
Post-Apocalyptic
Prognostications

Post-Apocalyptic Prognostications in *The Witcher*

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Catastrophes are cross-cultural themes in ancient stories.[1] Similar motifs can be found in the off-balance mythical past of *The Witcher*. The narrative is set in a continent undergoing a climate crisis known as the Great Frost, which started after the Conjunction of the Spheres, an event that opened a cosmic gateway that allowed humans to leave a dying world and enter a new one. In a way, this development parallels that of the paleolithic Sahara desert, which had wet spells. These allowed our ancestors northward passage through this normally impenetrable barrier, letting them branch out of Africa.[2] Lurking in the background of all of this and imprinted in humanity's genes is an ache in people to perpetuate themselves and their communities, a desire molded further through cultural experiences of contending with apocalyptic situations. In *The Witcher* too, this desire drives many individuals.

There's also a figurative sense in which apocalyptic impulses are in our DNA. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) claimed that all people "by nature desire to know," and the word "apocalypse" has meanings that relate to truth-seeking.[3] The term is a compound of the Greek "apo- '*un-*' + *kaluptein* 'to cover'."[4] So "apocalypse" literally means uncovering or revealing. In the hands of Greeks like Plato (c. 429–347), knowledge seeking takes on deathly tones because the sought-after truths are perfect, unchanging, and immaterial—in short, the opposite of messy, ever changing, and material biological ways of living. We see this deathly Greek ideal personified in Yennefer: because her nearly ageless beauty and otherworldly wisdom are achieved at the cost of her ability to have children.

The word "apocalyptic" has ruinous tones in no small part because of Biblical books like Revelation (called *Apokalypsis* in its original Greek title). The Book of Revelation may have partly been an allegory for the persecution that was occurring in Rome.[5] The scripture further suggests that humans have a destructive nature. This book describes an erosion of the barrier between earthly and otherworldly realms, allowing entrance of monsters such as a seven- headed dragon and an army of locust-lion-horse-human-scorpion hybrids.[6]

The Witcher has its own apocalyptic monsters in the form of its mutant creatures that appear when the barrier between worlds ruptures, with environmental crises further driving these beasts to migrate into human-populated areas. The series also has characters experimenting in an effort to create a transhuman superspecies, echoing the aspirations of Nazis as well as recent companies that try to perfect bodies through interventions ranging from steroids to cosmetic surgery to electronic brain implants.

In *The Witcher*, biological changes are implemented in humans through a mix of magic and science, leading to a breakdown of customary ways of classifying things. Geralt doesn't consider himself human anymore, even though that's what he was as a child. Paralleling this classificatory breakdown is something close to a post-truth erosion of moral concepts, which often just become whatever the powerful want, causing political mayhem. *The Witcher* captures these points. It frames environmental catastrophe, war, refugee migration, and ethnically-based atrocities as interconnected problems, confronting us with a post-apocalyptic, post-truth, and transhumanist chaos that shadows the situation that's brewing in our own world.

Familiar Bedfellows

On the one hand, sex and death seem pretty far apart. On the other, they're familiar bedfellows. As the elf Avallac'h says to Geralt, "Sex totally governs you," adding that it's "more powerful even than the survival instinct. To die? Why not, if one can fuck around beforehand. That is your entire philosophy."[7]

Though these remarks are glib, they get at pervasive realities that appear in culture and nature. The Japanese have myths of their volcanic islands ripping up—almost apocalyptically—from the ocean through a kind of erotic coupling. And the ancient Greeks told about how Aphrodite—their goddess of sex and love—emerged from the bloody froth of Uranus's severed genitals hitting the sea.[8] Television nature shows feature rutting animals fighting to the death or expending their last bit of strength to mate. As humans, we aren't that different. We exhaust enormous energy in prestige games that probably shorten our lives out of stress. We do this even if we're celibate, which is likely because we can't escape sexually competitive social instincts hardwired into us. Sexual temptation has destroyed the lives of many prominent people.

Most of us aren't willing to die for sex. Rather, it's because we will die that we've got a strong sex drive: our children will replace us. But a break in the last part of this equation motivates many characters in *The Witcher*. Factions in Sapkowski's books condemn contraception, abortion, and oral sex, similarly to certain religious traditionalists from history who hold that nonprocreative lovemaking is wrong.[9] This is a polite way of saying that individuals should stick to sex that has the potential to spread genes, though it doesn't matter for witchers and magic users since they are infertile. It's the price they pay for gaining their superhuman powers, and we're also told they'd make bad parents. For the witchers and those they protect, the situation is dire because they've lost the ability to transform humans into members of their order, meaning their kind is on the edge of apocalyptic destruction.

Especially haunted by her inability to conceive children, Yennefer plans to kill a highly intelligent and endangered dragon in hopes of trading its valuable tissues for a cure. Later, though, she turns sympathetic because the dragon's protecting an egg—an unborn youngling, the very thing she wants. The elves, who are oppressed and victims of bigotry, are similarly infertile; their effort to rectify this motivates many of their actions. Interestingly, the elf king is obsessed with Ciri's elder blood—a name for genes she carries that contribute to her magical powers.[10] He plans to impregnate her, believing that a child with her elder blood will save all races from a world nearing apocalyptic demise. Ciri's father wants to do the same, and he's revealed to be the emperor of the Nilfgaardians, ancestral enemies of Ciri's clan who violently massacred many of her people.[11]

Withering Heights

A problem for many characters in the *Witcher* is that they grow to be what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) described as individuals "who lack everything, except one thing of which they have too much."[12] These people, he goes on to say, "are nothing but a big eye or a big mouth or a big belly or anything at all that is big. Inverse cripples I call them."[13] We see something similar in *The Witcher*. Geralt, for example, curses his overdeveloped eyes that allow him to see imperfections in the magically perfected bodies of sorceresses, and Avallac'h bemoans that the long lives of elves make sex "boring."[14]

Discussions with Socrates, who's a character in Plato's *Phaedo*, lead to the conclusion that philosophers ought to separate themselves from bodily distractions like excessive emotion, uncontrolled lust, and greed, which impede the pursuit of truth.[15] Witchers partly follow these prescriptions since they suppress emotional feelings that would distract them from fighting, additionally adhering to restrictions about the kinds of jobs they can take for pay. Characters in the *Phaedo* conceive "truth" as perfect and unchanging, free from the vagueness of the material world, and they regard philosophy itself as a preparation for death, defined as the separation of soul from body.[16] Though not exactly as in the *Phaedo*, witchers likewise train with the expectation of dying for their profession, with Geralt remarking: "No witcher has yet died of old age, lying in bed dictating his will."[17]

Nietzsche diagnosed the views of the *Phaedo* as flowing from a hatred of the living body, leading philosophers to pursue what is contrary to it. "All that philosophers have handled for thousands of years have been concept-mummies,"[18] he complained. By this he meant philosophers worship what doesn't change. We see this in Plato's notion of truth, which borders on the apocalyptic because it's devoid of life. To some extent, this idea is personified in Yennefer, whose magic prevents her from aging. The idea also

shows up in the way that various characters fixate on Ciri as a vessel of the elder blood of long-dead individuals. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who influenced Nietzsche, analogously grumbled that intellectuals of his era lived in "the sepulchers of the fathers."[19] By this, he meant that too many people of his day obsessed over the biographies of their dead predecessors.

Another intellectual admired by Nietzsche was Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), and some of what he wrote gets close to capturing Yennefer's barrenness. He remarked that it's a burden for us to be human "with real bodies and blood; we're ashamed of it, we consider it a disgrace."[20] He added that "we're stillborn" and that "soon we'll contrive to be born somehow from an idea."[21] The words "idea" and "ideal" connect closely. We often use the term "ideal" in Plato's apocalyptic sense to indicate something that's so perfect as to not exist. This gets at another way that Yennefer lives as if dead: because she pursues otherworldly standards of magical power and beauty.

Transhumanist Entanglements

The predicament faced by Yennefer and Geralt gets at the issue of transhumanism, which is an agenda aimed at "changing and improving natural human characteristics through biological, technological, and cognitive modifications."[22] This can lead to a situation that philosophers characterize as "posthuman," a term that designates the view that we're moving to a condition where the category of "human" no longer applies.[23]

Classical prescriptions advocate for a balance between our rational, emotional, and desiring aspects (including reproductive capacities).[24] But these functions are all out of whack in Geralt, who doubts that he is even human. His encounter with Dudu in *Sword of Destiny* illustrates this point. Unlike the doppler, or shape- and mind-mimicking creature, in the TV series, Dudu is not evil and can only "copy what is good." Geralt hints at his own bad sides by warning Dudu: "I am what you are unable of copying."[25] It's not that Geralt is evil. He does noble things, but his tasks require an inhuman hardness. His job is to kill non-human monsters, but when an innkeeper asks him to murder Dudu on these grounds, he responds, "I would like to point out that that non-human hasn't harmed anybody else, only me. And incidentally, I'm also a non-human."[26] Geralt's lack of humanity does not stop him from acting according to a strict moral code. He can also behave altruistically. He refuses to kill harmless creatures for pay and he often protects people at great risk to himself without expectation of being tossed a coin.

Others, however, severely violate conventional morality, doing this partly because of their transhumanist obsessions. The worst is probably Degerlund, "an outstanding scientist, a specialist in the field of genetics, boasting immense, simply incalculable

accomplishments in transhumanism, introgression and speciation."[27] The magical community considers Degerlund's work "pivotal for the development and evolution of the human race" and its "genetic modification."[28] By "hybridization and combination of the gene pool," the wizard hopes to create a more powerful transhuman to "dominate non-humans and subdue them utterly."[29] Degerlund gleefully details other possibilities like "creating a woman with a perfectly flat back, so you can fuck her from behind and have somewhere to put a glass of champagne and play solitaire at the same time."[30]

Part of the transhumanism in Degerlund's specific schemes comes from the fact that his modifications of people treat them as if they're less than human. In Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) language, they're reduced to mere things to be used.[31] Degerlund's wish to subjugate and perhaps cause the apocalyptic extinction of other races is morally problematic from most ethical standpoints, including the Kantian perspective that we ought to respect rational individuals' right to self-govern.

Though not nearly so sinister, entrepreneurs in our society—like Elon Musk—expressly advance a transhumanist agenda through ventures aimed at implanting electronics into the brain to enhance it. There's also talk of uploading minds. Although the feasibility is doubtful, the enterprise is marketed as a path for transcending human limits of mortality. In a post-humanist vein, accordingly, the intent seems to be to transgress boundaries previously imposed on our species by nature and also to move us beyond classical conceptual bounds of what it is to be "human." Similarly, Degerlund wishes to transgress human limits, though he's also just a sadist. He wants to cut out Geralt's eyeballs, which have a reflective tissue that enhances night vision, in hopes of leaving "the whole of humanity with the ability to see like cats"[32]

Post-Apocalyptic Post-Truths

A different concern about transhumanism and posthumanism comes from conservative quarters. It's the concern that we're eroding notions of "man" and "woman" and that the next step in the progression is to explode the concept of "human beings." Some religious people see these social changes as signs that the end times are nigh since western society is falling into moral relativism by ignoring divinely ordained boundaries. Ironically, however, conservative political leaders have been instrumental in spreading post-truth relativism through what are sometimes called "alternative facts." This is even more interesting when we remember that the word "apocalypse" means "revelation," which is close to "truth." Seen in this light, a post-apocalyptic world is a post-truth world.

Geralt's morality, on the one hand, is far from post-truth relativism in that he exhibits old-fashioned virtues such as loyalty to friends and willingness to protect those

who can't defend themselves. But Geralt's traditional commitments do not preclude progressive attitudes. His ideas about sex are liberal, he closely associates with outgroups like dwarves, and he befriends those who'd normally be his enemies, like the Nilfgaardian officer Cahir and the kindhearted vampire Regis. But Geralt's reason for these friendships is precisely the opposite of post-truth relativism. Regis, for example, repeatedly proves he's not a monster despite belonging to a monstrous species. He's given up sucking blood, and repeatedly uses his knowledge and skill to help his companions and even strangers. Regis dies protecting Geralt in *The Lady of the Lake*. In the same book, Cahir meets his end when attempting to rescue Ciri.

One of Geralt's strengths, then, is that he grasps the substance of individuals—their genuine character based on what they actually do. This is why he's eventually able to see beyond Regis's and Cahir's superficial identities and welcome their companionship. In this regard, he aligns with the Book of Revelation's acceptance of multitudes "from every nation, tribe, people and language."[33] Elsewhere, Jesus welcomes society's moral outcasts and says whoever is not actively fighting his followers is supporting them.[34] From this perspective, we might say Geralt is both orthodox and heterodox. He accepts values that we find in old sources like the Bible. Yet he breaks norms by upholding inclusive principles that many religious adherents have historically ignored, meaning they have applied post-truth and in this sense post-apocalyptic thinking to their own scriptures.

Geralt especially becomes baffled by morality supplanted with economic calculations. When he offers to remove a bridge troll who brutalizes people for refusing to pay a toll, the town's alderman objects: "Who will repair the bridge if the troll's not there?"[35] The troll does "solid work, first rate. It's cheaper to pay his toll."[36] Geralt also complains about a man who wanted him to slay a harmless beast because of a false belief that its bones cure impotence. Similarly, people try to hire him to kidnap various nymph-like creatures, presumably for sex, even when "the villages are teeming with girls."[37] In both the books and Netflix series, Geralt declines mercenary soldiering jobs. Despite declaring that he works for money, most of his battles and quests are unpaid, taken up for principled reasons. He's disoriented in a post-truth world where moral values shift according to individual self-interest.

World Wounds

Perspectives ranging from ancient Greek and Neoplatonic traditions to Indian Vedic and Chinese Daoist philosophies held that the world has a proper balance or equilibrium.[38] The Greek formulation of the idea is *psukhe kosmou*. *Psukhe* connotes "psyche," "soul," "breath" and "life," and *kosmou* means "world," "cosmos" or "harmonious system."[39] If

the world is alive and breathing, it can get wounded when things fall out of balance—a description that characterizes the apocalyptic situation that's brewing in *The Witcher*.

The Witcher series portrays an ecologically unbalanced world on the edge of environmental cataclysm. It has ghoulish mutants and also creatures violating their normally reclusive natures to retaliate against people who are causing their extinction. In *The Sword of Destiny*, the mage Dorregaray advises that everything has "natural equilibrium."[40] He says each creature is the natural enemy of others, and that all non-humans are the foe of people, adding that this is for the better, since struggle leads to improvement.

Though Dorregaray's ideas are dubious, they stress connections between sex and destruction: overall improvement requires both the death of weaker individuals and continuing the genes of the stronger ones. His claims also orbit the notion of planetary equilibrium. In both the books and the Netflix series, magical tampering rips fissures in the earth that breed new and deadly mutants. Climate change is a reality in the *Witcher* stories, as it is in our world, where ruptures in equilibrium from altered weather coincide with the increasing numbers of invasive species. And as with monsters in *The Witcher*, the COVID-19 virus itself is a deadly mutation that seemed apocalyptic at times, and it was generated and spread because of human-made conditions.

The title of Sapkowski's *Baptism of Fire* has an ominous apocalyptic tone, and alludes to a New Testament verse.[41] The novel recounts how an elf long ago "prophesied the climatic changes" that came to be "known as the Great Frost" and were seen as "a sign of the end of the world."[42] *The Tower of Swallows* has another elf telling Geralt, "And then suddenly comes the Conjunction of the Spheres and you, people, appear here. Human survivors, come from another world" that "you managed utterly to destroy."[43] A message is that the environmental calamity is not just due to non-human forces in nature. It's also a consequence of an apocalyptical post-truth scenario in which selfish interests lead to ruin.

Social Apocalypses

These apocalyptic tones match Hebrew, Islamic, and especially Christian scriptures. The fact that humans migrated to new lands where others were already living also mirrors Indigenous American history and is captured in a divination that circulates among the Anishinaabe First Nations tribes: "Beware if the light skinned race comes wearing the face of death."[44] The parallels between *The Witcher* and colonial history are stronger in light of the fact that European migration to North America occurred for environmental

reasons like famine. Indeed, Sapkowski appears to model the predicament of the elves after the plight of Indigenous and other colonized populations.

Like Indigenous people of the Americas, who had advanced textiles, metal working, mathematics, palaces, crop domestication, and possibly one of the earliest writing systems, the elves are also sophisticated.[45] Because the elves do not farm, but take only what the land gives them, they resemble hunter-gatherer Indigenous communities. As an elf named Filavandrel elaborates, unlike humans, elves "never cultivated the land" and "tore at it with hoes and ploughs. To you, the earth pays a bloody tribute." But "for us, the earth gave birth and blossomed because it loved us." Filavandrel says that these days his people "are starving" and "threatened with annihilation." Because of cataclysmic environmental changes, "the things we used to eat, made use of, are dying."[46]

Filavandrel complains that when humans talk about living with elves, they mean on terms that acknowledge human sovereignty. He asks, "Cohabit as what? Slaves? Pariahs? Cohabit with you from beyond the walls you've built to fence yourselves away in towns? Cohabit with your women and hang for it? Or look on at what half-blood children must live with?"[47] These comments recall the removal of Indigenous people from their lands to be confined to reservations, which was part of a cultural apocalypse. The remarks also echo Jim Crow laws and social rules preventing intermingling, whether in America, Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, or colonial India. And together with the claims about how human appetites destroyed the land, Filavandrel is presenting cultural and environmental apocalypses as two sides of the same coin.

Despite the abuses they suffer, the elves have a proposition, involving Ciri having a child with the elf king, to save everyone from the dying planet. Though mostly human, Ciri is the descendant of a powerful elf, which explains her magical gifts. As Avallac'h explains, were Ciri to have a baby with the elf king, their child would have a genetically-bestowed supernatural capacity that could open an escape from the world, a "permanent Gateway, through which everyone would pass."[48] It's debatable that this is a solution, however, since the apocalyptic situation in *The Witcher* is at least partly caused by people, who seem likely to destroy their new world too.

Bad Endings

In the Netflix series, cities and forests are tinted grey, often crumbling or dying, recalling Soviet-era industrial cities as well as the polluted stretches of centers of capitalist industry that look like post-apocalyptic wastes. The visuals demonstrate that worlds—and cities in them—can get sick.

A conversation from *The Sword of Destiny* brings this into relief. Yennefer claims women want town walls and protection from dragons so they can bear children at the "proper rhythm" of one a year.[49] Dorregaray counters that "it is filth and lice—and not dragons—which threaten your splendid cities," spreading disease so that only one in ten babies survive.[50] This once again ties the ideas of social and environmental apocalypses.

In today's world, cities are key to a sustainable future because they're more efficient than rural settlements in many ways. Yet because of crowding and pollution, diseases in urban areas can be worse. Cities also fuel the environmentally destructive attitude that we're separate from nature, a belief Yennefer perpetuates when she talks of settlements as havens from the wilderness.

The failure of people within communities to cooperate is another kind of sickness. The dwarf Zoltan Chivay says to Geralt, "I predict a bad end for your race."[51] He explains that almost every other conscious creature "cleaves to his own" in desperate periods "because it's easier to survive the bad times in a group, helping one another." But humans "just wait for a chance to make money from other people's mishaps."[52]

A last thing to remember is that ancient concepts of city-soul like Plato's were modeled after "just individuals," said to have a healthy equilibrium between rationality, emotions, and appetites, all of which are unbalanced in most *Witcher* characters. Overwhelming lust for power or wealth drives many individuals. Others are absorbed in rational calculation without love for others. Again, the Greek word *apokalypsis* can almost be translated as "truth," and *The Witcher* reiterates the link between these terms. We get mage-scientists seeking solutions irrespective of ethical implications. We see greed driving people to act without compassion. In short, we are presented with a post-apocalyptic scenario that's partly grounded in a post-truth collapse of moral reasoning, and this gets close to the trajectory of our history.

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