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Uncharted Territory: Apocalypse, Jeremiad, and Abjection in Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*

Abstract: I use Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: a Post-Electric Play* to explore the ways in which contemporary social structures—generally pop culture and specifically entertainment—operate much like the historical, political, and religious structures of prophecy and apocalypse but, in these forms, explode the bottom of the u-shaped jeremiad and propel their characters into an abyss of 'bottomless memory' and society as abjection, using Julia Kristeva's formulation of the term; that is, these social structures have denied the characters in *Mr. Burns* access to the new future the jeremiad promises. Key to this reading is the concept of the jeremiad as a narrative structure of apocalypse and prophecy that brings the past into contact with both present and future and imaginings of wilderness as both a space of renewal and risk. I consider the place of self/subject and the role of art/literature in the tensions among the stories of the past, the realities of the present, and the unknowns of the future.

Keywords: apocalypse, postapocalypse, theater, jeremiad, pop culture

When the initial shock of the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 had settled, a more general anxiety about the future of the United States and of the world more broadly began to take shape. One manifestation of this anxiety in the US was the myriad of social movements that exploded that summer; both sides of the political spectrum, galvanized by issues laid bare by the pandemic and its handling, took to the streets and to the internet to make their grievances heard. At the same time, there was a parallel movement in which both sides, but perhaps especially the political Left, imagined the pandemic as an opportunity to make deep, structural changes to the social, political, and economic tapes-

try of the nation. As Stephen Leitheiser and Lummina Geertuida Horlings observe, "[T]he pandemic has merely laid bare the flaws of a system built on foundational vulnerabilities" (2021, 181).[1] According to Hanna Alhashimi and Vahd Nabyl Mulachela, these revealed flaws are a precursor to change, and they echo the sentiment that we should see the "COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity" to solve those problems (2021, 3).[2] This rhetoric of opportunity in the face of crisis can be seen even in popular media; a simple search on Google shows a recurrence of phrases, all in relation to the pandemic, like: "opportunity to change" (Friedman and Goldberg 2022), "opportunity to reform" (Blumenthal et al. 2020), "a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity'" (Fore 2021), and, a "final opportunity" (Kraaijenbrink 2020). In his 2022 *State of the Union* President Biden paid lip-service to this trope, saying that the United States had "turned [the] crisis [...] into an opportunity." It is clear that this rhetoric, what is called the jeremiad, is a common response to times of crisis and doubt.

The Encyclopedia of American Literature (Imbarrato and Burkin 2013) offers some useful background on the jeremiad:

> Jeremiads were ministerial accounts of the misfortunes that befell and were going to befall the Puritans of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century New England. Jeremiads interpreted these misfortunes as punishment for social and moral evils, although they also held out hope for a happier future if proper reforms were instituted. A response to the waning of devotion seen in the second generation of Puritans, the jeremiads were a call to revitalize the original intentions and passions of the founders.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The American Jeremiad* (2012), lays out the shape as "first, a precedent [...] that sets out the communal norms," laying the foundation for "a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community," which in turn gives way to "a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal" (16). We may consider this description of the jeremiad to be u-shaped: the lofty, ideal past arcing down into the lowly, morally degraded present and then gliding back upward toward a future that resembles the old ways.[3] Important here is the moment of the upward arc, the moment of the return toward a better version of humanity; implicit in this moment, and something we see in many jeremiads, are certain actions, structures, and beliefs—which vary depending on the source of the particular jeremiad—narrativized as necessary to achieve the promise at the end of the arc. In this way, the jeremiad both

1 This observation from Leitheiser and Horlings especially applies to food supply chains interrupted by the pandemic.
2 Here, Alhashimi and Mulachela are concerned, in particular, with diplomacy and national relations.
3 I am indebted to Dr. John Hay for this image of the jeremiad.

describes the perceived state of the current society and prescribes the path to something better, and that prescription is often the very point of the structure. The jeremiad, then, is a way to not only prophesy but also becomes a narrative structure through which subjects can attempt to understand their times in relation to what came before and what may come after.

The bottom of the u-shape is also fundamental, for it is there that the need for change is realized. This idea—that some sort of catastrophe is necessary for real, lasting change—is anything but new or historically uncommon. Indeed, the trope, if we may call it that, can be found in a number of social and political mediums, including literature. Here, the trope is a key feature in stories, whether literary or otherwise, that deal with apocalypse, especially those interested in the postapocalyptic state of being.[4] Mark Payne, in his book *Flowers in Time: On Postapocalyptic Fiction* (2020), explores how various authors have utilized this idea in their fictions. With these authors, "[p]ostapocalyptic fiction imagines forms of human freedom, sociality, and capability" that offers a deeper form of agency (3). Peter Y. Paik, in *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* observes that this framing "arises out of the awareness that the wellsprings of political conflict generally lie in the tragic struggle between two irreconcilable forms of the good" (2010, 19). That is to say, the human beings that live through and after an apocalyptic event are given access, precisely because of the catastrophic erasure of civilization, and, as such, civilized life, to ways of being "that afford the protagonists a more varied use of their own capabilities than was possible before" (3).

This new freedom, granted through disaster, undercuts the (unrealistic) idea "that a change for the better in human social relations can proceed directly from a vision of the collective" (Paik 2010, 25). Rather, the postapocalyptic subject, in order to attain this new freedom, "must be grounded in an individual, body-centric recovery of capabilities that only emerge outside of the polis walls" and that "can only emerge from a lack of political deliberation" (25–26; 3). From this perspective, the apocalypse is a "reset" that "rescales human aspirations for a better life from illusory macro social goals to the level of individual capabilities grounded in the human body" (3). This is truly a kind of jeremiad that enshrines past forms being while deriding current forms in that it imagines the return to a pre-polis state as a return to "the consistency and coherence of actuality" (2).

This particular jeremiad falls somewhere between what Bercovitch differentiates as the "European jeremiad" (2012, 7) and the "American Puritan jeremiad" (9). The former, according to Bercovitch, "pertained exclusively

4 Payne offers a useful distinction between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction: "A basic distinction can be made [...] between apocalyptic fictions, which focus on the end of days itself, and postapocalyptic fictions, which imagine that life that human beings might lead after the apocalyptic event has passed" (2020, 1–2).

to mundane, social matters, to the city of man rather than the city of God" (9) while the latter "entailed a fusion of secular and sacred history" and tried to "direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny" (9). Payne may not mention God in his analysis of postapocalyptic fiction, but the emphasis on catastrophe he traces as "the necessary ground for choosing the freedoms and capabilities we would want to see preserved in any future collective that might emerge from them" (2020, 34) and his reading that these fictions entail "not just the recovery of bodily capabilities but that this recovery will lead to new forms of ethicality" (164) instill a moral character to postapocalyptic possibilities that is hard not to see as quasi-spiritual. The apocalyptic event clears "a space of freedom that a would-be subject of freedom can access in order to enact their emergence as free" (34) in a postapocalyptic landscape freed of politics where the subject may live and learn "until the real world of becoming is available again" (169). It is in the word 'again,' here, that we see the back end of the jeremiad, the upward line of the historical arc as a "prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal" (Bercovitch 2012, 16).[5]

For this paper, I use Anne Washburn's 2012 play *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* to theorize the ways in which contemporary social structures—generally pop-culture and specifically entertainment—survive the apocalypse and how that survival affects the people who engage with them. Washburn's play is situated in a constellation of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic theater; as Peter Eckersall observes, "[c]ontemporary performance has played a crucial role in rendering apocalyptic futures and end times" (2019, 308). Some notable entries in this subgenre include: *Dance Dance Revolution* (2008) by Les Freres Corbusier; *The Honeycomb Trilogy* (2012) by Mac Rogers; *The Nether* (2013) by Jennifer Haley; *Radiant Vermin* (2015) by Philip Ridley; *The Children* (2016) by Lucy Kirkwood; and *Salvage* (2016) by August Schulenburg. In *Mr. Burns*, the structures of popular culture and media operate much like the historical, political, and religious structures of prophecy and apocalypse but that, in these forms, explode the bottom of the u-shaped jeremiad and propel their characters into an abyss of 'bottomless memory.' For Julia Kristeva, whose writing on abjection helps to make sense of what happens in the play, this abyss "is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be" (1982, 12).[6] In my use, when, as we shall see, the subject becomes the object—when the subject becomes the zone of apocalypse—'bottomless memory' becomes the moment of abjection, which Kristeva describes as "[a] bor-

5 Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics' is, as a general background, useful here as Payne emphasizes the individual. For Foucault, one of the principal features of modern human relations is a new form of power that "is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being" and, furthermore, to "man-as-species." He specifies that State discipline, in this newer form, "tries to rule a multiplicity of men" through their "individual bodies" with surveillance, training, and punishment" (2018, 1442).

6 Kristeva uses the phrase "boundedless memory" on which I base the notion of bottomless in relation to the sublime: "As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly" (1982, 12). While I do not consider the sublime in this article, I might argue that the effectiveness of *Mr. Burns*, its power and force, are related to its engagement with this perhaps darker side of the sublime.

der" and an "ambiguity," which is, in turn, "a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (9). In *Mr. Burns,* this process leads to society-as-abjection, as we will see and return to at the end of this article; that is to say, these structures deny the characters access to the new future the jeremiad promises. Key to this reading will be the concept of the jeremiad as a narrative structure that not only describes but prescribes, theories of apocalypse and prophecy that bring the past into contact with both present and future, and treatments of the body as the zone in which these structures coalesce. *Mr. Burns*, then, considers the place of self/subject and the role of art/literature/[pop] culture in the tensions among the stories of the past, the realities of the present, and the unknowns of the future.

Washburn complicates the vision of the postapocalypse Payne (2020) and Paik (2010) explore through its representation of the ways in which the structures its characters lived in during their lives prior to the end of civilization continue on after whatever event it is that triggers said apocalypse. These structures have been long recognized: one need only think of Marxism's hegemony, Jung's archetypes, Saussure's signs, and of the deconstructionists and their ideas on subjectivity and identity formation; indeed, I will rely on these ideas to explore the ways in which Washburn envisions humanity in a postapocalyptic epistemological and semantic space. Perhaps closer to home, one only need to look at the ways in which memes perpetuate culture and become modes of thought and expression to see how semiotic and cultural structures can take on what appear to be lives of their own. Yet, Washburn offers something new to the conversation and thereby argues against the 'apocalypse as space clearing' vision that Payne (2020) explores in his text. According to Payne's readings, the apocalypse resets the world by clearing it of its ties to history, be they ideological, structural, or material,[7] allowing humanity to develop new ideas that harken back to previous abilities in the back end of the u-shape of the jeremiad. What the works he explores miss, when we take into account Washburn's work, are the ways in which these structures not only exist and perpetuate in human culture but also live in the human body through behavior. The recursive relationship between structures of culture and behavior points towards an integration in the body that simply cannot be undone overnight. The fact that this text is a play, embodied in actors on a stage and reproduced over different performances through time, is important, and I will return to that later. Rather, these behaviors immediately reassert themselves at the moment of the apocalypse and then continue until they coalesce into cultural and social forms that are not identical to the past but synthesize them with the new

7 Indeed, it would seem for the fictions Payne studies that the power of the apocalyptic catastrophe is that it does all these at once: "What all these kinds of postapocalyptic fiction have in common, however, is a commitment to staging human beings living on after catastrophe, and to showing why catastrophe is necessary for the new forms of human sociality they envision [.] [...] The claim I make throughout is that while critical readings of postapocalyptic fiction have rightly identified its commitment to starting over, they have generally mischaracterized it as beginning at the macrosocial level with the social contract and other large scale forms of social organization, rather than the single human being and their body" (2020, 18, 21).
8 It should be noted that this synthesis carries with it "traces," to use Derrida's word, of the previous forms. As Derrida puts it, trace is the "common root, which is not a root but the concealment of origin and which is not common because it does not come to the same thing except with the unmonotonous insistence of difference, the unnamable movement of difference-itself" (1998, 93). Derrida is drawing from Freud here, who observes that "what is past in mental life *may* be preserved and is not *necessarily* destroyed" (1962, 18) in the "final form" of any development; Freud was writing of mental states and Derrida of the history of metaphysics. For more on the connection between Freud and Derrida, in this line of thinking, see the *Translator's Preface* of *On Grammatology.*

present.[8] *Mr. Burns* offers insight into the possibilities of the future by calling into question the imaginings of a hard break from the past and present, an idea that many ideologies, from communism to neoliberalism,[9] rely on for the fulfillment of their utopian ambitions. The past and present, as embodied realities rather than overarching concepts, are much harder to achieve. They have a mass and a gravity that extends further into the future than we might want to think.

Pop Culture Structures and Social Reconstruction

This, then, brings us to the world of *Mr. Burns*, where the characters survive a very real and complete apocalypse, that is the complete breakdown of the social contract, and enter into the postapocalyptic clearing left after a total catastrophe. They are in the position that apocalyptic 'realists' see as the necessary precursor to true change, to true revolution: the bottom of the u-shaped jeremiad. And yet, when we meet the characters of the play, who are in the forest in order to avoid the chaos happening in the world beyond,[10] they are discussing not their own futures nor the future of whatever society they will build but, instead, are trying to reconstruct from memory episodes of *The Simpsons*.[11] When Matt says, "It starts [...] the episode starts with Bart getting letters saying 'I'm going to kill you Bart'" (Washburn 2014, 13), which is a part of a larger dialogue about the episode, two things are worth noting. The first is the emphasis on where the episode "starts"; given their place at the bottom of the jeremiad, the moment before the upturn, the characters are already harkening back to a previous (fictional) beginning, undermining their own supposed claim to a new future. We should also note the violence that enters into the narrative with this line. The episode they are referencing—which, we shall see, not only operates as a thread throughout the whole play but becomes the form of the lives of the characters—is *Cape Feare* (1993), which itself is an appropriation of 1991's film *Cape Fear*, starring Robert DeNiro, which in turn is a remake of the 1962 version featuring Gregory Peck and Robert Mitchum.[12] The films are psychological thrillers that hinge on perhaps the most egregious form of violence: rape. Note, as well, the recursive nature of these references; the *Simpsons* episode is a pop-culture parody of a remake of an adaption of a book. The ways in which art and culture filter through and trickle down various mediums into the lives of the consumers of that art and culture itself is an important theme of the play and offers a view as to how these structures of language—in this case story-

9 In this way, Payne's reading is less a break from previous understandings of apocalyptic fiction and more an application of this reliance on fundamental breaks—class war in communist thinking and technological intervention in the posthuman—to the apocalyptic through the event of the catastrophe.

10 The audience is never directly exposed to this chaos. Rather, they are given hints and clues about it only through the stories the characters tell.

11 The choice of *The Simpsons* is important, as the series represents the place where pop-culture and the issues of contemporary life intersect. Fink describes the show as "globally recognized" and as "a pop-culture institution [...] whose major subject is popular culture itself" (2021, 15).

12 For more on the history of these films, which are adaptions of John D. McDonald's *The Executioners* (1957), see *Cape Fear* (2021) by Rob Daniel.

telling and character—become significant elements of both personal and social subjectivities.[13]

There are, however, moments in the first act where the reality of the situation interjects the pop-culture reconstructions of the characters. In the moments before Gibson appears out of the forest, the characters already in the scene hear his approach and arm themselves: "*SAM reaches behind him and pulls out a rifle. MATT pulls out a revolver*[...] *MARIA and JENNY have pulled out revolvers*[...] *JENNY has also pulled out a bowie knife*" (Washburn 2014, 21). Here, we can see that the specter of violence is always on the edges of their awarenesses; that is to say, the violence in the episode they are recreating is mirrored by the actual violence implicit in their situational reality. Gibson's appearance into the scene precipitates a conversation about the outside world, giving readers/viewers their first and perhaps only indicators as to the nature of the catastrophe that has befallen the characters. This is a bit of a digression—we will return to Gibson's appearance and eventual acceptance into the group—but an important one. While the audience is not given an exact explanation, it becomes clear some kind of massive electrical outage has led to a failure of nuclear power plants around "[t]he whole country" (23). The characters speak opaquely of the mechanics of nuclear power plants and about "cit[ies] [...] put under quarantine" (24): "that whole system continues to operate and that the radioactivity, the rods, are fine, basically, for as long as there's electrical power to the plant" but "when the power goes out" (33) the system fails and the radioactivity leaks out, infecting the surrounding environment and the people in it. Multiple metaphors are at work here—one of particular strength is the need to continually feed systems that have become so fundamental to the operations of society[14]—but the image of radiation is of particular interest given the context of this paper. The half-life of U-235, the fuel nuclear reactors commonly used, is about 700 million years (Salters 2018, 1465). Radioactivity, in this play, speaks to the ways in which pop culture like *The Simpsons,* "drags along with it the whole of the previous metaphysics" (Derrida 1978, 251) of whatever came before; that is to say, there is no complete break so long as language and story continue through the event of the apocalypse. Just as radiation lives within the environment long after the event that allows for it to seep into the tissues and both the living and non-living, narrative has no form that "has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations" of whatever comes after it (Derrida 1978, 250).

It is now that we may return to Gibson's entrance and acceptance into the group. His appearance from the forest disrupts the social unit already under construction in this part of the play; he is, at first, not

13 This line of thinking, in part, attempts to answer Vygotsky's question: "What is the relation between aesthetic response and all other forms of human behavior? How do we explain the role and importance of art in the general behavioral system of man?" (1971, 240). For Vygotsky, any art "can become the basis for an individual's behavior" and subjectivity (1971, 250).

14 Mark Fischer writes of this as a kind of "addiction," which he, through Spinoza, calls "the standard state for human beings" (2009, 73). Fischer sums up the result of this relationship between humans and their systems by observing that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (2009, 2).

trusted and treated with suspicion, and, therefore, the threat of violence underpins their initial interactions with him. This can be seen in the very moment Gibson is accepted into the group, a moment that could have gone another way. When Gibson, somewhat suddenly, says, "O I'll stay away alright. I'll stay away... *forever,"* Jenny "[pulls] *out her gun*" (Washburn 2014, 36). In this "[*g*]*hastly moment,"* we see the hinge upon which social acceptance lies, what Latour calls the "ongoing process made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial and ever shifting ties" (2005, 28). This moment of acceptance is also the potential moment of abjection, the implications of which are violent. When Gibson explains himself, saying: "That's the line. It's: Oh I'll stay away from your son/alright" (Washburn, 2014, 36), he engages in Latour's "rule [of] performance" in which the "making and remaking of groups" relies on "to the means necessary to ceaselessly upkeep the groups" (2005, 35).[15] For this group, in this time, this episode of *The Simpsons* is the form of that means, and when Gibson signals his knowledge of that form, his willingness to fit into it, by providing the line the other had not been able to remember, he is almost immediately accepted a member. This pop culture knowledge, then, is "the hard currency of recruiting and extending" (Latour 2005, 218) that allows the individual members of the group to join together through this shared form. Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Planet and Sense of Place* can be of use here to further understand Gibson's transition from outside to inside the group; for her, "modes of belonging [...] are defined by human intervention and cultural history more than by natural processes" and are "painstakingly established and safeguarded through a multiplicity of political, social and cultural practices and procedures" (2008, 46). In *Mr. Burns,* the political and social have both collapsed, leaving only the shared cultural knowledge of the characters left for them to use as an organizing principle. In this situation, according to Latour, "[s]ubjectivity is not a property of human souls, but rather of the gathering itself" (2005, 218). In a way, the form of the group—in this case a form dependent on pop culture—comes to replace individual human subjectivity. Here, in the first act of the play, the characters are still in the early stages of that exchange; the second and third acts of the play continue that process.

In the second act, this process expands beyond individual subjectivity and becomes the new, rebuilt socio-economic structure itself, undercutting claims of the jeremiad by creating a social structure that is not new in the strict sense but instead is a reconfiguration of past social elements with new emphasis and focus. The second act takes place seven years after the initial catastrophic event, and it appears that society has somewhat recovered itself: the audience sees a "*cozy living room*" with

15 This process relies, at least in part, on performative language, what Jonathan Culler describes as "utterances [that] do not describe but perform the action they designate" (2011, 96). Culler goes further, writing that "the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal—an active, world-making use of language" that "transform[s] the world, bringing into being the things [it] name[s]" (2011, 97).

an "*armchair*" and "*TV.*" We are given a familiar, domestic scene: Gibson in his chair while "*QUINCY enters wearing an office suit, blouse, the heels, the leather purse, the earrings*" (Washburn, 2014, 42).[16] Yet, this is not a 'natural' or authentic scene of social cohesion, of restructured contemporary life after the apocalypse; rather, this scene is a scene within itself. As soon becomes clear, the characters are themselves playing characters now, recreating not the social (at least, not in its previous form) but instead are acting out a scene from an episode of *The Simpsons* on their stage within a stage; they have 'substituted' the form of the cartoon for the form of their social structures. This reproduction supplants all other needs. What follows is a discussion on how to best achieve the recreation they are striving for. When Sam shatters a mirror so as to make the flicker of their fake television—for they, it appears, still do not have electricity, a sign of the shallowness of their reconstruction—he says: "Sorry 'bout that folks. Towel's gone, didn't want to risk a blanket" (Washburn 2014, 50). There is an inversion of need here; Sam is willing to give up a mirror and a towel, two items that may have some survival value,[17] in order to improve the simulacrum of the episode they are acting out. This disruption of the hierarchies of need is apparently not local to their group; Maria points out later that "a guy in Dayton who has a stash of Diet Cokes" is selling them for "lithium batteries. 2 a can" (54). And while she recognizes the irrationality of the trade, she also admits that she would "wait until winter" so as to "have it over ice," relishing "[t]hat *pop* sound, the sparkly fizz" (54).[18] This line of cultural reproduction that hinges on the mass-produced culture and products of the pre-apocalyptic times is not limited to simple exchanges as those described above but has, instead, become the entire basis for the socio-economic structures of the new world they are actively creating.

As the second act continues, the audience is given clues as to how this new world operates. We learn that the characters are "buying lines" (61) from other groups with names like "The Primetime Players" and "The Reruns" (57) in order to recreate episodes "[p]eople remember loving" (58). Memory, specifically memory of cultural artifacts from the past, has become its own marketplace and has, in turn, begun to dictate the nature of their social structures. Rather than reading the moment to understand its import, to build something new and different, the characters are "negotiating for it" (57) through a dialectic that heavily favors past forms of entertainment over new ideas for social structuring. Capitalist culture—mass produced products like Diet Coke and pop culture television series like *The Simpsons*—becomes a form of monoglossia, which always operates as a justification for the past, a process that extends forward

16 The use of the article 'the' on this description indicates something timeless about these objects and indexes them as elements of social forms that are synonymous with the domestic scene being reproduced in the characters play-acting. .

17 As *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* reminds its readers: "A towel [...] is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have" (Adams 1980, 28).

18 There is something of what Timothy Morton calls "happy nihilism" in this conversation, where the forms of solutions this group has created in light of their situation "reduce[s] things to bland substances that can be manipulated at will without regard to unintended consequences." (2018, 52).

beyond the present, thereby prescribing what possible futures subjects have access to.[19] This, then, becomes their principal form of social interaction and seeps into other aspects of their lives. When they discuss their political, group dynamics, as Quincy says, „[o]bviously we can't decide every decision by quorum, but I think we should decide on a category of decision which is decided by quorum. And I think repertoire should fall within that category of decision" (57). As such, this new pop culture economy is the basis for the discussion; is the principal problem their politics needs to solve. But this new structure seeps even deeper than their economy[20] and becomes the way in which they are "trying to create a [...] richer sense of reality" (70). When Quincy argues that "giving everything motivations" goes against "the *point* of a cartoon," that the main purpose of what they are doing is that there is "no consequence," he asks and answers himself: "Where else do we get to experience that, *nowhere*" (70). Maria responds that they "have an opportunity here to provide...*meaning*," to which Quincy responds: "Meaning is everywhere. We get *Meaning* for free, whether we like it or not" (70). This argument indicates the tensions between simply existing, that is surviving, and 'living'.[21] Quincy's argument here contradicts itself; if meaning is "everywhere," as he says, then it is also in *The Simpsons* episodes he is trying to separate from meaning. This fact undercuts the possibility that the arc of the jeremiad can signify a complete break from meaning, as the apocalyptic event itself is pregnant with a meaning that drags into it the ontologies and epistemologies of the past, perhaps refracting and refocusing them in whatever comes next but never removing them completely.

Pop Culture Becoming and the Zone of Apocalypse

This is what happens, then, in the third act of the play when we find the characters far enough in time from the apocalyptic event that they might be considered on the upward arc of the jeremiad. The stage directions here are telling: "*75 years later. / Ranged across the stage: a chorus of the citizens of Springfield. / Their faces bear a blurred similarity to faces we may recall from the TV series: Chief Wiggham, Nelson, Principle Skinner, Apu*" (Washburn 2014, 74). Given enough time, they have now 'become' the characters they played. The very reproducibility of *The Simpsons* has, in turn, caused the characters — men and women who survived a catastrophic event that should have, given the idea of apocalypse as a kind of clearing out, been given access to forms of being that bring back their

19 This understanding of monoglassia and its application to popular culture is derived from Bakhtin: these structures become, as Bakhtin points out, "[t]hat center of activity that ponders and justifies the past and is transferred to the future" (1982, 31) and that is, "as an essentially indifferent continuation of the present or as an end" (1982, 20), "transformed into the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia" (61).

20 The play itself uses the word "[s]eepage" when Gibson is discussing the radiation event that has caused their apocalypse: "We don't even know what's been seeping all this time from. Wherever through shale or any or [...] We're breathing, we're drinking, we're eating. It's all broken open. You know it has" (2014, 58–9).

21 Foucault's aforementioned biopolitics becomes pertinent again here, as does its attendant biopower. According to Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "the concept of 'biopower' serves to bring into view a field comprised of more or less rationalized attempts to intervene upon the vital characteristics of human existence" (2006, 196–7). In a way, then, pop culture might be considered a form of biopower.

previous capabilities—to reproduce the culture of the previous era in their own subjectivities. This process makes the self, then, the space of reproduction. The role of the body is important here, but first note the movement of the subject from the consumer or critic of culture to the zone of it, from the producer of culture to the one being produced by it.[22] This is an extreme version of the observation Mikhail Bakhtin makes, namely that humans "experience [the] adventures" in the stories they tell and that these stories "become a substitute for [their] own lives" (1982, 32). While Bakhtin is here focused on the novel, the fact that this work is a play adds another dimension to the intersection between pop culture and subjectivity. For if novels, as Bakhtin adds, allow "the individual [to acquire] the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image" (1982, 38), so the more does theater, which hinges on actors embodying characters on stage in real time before a live audience.

While I am primarily looking at *Mr. Burns* as a text, an extended note about the actual performance is cogent here. Just as *Mr. Burns* recursively loops both the various ontologies of the pre- and postapocalyptic lived experiences of the characters with the narratives from either side of the divide, the medium of the stage play adds to that "strange loop form of ecological being" (Morton 2018, 37)[23] by including in it the layers of performativity stage narratives require and by collapsing the distances between story and audience, character and actor, narrative and discourse. This makes visible "the unconscious style of a certain mode of human beings sprayed all over what lies outside the human" (Morton 2018, 23). Given that, as observed by Jessica Teague and who is here commenting on her own experience seeing a performance of *Mr. Burns*, "the characters can only reproduce these multimedia works orally through labored acts of recollection and performative speech" (2021, 191), the theatrical performance takes on a reflexivity that deepens the structures of reproducibility the play is engaged with (think back to my previous discussion of the many layers, from book to film to remake to television show, of pop culture), which in turn further exemplifies my argument. The "performance is transformative" and hinges on "the [audience's] ability to recognize the intertextual references and quotations," thereby bringing the audience into the very structures the play is exposing (Teague 2021, 191–192). Furthermore, the performance of the third act, in terms of style, imposes still more cultural layers onto the characters—and the audiences—by "harken[ing] back to classical theatrical traditions such as Greek tragedy, Japanese Noh theater, and European opera," signaling the "power and persistence of [the] aesthetic forms" subjects engage with (Teague 2021, 193). The performance

22 Vygotsky speaks to this when he writes: "[A]rt takes its material from life, but gives in return something which its material did not contain" (1971, 243). For Vygotsky, the "new principles" and the "reorganization of new social and economic processes" that are a necessary part of the unfolding of human history will result in "a rearrangement" and a "'remolding of man[kind]'" according to these new realities. (243) In this light, it becomes clear that the "role of art will also change" for "art will have a decisive voice in this process" and "[w]ithout new art there can be no new man" (259).

23 This is what N. Katherine Hayles describes as "the linguistic code system" of "technological embodied practices" in which humans are "necessarily enmeshed" (2012, 134).

itself, then, adds to the work the play does in deconstructing the narrative of the apocalypse that engages in the structure of the jeremiad.

Laid bare in this final act, both in the text and in the performance, is "how the connections between bodies and techniques [accelerate] and [catalyze] changes in conscious and unconscious assumptions about the place of the human in relation to language and code" (Hayles 2012, 157). This, then, becomes the logical result of the apocalyptic subject filtered through the catastrophic destruction of at least half of the "techno genetic cycles" (Ibid) that created them: they become all form and no content in a kind of subject-Armageddon, a kind of abjection of subjectivity. As Kristeva observes, abjection, especially in the apocalyptic genre but perhaps in all literature, hinges on "the fragile border" in which "identities… do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (1982, 207). This describes almost exactly what has happened to these characters and what has happened, as a result, to society. The etymologies of the words apocalypse and Armageddon become noteworthy and relevant, as we consider how "technical media" become "causal agents," turning the subject in a "deterritorialized spatial dynamic" by being, in this reversal, "the source rather than the expression of a conscious subject" (Hayles 2012, 223). The subject here 'is' Armageddon—that is, the field or location of the final battle—and this process itself is the true apocalypse (Lagasse 2018)—that is, the unveiling that is the deeper definition of the word.

Just as the words apocalypse and Armageddon are generally associated with physical violence, the postapocalyptic condition, here represented through pop culture, of the human subject does a kind of violence through the very "[c]onstant presence in social and physical space" that the narrative frames the characters embody end up reproducing (Morton 2018, 50). When the end of the play explodes into violence, it is not just the identities the characters have taken on that are attacked but their bodies as well; the subjective violence of the postapocalyptic process results in embodied violence. This breakdown of subjectivity—which is in truth a kind of substitution—and of body then rejoins the etymologies of apocalypse and Armageddon as they all indicate an epistemological breakdown as well. In the end, when Bart sings, "And I do not know what next will be/ and I cannot know what next I'll see" (Washburn 2014, 94), he indicates the potential abjection on the other side of the apocalyptic unveiling. That is to say, he reveals the fault in the line of thinking that we began with, namely that the apocalypse will clear space for new possibilities to emerge and the jeremiad makes the upward turn towards a better future. Rather, the apocalypse instead reveals and potentially reproduces the emptiness

of the moment insofar as that moment is a reflection of the dispersed and replaced subjectivity of the abjected individual, who is thrust through the bottom of the u-shape into unfamiliar space. While Bart and all the rest strike a defiant and hopeful note about the future, ending the play with the lyrics "Yes I will meet life so gloriously" (95), we must ask the question: who is singing this? The characters we started the play with are, by this point, gone in terms of their subjectivities, and all but Bart are killed in the final scene. These narrative points undercut any sense of hopefulness the audience may feel at the end, as does the Sisyphean final image of Mr. Burns pedaling the treadmill/bicycle contraption to failure, with which the lights go down and the narrative ends.

Conclusion

This returns us to the jeremiad and to where we began this article: the new, better future promised by the jeremiad is lost forever by virtue of the very past and present the jeremiad drags into that future that then condemns the subject to complete abjection. The jeremiad depends on social structures for its reproducibility and on mythic structures for its foundations (generally biblical). When we replace these social and mythic structures with pop culture, the end of the jeremiad is lost due to the reproducible tendencies of pop culture structures that embed them too solidly in our culture.[24] Now we must consider where that leaves these characters (and us). They end up abjected, losing their subjectivities and their bodies through forms of violence. They are the makers of their own demise. They create dependencies they cannot sustain but that they cannot live without. This at least complicates, if not completely deconstructs, the "realisms" portrayed in Payne and Paik's readings of apocalyptic fiction and of catastrophe and in the rhetoric of opportunity that surrounded—and still surrounds to some degree—the COVID-19 pandemic. These fictions are fundamental to our understanding of human perspectives of the future: "far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as general consensus seems to have it, this kind of literature, or even literature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses" (Kristeva 1982, 208). In some ways, we might consider these optimisms to be at best hopeful fictions and at worst forms of blockage that keep us from truly looking at ourselves and looking at the world we have created; a world then reflected in our own subjectivities and that recursively affects our own abilities to be subjects in that world. Here is the kernel of truth in Payne's analysis: humans are

24 It should be noted, also, that the previous version of the jeremiad too contained something of an empty promise for similar reasons.

different now than they were in the ancient past, a truth we read in the stories we tell and the lives we live. This faith in the resetting power of apocalypse and catastrophe is what Washburn's *Mr. Burns* calls into question. From this angle, the jeremiad is never a return to some previously attained glory, nor is it a path to something fully new; instead, it leads to epistemologies and ontologies that synthesize the past and present. Key here is the directional arc of the jeremiad: it is never a circle, never a true return. Rather, at the moment any generation begins to traverse the valley of the path, they break through the line and into something both old and new, for the very act of traversing the line is a kind of constant remaking and reproducing, for better or for worse, that leaves the human different than it was before and sets the next generation off into uncharted territory.

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