what does he want from me? However, it is precisely in this indeterminacy of the Other's desire that we find the possibility of interpreting our own desire: 'How did I end up here? What am I doing with my life?'[18]

What remains integral to this indeterminacy and, specifically, to Vieira's questions, is that such interpretation provides the possibility to retroactively (re)interpret our desire. Here, the significance of the Covid catastrophe resides within its retroactive importance: an importance that requires a 'risk' far outside the parameters prescribed by our risk society and one that seeks no middle ground in evaluating the implications of catastrophe, today.

III.

In his appraisal of the virus, Žižek has frequently drawn from Jürgen Habermas' concern that what the virus reveals is an "existential uncertainty."[19] This uncertainty is predicated on the fact that, much like other catastrophes, "There never was so much knowing about our not-knowing and about the constraint to act and live in uncertainty."[20] To this, Žižek underscores the following: "Note his [Habermas's] precise formulation: it is not simply that we don't know what goes on, we know that we don't know, and this not-knowing is itself a social fact, inscribed into how our institutions act."[21]

Certainly, while knowledge of a potential global pandemic was widely disavowed, both Habermas and Žižek help to emphasise that it is not the disavowal of this knowledge, which proves problematic to our present circumstances, but, rather, the revelation that the virus brings to bare a knowledge predicated on our very non-knowledge; or, as previously noted, to a 'hole' in knowledge.[22] Moreover, it is this gap in knowledge – this not-knowing – which is inscribed in the actions of our

institutions; actions which lay bare their own temporality: a form of retroaction whereby what is not-known is *already* known.[23]

To return to our previous assertion that the Covid catastrophe has always-already happened, we can consider how it is our (non-)knowledge of the Covid catastrophe and our responses to it that are inevitably entwined in the very catastrophe we seek to manage. In extending this consideration, we can begin to perceive how "every work of mourning, every symbolization of a catastrophe misses something and thus opens a path toward a new catastrophe."[24] What's more, "Our acts are never self-transparent, we never fully know what we are doing or what the effects will be."[25]

This approach is echoed in Ruda's "comic fatalism,"[26] which, alongside Žižek,[27] echoes the work Jean-Pierre Dupuy on time and catastrophe.[28] What remains significant to Dupuy's account (as well as the Ruda and Žižek variations) is the retroaction it posits. Opposing the concern that time presents a linear progression, Dupuy considers how our relation to time can be conceived as a 'loop.' In what he refers to as the 'time of the project,' which works in contrast to the perception that the past is fixed and the future open to possibility (potential options/choices, for example), Dupuy outlines how we should reconfigure this relationship so that it is the future which is determined and the past which is open to counterfactual possibility. In the case of catastrophe, this requires conceiving the catastrophe as predetermined, or, as noted above, as a catastrophe that has always-already occurred. By conceiving the future catastrophe as predetermined, we are driven to consider counterfactual possibilities to this future, thus, directing our action in the present. In summary:

> we should first perceive it [catastrophe] as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourself into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ('If we had done this and that, the catastrophe we are in now would not have occurred!') upon which we then act today. Therein resides Dupuy's paradoxical formula: we have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny – and, then, against the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past.[29]

Certainly, any consideration of the very possibilities which led to the always-already catastrophe can just as easily be subject to examples of superegoic injunction: "Possibilities are here to be taken, realized, by all means and at any price. You can do it, therefore you must!"[30] Under such circumstances, "we are expected to […] realize as many possibilities as possible (to act), but never to question the framework of these possibilities as possibilities."[31] Instead, following Dupuy, we can concern that what is required is not the complete understanding of the multitude of possibilities that led to the catastrophe, but to a rethinking of the very framework which structured these possibilities in the first place. Subsequently, while any pre-Covid prevention may have seemed ridiculous (perhaps being viewed as scaremongering), it is only in hindsight that we can retroactively conceive of these 'ridiculous' actions as being drastically required. In light of the Covid catastrophe that happened (as well as the possibilities that led to it happening), what we require now is no longer ridiculous, but impossible.

IV.

What remains unique to the Covid catastrophe is that we don't require an 'as if' – the catastrophe has happened.[32] In other words, what was perceived as impossible – or, at least, what was disavowed as possible (not believed) – has occurred. As a result, "Our great advantage is that we know how much we don't know, and this knowing about our not-knowing opens up the space of freedom."[33] This space of not-knowing prescribes an "impossible in-sight,"[34] which, from a preordained 'future' position, retroactively determines what, at present, we do not know. The catastrophe of the present, therefore, is that it posits this very contradiction in our knowledge.

More importantly, when set against a predetermined future, past possibilities are not merely other potentialities working towards the same end, but are instead prescriptions of a retroactive 'cut' which announces the advertent of a contradiction – a point of impossibility – that fundamentally discloses the inconsistencies in our current socio-political frame. Though interpretations of this 'cut' work in accordance with Lacan's account of the Act – defined, by Žižek, as what "changes the very coordinates of what is possible and thus retroactively creates its own conditions of possibility"[35] – we can consider how this 'change' transpires via a self-determining 'cut' that retroactively proposes – and, thus, serves – its own self-limitation.[36] This

suggests that one is not simply 'free' to 'choose' the past in whatever way they see fit (this would have to assume that one's future remains non-determined, if only on the basis that one's choice would determine this future); instead, the underlying logic of a future that is determined is that it can only ever be retroactively determined by the self-limitation it establishes. For example, consider Ruda's appraisal of Jameson's program of utopia, an account which highlights how any determination is limited by its own 'self-limitation':

> in a first move, the very act of proposing an impossible utopia posits its own conditions of possibility – creates a new possible imaginary – and as soon as this act is performed there is a second retroaction involved, that leads to the fact that after the act the utopia will always have been a political program.[37]

It is this 'second retroaction' ('the will always have been') which lays bare the limitation that underscores any act which posits its own (impossible) determination. Today, such an act must be identified "in a series of modest demands that are not simply impossible but appear as possible although they are de facto impossible."[38] It is our fated catastrophe which determines that we must now retroactively align ourselves with the impossible.

In part, proclamations of the "impossible" can work to cover-over the fissures in the symbolic order; a pretence echoing that of the 'outside' catastrophe which unexpectedly changes the present-state of things. Yet, to encounter the impossible is to perceive it as that which happens under our current ideological coordinates. Under such circumstances, the impossible is a foreclosure of what is perceived to be possible under *present conditions*. It is in this sense that the Covid catastrophe highlights how the impossible is possible: an impossibility in the very sense that retroactively such an impossible possibility has always-already occurred. Encountering the impossible in the context of catastrophe requires what can only be conceived as a paradigm shift in our social-political coordinates.

More to the point, it requires (retroactively) recognizing the necessity of failure as constitutive to our knowledge of the virus. It is in reconciling with this failure (conceived in the above discussion as a hole in knowledge, the knowledge in not-knowing and as the impossible) that our relation to catastrophe can help us

identify the possibility of new failure. The necessity of such failure suggests that it is only in failing that we establish what it *is* that failed.[39]

In the wake of the Covid catastrophe that has always-already happened, we can assert the following: what we retroactively require are institutions that at present are impossible (i.e. do not exist, unless conceived from some future position). Though widely derided, Žižek's call for a communist response to the Covid catastrophe is not an attempt to reassert the communist past, marred by Soviet terror, but is instead a demand for 'collective principles' set on orchestrating an international response to an international catastrophe (pessimistically, if these institutions were 'presupposed' to fail, they would have to be established in order to know what it is that failed). On this basis alone, a retroactive perspective is not simply a 'return to the past,' but a considered attempt to theoretically, and, thus, philosophically, redefine the very framework in which this past is conceived and, as a consequence, how our future is impossibly determined.

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Notes

[1] Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* 2.

[2] See Zupančič, "The End of Ideology, the Ideology of the End" 833–844.

[3] Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* 64.

[4] See Baradaran, "The ruins of our lives: A plea for fatalist sleeplessness."

[5] Dolar adds: "The standstill involves the heightened tension which is at a crossroads – there was a lot of standstill, but where is the dialectic? The pervasive wish to go back to normalcy is the escape from this tension, which also offered, and continues to

offer, a chance of a different path." (Qtd. in Hamza and Ruda, "Interview with Mladen Dolar" 495–496).

6 Ibid., 496.

7 See Jacobson, "Why *Children of Men* haunts the present moment."

8 Žižek, *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* 12.

9 See Žižek, "The will not to know."

10 Colquhoun, *Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy and Mark Fisher*.

11 See Žižek, "Slavoj Žižek: We Need a Socialist Reset, Not a Corporate 'Great Reset'."

12 Ibid.

13 Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*.

14 Žižek, *Living in the End Times*.

15 Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*.

16 See Zöchmeister, "Life."

17 Žižek, *Frist as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 154.

18 See Vieira, "Notes on Desire and Isolation."

19 Habermas qtd. in Žižek, "Socialist Reset."

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Let it be clear that this account of 'non-knowledge' is not a cynical discrediting of the work of medical researchers and practitioners attempting to understand and treat the virus. It is, rather, an attempt to acknowledge that there are aspects of the virus that remain unknown and, more importantly, that the impact of our interventions in treating the virus are unknown (or, at least, we know what we don't know).

23 Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* 126.

24 Žižek, *Pandemic! 2* 112.

25 Ibid., 112.

26 Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*.

27 Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*.

28 In what follows I draw entirely from Žižek and Ruda's interpretations of this work.

29 Žižek, *In Defence* 459–460. It is from this point of projection that further links can be made with the 'inhuman' and the Lacanian 'not-all' (see Black, "COVID-19: Approaching the In-human" 1–10; Zupančič, "The Apocalypse is (Still) Disappointing" 16–30).

30 Zupančič, "The End" 2.

31 Ibid., 2.

32 See Zupančič's critique of Ruda's 'comic fatalism' (Zupančič, "The End.")

33 Žižek, "Social Reset."

34 Ruda, "The Impossible InSight" 31.

35 Žižek, *Living in the End Times* 420.

36 The reference to self-determination is drawn from Todd McGowan's Hegelian interpretation of freedom (McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution*).

37 Ruda, "Jameson and Method: On Comic Utopianism" 200.

38 Žižek, *Disparities* 382.

39 Here, I deliberately re-work Zupančič's account of Blanchot's, "The Apocalypse is Disappointing." For Blanchot: "The true choice is not between tolerating the Bomb (and hence running the risk of losing everything) on the one hand, and preventing the looming destruction of the world (but thereby running the risk of losing our liberal

freedoms) on the other hand; the true choice is between 'losing it all' and creating what we are about to lose (even if we lose it all in the process): only this could eventually save us, in a profound sense" (Zupančič, "(Still) Disappointing" 21).